

KITS AT CLYNTON COURT SCHOOL



MAY WYNNE

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SOMEONE WAS STANDING THERE, LANTERN IN HAND,
HESITATING AS TO WHICH WAY TO TAKE.

KITS AT CLYNTON COURT SCHOOL

BY

MAY WYNNE

Author of

“The Best of Chums,” “Peggy’s First Term,”

“Angela Goes to School,”

Etc.



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Dedicated to
“JOAN”

KITS AT CLYNTON COURT SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

“DO come over here, Pearl,” urged Roseleen excitedly, “it’s . . . a girl . . . in the grocer’s cart. It looks as if it might be the new girl who ought to have come last week—only it *can’t* be! The grocer boy is grinning like anything—and yes! he is handing her down a hockey stick . . . and a bag, and she is actually *shaking hands*. Really if that’s not the limit! Wherever can Miss Carwell have got her from?”

Pearl Willock crossed to the side of her friend. The two girls were alone in the deserted schoolroom; and their interest for the moment was wholly given to the new arrival.

“One of the new rich class,” drawled Pearl disdainfully, “but I agree with you. It will be horrid getting another girl of that sort in the school. The Welbracks are quite enough. I wish one of the gov’s. could see her. I have a good mind to tell Miss Pasfold.”

The object of their disdain, a tall, well-built girl of fifteen, with a mop of brown curls had already disappeared into the house. Of course, she must be the new girl—and a horror.

“Let’s go down to the garden room,” suggested Roseleen, “or we shall be asked to look after the freak. All the other girls are in the play ground.”

Too late! Already the schoolroom door was opening, and Miss Carwell, the head-mistress of Clynton Court School, came in with the girl who had just arrived.

Such a happy, merry-eyed girl, with freckled face and a pair of the very bluest of blue eyes; there was an enquiring look about her small, tip-tilted nose, and good-humour round her smiling lips.

“This is Kits Kerwayne, girls,” said Miss Carwell, “your new school-fellow. Kits dear, these are Pearl Willock and Roseleen O’Fyne. I am sure they will take you under their wing and make you feel at home. Pearl, child, take Kits up to Miss Sesson’s room, and she will show her where she is to sleep and help her unpack. By the time you are ready, Kits, it will be dinner time.”

Miss Carwell turned away, she was very busy, and felt quite satisfied that she left the new girl in good hands.

Kits was looking with smiling enquiry from one to the other of those new comrades.

“I’ve never been to school before,” she said frankly, “so I’m awfully at sea. I expect—er—it will be jolly when I’m used to it.”

Pearl shrugged her shoulders, she was a pretty fair girl, extremely lady-like in appearance and slightly affected in manner.

“I can’t say I find school a particularly jolly place myself,” she retorted, with a most unfriendly stare, “but if you’ll come upstairs I’ll show you Miss Sesson’s room.”

Poor Kits! She felt the chill of the remark, and stood suddenly shy and uncomfortable before her critics. Were the girls *all* going to be like this? Roger and Ned had told her it was a billion to one she would hate school—and they seemed likely to be right—though she had loved the look of this grand old house, with its woods and fields and unschoollike air of ancient romance.

It was at this moment, when the newcomer was really in danger of being frozen stiff, that the door opened and in tumbled a very different-looking young woman, who, leaving the door open, shouted gleefully over her shoulder to some one still mounting the stairs.

“Winner, *snail!* You’re *no* good to race. Hullo! *are* you the new girl?—and *did* you arrive in the grocer’s cart just now?”

Kits thawed at once. This untidy, jolly maiden with two enormous plaits of red hair, and the roundest of moon faces was—*human*. She also looked friendly, and Kits responded gratefully.

“Yes, I’m Kits Kerwayne. I couldn’t come back—on the right day because of quarantine, and—I suppose I came by the wrong train to-day—there wasn’t a cab anywhere—and the grocer’s boy was a dear. I couldn’t have walked.”

Trixie roared. She had seen the expressions of superior disdain on the faces of her other school-fellows and knew what they meant.

“You’re a sport,” she applauded, “most new bugs would have sat on their boxes and howled. The grocer’s boy deserves a putty medal. What’s happening? Are you coming to view the domain, or——.”

Roseleen struck in hastily.

“Miss Carwell wants her to go up to Miss Sesson and be shown her room. Will you take her with you, Trixie? Come along, Pearl. We shall have

time for a game of tennis.”

Trixie, perched on the edge of one of the long tables, grimaced after the departing pair, then looked at Kits and laughed.

“Fancy falling into the hands of the Prims!” she chuckled. “Poor you! And you shocked them in one act. For the rest of your stay at Clynton Court the Prims will bracket you and the grocer’s cart together. Never mind, don’t take it to heart. The Prims are harmless and concern no one. Come in, Pickles, and be introduced. The grocer’s cart chum is all right.”

Kits laughed outright, but she was no longer forlorn. A pretty imp of a girl, with bobbed hair and the very thinnest of thin arms was peeping in on them.

“Allow me,” quoth Trixie, with mock grandeur, “to introduce Pamela Irene Spandock—otherwise Pickles—the darling of our Crew. Come in and have a good look at Kits, my dear Pickles, she’s worth a survey, though I’ve not yet asked her to be our most faithful and devoted comrade. Are we making your head buzz, Kits? If so, it’s nothing to what it *will* be during dinner! Come along to Miss Sesson, and ask her to put you in No. 8, we have room for a little one, and I don’t think your constitution would survive being put to bye-byes with the Prims.”

Kits chuckled.

“You’ve done me good,” she said, gratefully, “I . . . well! it’s my first experience of school, and it was *awful*. Do let me glue myself on to you? And are most of the girls like those first two?”

Pickles skipped in delight.

“A school full of Prims! Why, we should suffocate or require padded rooms,” she gurgled, “but we’re a mixed lot, my angel, and require a lot of weeding out. It’s no use to explain. You’ll have to feel your feet if you’ve never been to school. *Has* any one taught you the A.B.C.?”

“I’ve always shared a governess with a friend,” replied Kits, nodding, “I went to her house every day. It was quite jolly. Then her mother thought she had better go to Lausanne to be polished off, and, as our Dad didn’t like me to go abroad, I came here. You see, I’ve no sisters, only brothers—four of them, all darlings who don’t count me as a sister—I’m one of themselves. They *did* pity me, coming to school.”

She pitied herself too at the present moment, though, of course, it would have been ever so much worse without Trixie and Pickles, who took entire possession of her.

Actually, Kits had not known she could be shy till the moment she found herself marshalled to her place in the long dining hall, with thirty pairs of

bright, inquisitive eyes regarding her.

Trixie was sympathetic.

“Rude cats,” she said, *sotto voce*, “don’t you want to put your tongue out at them? I should! Of course, it is because you’ve come back late. New girls don’t generally have so much attention. Lucky for you it is a half holiday. I’ve told Noreen and Jane that we are going for a tramp over the moors. Have you any special and particular liking for a cave—with stalactites and mysterious echoes? It’s the Crew’s happy hunting ground. *We* are the Crew.”

A thin, high pitched voice came echoing down from the head of the table.

“Beatrix, you disobey! To talk it is not permitted. *Taisez-vous*. You receive punishment if I speak again.”

Trixie grimaced. After all, she had only been whispering to encourage a shy newcomer, and had hoped Alda Wenton’s broad shoulders were hiding her from Mademoiselle. But it required *very* broad shoulders, or very dark corners to hide anything from Mademoiselle’s sharp eyes.

Kits decided that she should never like the vinegar-cruet of a woman, with her stiff angles and pointed features. The gentle-faced, grey-haired lady at the other end looked much nicer—not a bit like Kits’ idea of a governess.

The dining hall was a double room, with two long tables running the whole length. To Kits it all seemed a great bustle and bewilderment. She didn’t want her dinner, yet dared not leave it for fear of being spoken to by Mademoiselle. It was real relief when the meal was over and her faithful “protectors” succeeded in drawing her away from the crowd of girls, who were making up for lost time by chatting like a flock of magpies.

“You are sleeping in No. 7 with Joyce Wayde,” said Trixie, as they ran upstairs. “No, she’s not one of the Crew, but quite a good sort, rather quiet and mooney, with eyes for no one but Gwenda. Did you notice Gwen? A big fair girl—with a trick of fluttering her eye-lids. She’s a genius—but not a ripping genius like Crystal Colton—who is one of us—and a perfect scream. She is one of the latecomers, too. She won’t be back till to-morrow, then we shall all sit up and take notice. Here’s No. 7. Oh, you have unpacked of course. Get on a hat and sports coat and wait on the landing. I must collect the others.”

Kits still felt breathless. She wondered whether she ever would get to know this world of girls by name, or how long it would take her to learn the ropes. Trixie was the kindest of teachers, but—well! she did talk rather fast, and Kits had collected only one or two outstanding facts. The girls with whom she was to chum called themselves the “Crew”, and loved fun and

mischief, whilst two others at least were known as the Prims, and embodied the perfect sketch that Roger and Ned had made of “Ye youthful school-girl.”

“I’m jolly glad we don’t have to walk two and two,” thought Kits, as she flung open her room door, “but I wonder whether we have to have a governess with us? I thought we always should, and I can picture Mademoiselle in a cave. Oh!”

She came to a halt at sight of the other girl in the room. This would be her bedroom companion Joyce Wayde, and as there was no one else to introduce her she would have to do it herself. Kits grinned and held out her hand.

“I’m Kits Kerwayne,” said she, “and you’re Joyce Wayde I’m sure. Are you coming out on the moors with us?”

Joyce blushed. She was a tall, slender girl, not exactly pretty—she was too pale for that, but she had big grey eyes, and very soft brown hair, which she wore in a plait. Her face suggested a sensitive nature, reserved and shy—by no means the ideal comrade for mad pranks or merry fun, but the sort of friend who would be a friend through thick and thin, if she once gave her love. She shook her head hurriedly at Kits’ question.

“Oh no,” she replied, “I am going into the town with Miss Carwell. Is there anything I can get for you? Oh, I forgot. You have only just come. Can I help you to find anything?”

Kits laughed.

“No thanks,” she replied brightly, “Trixie Dean and some of her friends are taking me for a walk over the moors. I’ve never been in Yorkshire before. The moors look ripping!”

Joyce flushed.

“Of course, I love it,” she replied simply, “Clynton is my home. I live—at least my home is—on the other side of the village about three miles away. The moors are my friends if you can understand?”

Kits nodded.

“Rather! I’ve lived all my life in Kent—near the sea. I hated coming here, but I believe I’ll like it. Now I must bustle, or the others will be waiting.” And, snatching up her cap, Kits ran off whistling. Yes,—actually and openly whistling, to the horror of Mademoiselle—who was just coming upstairs.

Trixie & Co. faded into the back-ground, convulsed with laughter, as the French governess exclaimed in horror at that most deliberate, most unheard-

of crime—the whistling on the stairs.

“But you . . . you have ze air of a *gamin* of ze streets,” Mademoiselle concluded, “it is not so the demoiselles of Clynton Court conduct themselves. It is told me you arrive in the carriage of ze grocaire! And here you stand, ze cap set at ze back of your head—your legs apart, . . . and with your lips you do whistle. It is a disgrace, my dear, you shall not permit to happen again.”

Kits looked quite bewildered, and blushed to her eyes.

“I’m very, very sorry,” she replied, “awfully sorry. I . . . well! I always *have* whistled, all my life. I never thought of it being wrong.”

Mademoiselle sighed the sigh of hopelessness and despair. This new pupil was, she felt convinced from the first, destined to be a thorn in her side.

Meantime, with the passing of Mademoiselle, merry comrades surrounded Kits once more, whirling her away in consoling fashion which for ever wiped from her vision the picture of demure little maidens walking two and two, neither swinging their arms or turning in their toes!

Clynton Court had never been built for a girls’ school. It was a fine, imposing white house, set in a hollow of the moors, with wooded grounds stretching away almost as far as the banks of the Ribble. There were fields for the playing of hockey and cricket, wooded dells for rambles and picnicking, and . . . an occasional chance for boating when Miss Evelton, the sportsmistress, had time to take a favoured few under her care.

Kits was “all eyes for everything.”

“I love cricket,” she confessed, “nearly all games but croquet are jolly, but the boys and I love birds-nesting and collections of all sorts. Fossils are our favourites. In Kent there are such ripping chalk pits, we go and spend hours in them, and we find all the treasures of the deep. Old arrow heads, fossilized shells and snails, it’s grand fun. I suppose there aren’t any chalk pits round here?”

“Never heard of any,” quoth Trixie, her eyes twinkling, for already she had recognized a kindred spirit, “but there *are* fossils, and I believe an old coal mine. Crystal will tell you. She collects fossils and antiques, so she’ll welcome you to her heart. Now, Pickles, what are you up to? Is it a bull, or —?”

Pamela had scrambled to the top of a heathery hill, and was viewing the landscape.

“No,” she shouted back regretfully, “no such a thrill, but there’s a car turning in through the gates—and I fancy—I’m almost certain I saw Crys.”

“She said she wasn’t coming till to-morrow,” said Noreen and Jane in a breath, and Kits looked in some amusement at the speakers.

Of all this merry band of new comrades the twins roused her speculations most. They didn’t look as if they were brimming with fun or mischief, though it almost made you smile to *look* at them at all! They were so exactly like a pair of tall Dutch dolls, with funny little plaits of black hair, rosy cheeks and the roundest brown eyes. Noreen seemed to be the spokeswoman and Jane the echo. How was it they came to be part of the Crew with a Pickles and a Trixie?

Kits rubbed her nose thoughtfully, whilst Pickles, descending from the hill top, tucked her arm through Trixie’s.

“Let’s race for the Cave,” she suggested. “Shew Kits round and get back early. We can go down to the Dell after tea if Crystal has come, and have a meeting to elect Kits in style. Of course, you want to be elected, eh, Kits?”

Kits beamed.

“Does that mean being one of the Crew?” she asked. “Rather! And I shall write to Ned and Roger to-night, and tell them they were absolutely out of it about girls’ schools, though at first—oh, those Prims *did* give me shocks!”

“Serve you right for mounting ze carriage of ze grocaire,” retorted Trixie. “Now, one, two, three and away! as far as that sort of cairn of rocks to the left, Kits. Off!”

Kits could run—and she meant to let these girls know it. But, alas! running over a heather-clad moor needs practice—and Kits “won her spurs”—not by arriving first at the cairn, but by turning a complete somersault, and picking herself up promptly to continue the race!

Pickles crowed her bravas like a cock, as she stood flapping her long arms from the summit of a rock.

“You’ll do,” said she. “No squashiness about *you*. Never mind the mud on your skirt, it’s the brown badge of courage. Here’s the Cave. Not a very mysterious affair but O.K. for the Grand Council meetings of the Crew.”

Kits was down on her hands and knees, only too ready to crawl through the rocky opening which led into a circular cave—one of those many hiding places of the moors. Stalactites hung from the roof and thin trickles of water had been petrified against the rocky walls giving an appearance of dampness.

“Here we sit and jawbate,” said Trixie, “or at times, if possible, bring Crystal’s symplelite lamp and make ye olde world toffee which sticks to your ribs, likewise to your teeth. Barring Crystal you now see the Crew

complete. We are not law-breakers or secret sinners, we like fun, we *love* fun, we hate sneakery in all its branches, and we utterly fail to see why girls shouldn't be as jolly as boys. *That's* the idea. We want to be sports, with a sporting code of honour. If we have larks and get caught we own up. We wouldn't allow any one to be blamed for our pranks. We adore adventure—and we won't be stiff or starched. There you are, my dear. So if you join up you'll take us as you find us. Have a stalactite?"

Kits sat back on her heels and laughed for very glee.

"Topping!" she cried, "What luck that I found you all right the first day. We'll have adventures, we'll have fun,—and we'll not let the boys—any boys—all boys—have the crow over us. Oh, I do wish we had the symplelite now, for I'm longing for toffee,—and Miss Carwell told Mums hampers were not allowed."

"Neither are they," quoth Pickles, "but they come. Of that anon. I really do feel we ought to return now and welcome Crystal. I'm certain sure it was she,—there's only one Crystal, eh, girls? and she sent me a p.c. last week to tell me she had made a discovery for eighteen pence. I'm longing to know what it is."

The vote was carried, and though Kits would have liked to "collect" several of those jolly stalactites she realized that they would not be likely to run away and that she would be returning to the Council chamber many times and oft.

It did not seem nearly such a long walk on the return journey, and the "missing member" was not far to seek. From the top of the slope they saw her—an elf-like figure perched on the right hand pillar which stood sentinel at the gate, an ancestral column having nothing to do with impudent girlhood. Yet, there she sat, a mere wisp of a girl—with a fuzz of light brown hair, and a whimsical expression on her nondescript features, which were only redeemed from plainness by a wonderful pair of green eyes—yes! green *absolutely*, with curling lashes to shade but not conceal their peculiar colour. Kits stared, fascinated by those eyes and their small, impudent-looking owner, who smiled down at her enquiringly.

"Kits Kerwayne," sang Trixie, "A new comrade and a sport. Come down, Crys, instanter and tell us all your news from the very beginning. First, what is the discovery?"

Crystal clambered carefully down from her perch.

"A Cookery book," said she, "A manuscript of the greatest importance. Wait and see! I have brought back a fortune in a nutshell, but I'm not going to tell you all about it yet. We must hold a council, after tea, and I'll shew

you the discovery. What room are you sleeping in, Kits? I'm feeling rather anxious over the answer!"

"No. 7," said Kits, "with Joyce Wayde. She seems nice."

Crystal crumpled up and flopped against the gate post.

"Help!" she moaned, "I was hoping . . . hoping . . . hoping I was quartered with Joyce. Friends, your sympathy! There's no longer any doubt. Miss Sesson has had her revenge and put me with the Prims. With the Prims! Me myself. What will the end be?"

"Collapse of the Prims and solitary confinement for you, my girl," retorted Trixie positively, "but never mind. You'll suffer in a good cause. Just think how we shall scream over your experiences."

"Pig!" raged Crystal, and chased the callous Trixie up the drive. Kits wiped the tears of laughter away from her eyes—and the second post card she sent home that evening was received with smiles by the home folk.

"This is a jolly place. I shall like it awfully. Tons of love. Kits."

If Mademoiselle had seen that card she would have felt that the new girl ought nevaire . . . nevaire to have come to so select an establishment of young ladies as Clynton Court!

Did Mademoiselle know of the existence of the Crew?

CHAPTER II

KITS liked Joyce. She was quite sure about that. Her room companion was not like the merry comrades of the Crew but she was *nice*.

What a comfort! Kits could thoroughly sympathize with Crystal Colton doomed to the companionship of the Prim, though she had an idea Miss Crystal would prove herself a match for the petrifying treatment accorded by Pearl and Roseleen.

Joyce was not a bit of a Prim, though Kits could not altogether “place” her. She was rather shy and dreamy, keen on her lessons and possessed of two gifts—a lovely contralto voice, and a genius for friendship. Her greatest friend was Gwenda Handow, the fair girl with the fluttering eye-lids, who Kits had noticed the first evening. Gwenda was older than Joyce and very clever. She was going in for a big scholarship—so was Crystal—and Joyce confided to Kits almost the first day of her coming how she hoped Gwenda would win it.

“You see, she saved my life, four years ago,” added Joyce earnestly, as she sat by the side of her bed nursing her knee. “I should have been burned to death if it had not been for Gwenda, she has a scar right up her arm now. I only wish . . . oh, you don’t know how I wish, I could have the chance of repaying her.”

Kits chuckled.

“You don’t want her to catch fire just for the pleasure of putting her out, do you?” she asked, “but I know what you mean. You want to shew your gratitude.”

“Yes,” said Joyce, “but she is two years older than I am—and . . . and her friends are older than I am. She’s awfully kind, but . . . I always feel she looks on me as a child. Of course, I’m nearly fifteen, but being the eldest of the family makes me young for my age, and I’m no good at games, excepting tennis.”

“What a pity you don’t belong to the Crew,” said Kits, with real regret, “Trixie and the others are jolly. Tell me, Joyce, who is that very dark girl—almost like a gipsy or an Italian—Teresa Tenerlee.”

“Teresa,” replied Joyce. “Oh, she only came last term. Her mother is Italian. I believe she was a great singer. Teresa sings beautifully too. I don’t

know much about her. She doesn't like me a bit . . . and neither does her friend Olna Raykes."

"I don't like Olna," said Kits heartily. "She reminds me of a ferret or a vicious horse. Aren't I a cat? But do think over what I've said about the Crew, Joyce. The girls are so straight, and they like you."

Joyce blushed.

"I'm too slow," she sighed, "I'm sorry. I'd love to join—if only because of you. But you'd soon wish I hadn't. You see, mother always tells me that being the eldest is such a big responsibility. Jennie and May will be looking to me as an example. And . . . though the fun you all have is just the *loveliest* fun . . . it might lead into rows—and mother is a friend of Miss Carwell's . . . and would hear at once. I'd rather have the dullest time in the world than worry my mother, for she's not strong—and such a darling. I do hope," added poor stammering Joyce shyly, "that you don't think me a prig. It's not that a bit. I always was a tom-boy at home—and Jim my brother says I'm as good as a boy, but at school it's so different. Things you can do at home are really against rules here."

Kits wrinkled her brows. She *did* understand Joyce's meaning, far better than Trixie or Crystal would have done, and her liking for the girl, who would rather have a dull time than give her mother the least uneasiness appealed to her generosity.

"I'd like to shake hands, Joyce," she replied frankly. "That's all! And I'm glad we're pals. Of course, I shall stick to the Crew. Mother wouldn't mind the jolly fun we have—she's even a bit of a tom-boy herself, and often goes rabbiting with us in the woods. But . . . I see it *is* different for you—and I'm awfully glad I'm not the eldest—or an example."

"But I'm often a bad example," urged Joyce, in deadly fear of having made herself out to be a pattern. "And perhaps, though I can't be one of the Crew, you'd let me join your fun—when I can? I know the moors all round, ever so far, and I think I could get leave for us to fish in the stream in Farmer Gale's meadows, if Miss Evelton came too."

Kits beamed. She guessed that her friendship would mean a big thing for this girl who had somehow failed to find her niche in school life.

Crystal's ancient cookery book had been keeping the Crew most unnaturally quiet of late. Even with the aid of a magnifying glass it was quite difficult to make out the old English characters.

Crystal's patience was admirable.

"It's no use to be ambitious," she declared, "we can't make home-brewed wines or preserves, or a noble venison pasty. But some of these

household hints are topping. ‘To make blacking for boots.’ Here’s the milk in the cocoanut! White of egg and lamp-black. *Girls! it’s a fortune.* Look at the shine those Hessian top-boots must have wanted. We’ll save our money and buy eggs—many eggs. Then the lamp-black and the boot room. What a lark.”

“What shall we do with the yolks of the eggs?” asked Pickles. “Custards, eh? It’s a pity to waste them. Here’s a recipe for mending china. I say, Crystal, that was a well laid out eighteen-pennorth.”

Trixie yawned.

“We’ll get the eggs to-morrow,” said she, “but what shall we do to-day? I don’t feel like cricket, and all the tennis courts are engaged. Come along Crew, and be—er—is it patriotic? I know to-morrow is Primrose Day, and that’s a national *in memoriam* about something. Is it the Battle of Waterloo? or the Accession of Queen Victoria? Anyhow Horsfold Woods are crammed with primroses, and we’ll decorate the place. Miss Carwell might take the hint and give us a holiday to celebrate the day.”

The idea “caught on”, though Crystal, who liked to stick to her own trail a bit too much, would have preferred a visit to the farm. Baskets were routed out and the bunch of merry girls set off for their afternoon’s fun.

“The Hall has been bought by a Mr. Timothy Plethwaite,” quoth Trixie, tucking her arm through that of Kits. “He is—or was—a rich manufacturer in Leeds, but having made a huge fortune, he has come here, bought the Hall, married a Lady Marigold some one or the other, and is enjoying life. Why not? From all accounts he’s awfully good-natured too. That’s why we’re going to take his primroses.”

“They *are* lovely woods,” chuckled Kits, as she rolled down a steep bank to where the primroses simply carpeted the mossy ground. A cuckoo sang its gay challenge, brown rabbits scuttled breathlessly away into the undergrowth, and Kits, clapping her hands, sang too, in sheer joy of life.

Would Ned and Roger ever believe her tale of the freedom of girl school life?

“These are primroses with *stalks*,” declared Pickles, “not weedy little apologies. What are you after, Crystal? We came to pick primroses.”

“Of course, we did,” agreed Crystal, who had already lured Noreen and Jane up into the branches of a grandfather oak. “But primroses have a way of dying unless put in water, so *I* say let us explore first, and pick afterwards. I want to go as far as the lake; some one told me old Plethwaite was collecting fancy ducks. Honour! Ducks from China, ducks from Australia, blue ducks, green ducks, ducks with red bills, and ducks with yellow bills. I

want to see them. I want to see lots of things. Then, when my horizon is widened, I shall come back to primroses. What says the recruit?"

Kits was laughing. Here were comrades after her own pattern. At first she had doubted Crystal's sportsmanship—now she realized that fairy slimness and a delicate air were deceptive. Crystal was a genius in the *best* way.

So away tramped as jolly a Crew as ever could be found in any English school. Noreen and Jane, of course, plunged into the tangle of undergrowth and got caught by affectionate briars; Pickles rolled down into an unseen pit, and had to be hauled out. Kits and Crystal were the first to arrive on the banks of the broad sheet of water known as Horsfold Lake. They had hurried on ahead on hearing a loud squeal of terror—evidently the cry of some small boy or girl. And they reached that bank at a crucial moment.

A curly-headed boy—aged about nine—was clinging to an overturned boat, which was drifting towards the middle of the lake, and making gallant efforts to clutch the frock of a small sister, who sank out of sight before the eyes of the newcomers.

Kits did not even wait to throw off her sports coat. Into the water she plunged, swimming with powerful strokes towards the scene of the accident.

Crystal, unable to swim, but no less ready to help, began to climb along the trunk of an ash tree which stretched over the water.

The boy, pale with fear, did not move. He still clutched to the boat, watching Kits rather than Crystal.

The little girl had risen for the second time when Kits reached the spot. Then, the girls on the bank wrung their hands in dread. Noreen turned and hid her face against her twin's shoulder. Kits *and* that small child would be drowned, for Kits, weighed down by her clothes, was evidently in difficulties. The child lay a dead weight on one arm, and, though Kits was fighting with every ounce of strength, she *could* not make any progress. Once, it seemed as if she must sink.

Pickles had left the bank, and was speeding in quest of help.

Crystal, perched monkey-like on the bough, leaned over towards the boy.

"Catch hold, Tommy," she called, "and I can help you up here. Don't be afraid."

The little lad stared upwards in despair.

"Janie," he whispered. He could not, poor boy, endure the thought of being rescued if his small comrade were still in danger.

Crystal tried to smile.

“Kits has got Janie,” she replied. “You can’t see because of the boat. If you get up here it will help. Make haste!”

He obeyed, stretching up—too stiff and cold to help himself. And Crystal had attempted an impossible task. To drag that helpless laddie on to her own swaying perch was beyond her strength. Did it mean too she must be dragged down into that terrible lake?

To Noreen and Trixie it seemed as if both rescuers must be drowned. Kits was making slow progress, but her face was ghastly, . . . her strength ebbing, whilst Crystal, lying flat along her branch, might be pitched at any moment into the water with the boy.

Then, oh, joy, joy, joy,—steps came hurrying, voices shouted, and two or three men burst through the tangle of bushes on to the bank.

One glance took in the situation, and even as Crystal felt herself slipping round and over into the water, a man came swimming up, . . . managed to right the boat, and, standing up, in what seemed to the watchers, a marvellous way, stretched up his arms for the small boy. Then . . . it was Crystal’s turn, and down she came, feeling as if her arm had been dragged from its socket, whilst a cold mist blurred her vision.

“Hurrah!” panted Trixie from the bank, but her voice wobbled, whilst the twins burst into tears. For already the rescuer of Kits, and the wee girl, had reached the boat with his double burden, and they were safely lifted in.

Others were arriving on the bank by this time, a sobbing nurse ran up and down, calling the names of her charges, another woman was busily arranging the blankets which were to wrap the rescued bairns, whilst a big important-looking gentleman, with a kindly but anxious face, stood waiting with wonderful self-control for the return of the boat.

The boy—a sturdy youngster—was conscious, and began to cry at sight of his father.

“It was all my fault,” he declared. “Oh, daddie, daddie! say Janie isn’t dead? Say she isn’t?”

Janie was not dead, poor mite! but she was unconscious, and the sooner she was taken to the house and tucked up in bed the better. The doctor, fetched from the village, was already in attendance, and Mr. Plethwaite, having seen the children carried safely off, turned before following them to speak to the two girls, who had so bravely saved the lives of his children.

Kits had utterly refused to faint as had been expected of her, but her teeth were chattering with cold, and her eyes had a dazed expression. Crystal looked very white too, and her arm was bleeding where the rough bark of the tree had torn it.

Trixie had to be spokeswoman.

“We are Miss Carwell’s girls,” she told the distressed Mr. Plethwaite, “don’t worry about us. The lodge-keeper’s wife—” and she looked at a motherly woman, who had come up,—“has promised to see after Kits. We’ll get back to Clynton Court as soon as we can. *Please* go to the children, and don’t bother about us. We do hope the children will be all right.”

“I can never thank you girls enough,” said the poor father, huskily, as he held out his hand. “Another time I shall try . . . to say . . . what I feel. Now . . . won’t you come to the Hall and——?”

But Mrs. Plant, the lodge-keeper’s wife, interfered respectfully.

“The lodge is close, Sir,” said she, “and the kettle boiling. I’ll soon have the young lady in dry clothes, and give them some tea. If you don’t mind my saying, Sir, that’ll be the very best thing to do.”

And Mr. Plethwaite took the hint. Away he hurried after the cortège now on its way to the house, leaving six awed and somewhat limp damsels to be escorted to the snug lodge, where Kits soon regained her colour and spirits under the influence of a roaring fire, dry clothes, and the finest cup of tea.

Mrs. Plant’s hospitality was inexhaustible. She brought out a home-baked cake and cut mighty slices of bread and butter, whilst her visitors, reviving under such ideal surroundings, sat up, took notice and began to grasp the fact that this had been a real adventure. Two at least of their number had been heroines, whilst Mrs. Plant was loud in her praise of Pickles’ presence of mind in running for help.

All was well that ended well, and if Crystal looked rather the worse for wear, and Kits sneezed in a shame-faced way, the heroines would not allow that they were one bit the worse for their adventure.

It was after Plant the gardener, had brought news that Miss Janie had recovered consciousness, and Master Jock was none the worse for his ducking, that the girls started back to school.

“We shall be late for tea and have to report ourselves,” said Trixie, “but— isn’t it a gorgeous feeling, girls?—we *can’t* get into a row! First time, I’ve ever had to report ‘nothing doing’ in the way of—er—mischief. We ought to be wearing laurel leaves.”

“What a difference having tea makes,” laughed Kits. “If we hadn’t got to return to school I’d love to go primrosing.”

But I fancy there was a wee bit of bravado about that boast, and I am sure neither Kits nor Crystal were sorry to receive Miss Carwell’s strict injunctions to go to bed at once, and not to get up in the morning till after Miss Sesson had seen them!

CHAPTER III

“WHY don't you get out a drum and fife band at once?” asked Crystal, irritably, “or send our photos to the *Daily Mail*? Kits and I don't mind,—only for goodness sake don't look at us as if we'd suddenly been popped under glass cases. Actually, girls, Mademoiselle herself, came and congratulated Kits. The strain of this glory will break us altogether. We shall do something outrageous. It's—*beastly* to be famous!”

And Crystal nursed her cheek as though she had toothache.

Ena Welbrack laughed.

“All the same,” she retorted, “we're awfully obliged to you girls. Have you heard the latest? Mr. Plethwaite has asked the whole school to spend an afternoon at the Hall. An entertainment and a big tea. So *that's* the secret of your popularity, my dears.”

Kits grimaced and fled from the schoolroom. She had thoroughly disliked so much patting on the back by school-fellows, though the worst of the whole ordeal had been when Mr. Plethwaite and his wife had come to thank her and Crystal. There had been tears in Lady Marigold's eyes, as she kissed the girl who had saved her own wee daughter's life, and Mr. Plethwaite had spoken so very kindly in thanking them.

As Crystal remarked that *would* have been “nuff said”. But not a bit of it! and the luckless heroines felt their hearts sinking at the prospect of a fête given in their honour.

Of course, they could *not* live up to such a reputation, and Crystal was thoroughly sincere in her wish to make it quite plain that the Crew was *still* the Crew, and incidently, a thorn in the sensitive side of Law and Order.

Kits did not escape far. In the otherwise deserted library she met Teresa Tenerlee, the half Italian girl, who had already made several advances towards friendship.

For some reason—one of those reasons without reason, known so well to school girls—Teresa was not popular with her fellows. Mademoiselle made a favourite of her, so did Miss Pasfold, the junior mistress, but beyond her one girl croney, Olna Raykes, Teresa did not possess a chum in the school.

She greeted Kits gushingly.

“Do have a choc?” she urged, “here's a beauty. Oh yes, I know we aren't supposed to keep sweets tucked away in our pockets, but you are not one of

the goodies—even though I saw our Pearl smiling tenderly on you. Tell me, do you collect fossils, Kits? I thought you did! Here’s a fossilized frog I was given some time ago. I kept it as a mascot. You’re welcome.”

Kits flushed. She disliked promiscuous gifts being showered on her—especially by a girl she did not care for. But Teresa was so friendly, her manner so wistful, that she felt she could not well refuse. Besides—a fossilized frog was a treasure! Ned would be green with jealousy!

“Are you sure you don’t want it?” she asked, as she bent over the ugly, squat curio. “It is ripping, but I never heard of any one parting with a mascot.”

Teresa laughed airily, as she perched herself on the table. She was a remarkably handsome, dark girl, with fine eyes.

“I’ve got another mascot,” she retorted, “a much nicer one. Do tell me, Kits, how do you like school? You’re in No. 7, aren’t you, with that stodgy Joyce Wayde?”

Kits hesitated. She remembered now what Joyce had said about Teresa, and she studied the latter more carefully. Kits was so honest herself that she did not easily suspect deceit in others.

“Yes,” she replied abruptly, “I am with Joyce in No. 7. But I don’t find her stodgy. We are friends.”

Teresa did not look pleased.

“Tastes differ,” she remarked, “but I doubt if you remain friends for long. Joyce is a queer girl, a very queer girl. Do you think she is straight? *I* don’t! I wouldn’t trust her. That’s not fair, of course. Use your own eyes. At present you think I’m a sneak, but I am not. Only I like you, so I’m putting you on your guard.”

“*Bosh!*” retorted Kits indignantly, “Joyce is as straight as can be. I hate that sort of hinting. You can’t tell me anything straight out. No, of course not! And I shouldn’t believe you if you did.”

This was plain speaking, and, as she concluded, Kits laid the fossil on the table.

“I’d rather not take your mascot after all,” she added, and marched out of the library, feeling that Teresa would not be asking for friendship again—and a good thing too!

The party at the Hall was quite an event for the Clynton Court girls.

“It’s the first time the neighbourhood has entertained us in a bunch,” laughed Trixie. “Do you know, Kits, I believe the Prims would agree to bury

the hatchet—I mean the grocer’s cart—if you liked to hand out the olive branch. Roseleen is quite impressed by your exemplary conduct.”

Kits chuckled.

“I hate it,” she replied. “I’ll be glad when it is over. Have you heard of Crystal’s great idea? Colossal cheek would be a better name.”

Trixie hugged her knees.

“What is it?” she demanded, “I adore the Professor’s ideas. She’s great. We have slacked horribly since we trod the primrose way.”

“She’s going to ask Mr. Plethwaite to hand us over that old hut in his woods, facing that piece of waste land,” said Kits, rubbing her hands. “If she gets it it is to be the Crew’s property, and we shall really experiment there. Crystal is, of course, the only person in the world who would dare ask for such a thing.”

Trixie shouted in glee.

“Good old Crys! She’ll do it too. Hurrah for landed property! What discoveries lie ahead of us. By the way, we’ve not tried the blacking yet. Now, I must be off to cricket practice. Coming, Kits? Miss Evelton wants you in the eleven, only she can’t say so till Grace Hughes decides whether she is too delicate for such strenuous exercise after measles in the holidays.”

Kits nodded. It was a secret ambition of hers to be in the cricket eleven. She knew she was as good a player as any of the girls, in fact, a better bat than most. Ned was always asking her if she wasn’t being elected for the eleven.

They met the sports mistress near the gate and she beamed on them.

“I was coming in search of you, Kits,” said she, “Grace Hughes has resigned from the eleven. She gets so easily tired since her illness, and her mother did not want her to play. I hope you’ll fill the gap?”

Kits was only too ready, and Hall fêtes and shed experiments were forgotten, as she stood before the wicket making havoc of Miss Evelton’s best balls.

“Luck for us!” applauded the energetic little sports mistress. “You *are* a bat, my dear, and a bat we needed. Miss Carwell has allowed us to challenge Mr. Martin’s boys at Beech College, so it will be a battle royal at half term this year.”

The girls were delighted. How ripping it would be to beat those very superior youths, who, of course, would consider themselves so vastly superior.

Crystal was frankly disgusted by this new enthusiasm. She was no cricketer. Her “forte” being confined to fields of learning. She and Gwenda Handow were both working hard for the Parraton Scholarship—though Crystal reserved *her* industry strictly for school hours!

“No excuses,” she told her chums, “you can cricket in reason, but you are members of the Crew, and we have a dozen schemes on hand. Trixie has a new suggestion for the next Council, but it is not ripe yet. She vows it is the exploration of a mystery. Now mysteries are almost as good as inventions, so we must have a special Council meeting after the fête. I wonder what Timothy the Great will give us for tea? Éclairs and ices are very choice. I think of them when I get stage fright.”

The Hall fête was on Saturday, and the day was one of April’s loveliest.

Mr. Plethwaite had asked Miss Carwell to bring her girls early so that there should be plenty of time for the entertainment before tea.

And such a merry entertainment it was, beginning with a clever one-act play, and concluding with a conjuror. Crystal and Kits were greeted by Jock and Janie—the most roguish and curly-wigged darlings, who hugged them vigorously, whilst Jock presented them with gold wrist watches.

“Daddie gave us them to give you,” he explained, “but we put our pennies into the bill too, because we wanted the watches always to say thank you for us.”

How pleased the girls were, and what a nice way of getting over the ordeal they had dreaded. As to the tea, I wonder they were not all ill—in fact, I fancy Alda Wenton *did* have to retire rather hastily. But—such temptation! Éclairs, cream cakes, sausage rolls, creams, jellies, ices, meringues. It was more like a ball supper than a tea, and the girls did justice to it.

“Of course,” murmured Pickles to Kits, as they walked home across the moors in the gloaming of an April evening, “we all owe you a debt of thanks, but no one will remember that. Why can’t they go and stop runaway horses, or rescue a philanthropic old gentleman from a bull or something equally joyous? Then we’d go to *their* beanfeast. But no such luck! Hillo, Crys, what are you and Trixie wagging two tails about?”

Crystal, with arm linked in Trixie’s, had joined them.

“Secret as the grave,” retorted Crystal, “whisper it low. Timothy the Great ought to be knighted or canonized, he’s given us the hut—you know, the one opposite the waste land as we call it—which is really a bit of the moors. He is also telling the carpenter to put shelves round, and to fix in a small stove, so we are what one might call ‘made for life’. Of course, I gave

my word we'd tell Carwell—in fact, she came up whilst we were talking, and butter would never have melted in the mouth of yours truly, as I asked permission to 'accept possession'. Neatly put, eh? And we really shall play the game. Picture, *mes enfants*, that simple hut photoed in future as the birth place of a world-famous blacking or patent pomade—or—”

Mademoiselle's stern call to loiterers broke through the dream of genius, and taking hands the three girls raced across the rough ground to where their school-fellows awaited them in the road.

It was a very joyous and tired Kits, who reached her bedroom that evening. Joyce was there before her, standing by the chest of drawers; she turned eagerly to greet Kits, who flung one arm lightly round one shoulder.

“Enjoyed yourself, Kid?” she asked, for, though Joyce was actually only six months younger, *and* the eldest of a large family, she always seemed such a kid to jolly Kits. “Look at my watch, some people have all the luck, don't they?”

Joyce's grey eyes sparkled.

“Yes,” she agreed, “and you deserve it, Kits. I never could have jumped into a lake like that. I can't even swim. But I've had good luck to-day—at least mother will be pleased. Mr. Roberts, our singing master, has asked me to sing at a concert in York on the 10th of June. It is ever such an honour. He could not decide at first between me and Teresa, but he brought another man to hear us—and I am chosen. I can't help being glad because mother will be so pleased.”

Kits patted her back triumphantly.

“Well done!” she applauded. “You're going to 'come out' of that shell of yours after all, Joy, and I'm glad. Was Teresa vexed? I know she would be. I remember you told me she did not like you.”

Joyce sighed.

“No, she doesn't,” she replied, “and I don't like her. I never quite know why. I hope it's not jealousy. I don't see why rivals should not be friends. Crystal and Gwenda are quite friendly and nice over their scholarship competition, but Gwenda is a much sweeter nature than I am. I . . . I think I must be *petty*, Kits, such silly things bother me.”

But Kits would not hear of it.

“If you didn't fuss so it would do you a world of good to join the Crew,” she declared. “We're quite innocent and harmless. There's a special meeting to-morrow. Trixie Dean is proposing an adventure. Do come. You,—well! I know you don't *mope*, but you would be happier if you got more excited about things. I love enthusiasm. What I should like to see would be you

sliding down Farmer Perkins' hay-rick a few dozen times. Tra-la-lee. I'm going to sleep the clock round and awake as a giant refreshed. Tell me, Joy, *if* by any chance we planned a pillow fight, would you join the fray?"

But Joyce's reply was inaudible.

CHAPTER IV

“HILLO, KITS, what’s wrong? *Have* you picked up sixpence and lost a sovereign? Don’t forget it’s Council day, half holiday, *and* an exploration rolled into one. Away we go, to ‘deeds of derring do’! And where’s Joyce? I heard she was coming to the Gap to discuss things.”

Kits sighed, smiled, and gave herself an impatient shake.

“Mademoiselle is a cat,” she replied. “She says I’ve been slacking over my French, and actually she went to Miss Carwell about it. I don’t see I’ve slacked at all. I’ve not got a tongue for foreign languages like Teresa.”

“Of course not. You’re All British Goods. Who wants to know that *rire* means to laugh? Giggling is the same in all languages. I believe in pantomime action. But don’t look glum. We are going to be serious. Trixie gave me a hint about her idea, and it’s prime!”

So Kits banished the memory of rather an unpleasant lecture, and joined the merry “Crew” gathered in the wood close to the playing fields.

Trixie lost no time in beginning. She greeted Joyce quite gushingly.

“You live near here, don’t you?” she said, “so perhaps you can tell us right away. Who *is* the hermit of the Moor?”

Joyce laughed.

“I couldn’t tell you his name,” she replied, “because ever since I can remember he has always been known round here as Old John. He’s a crank, of course. No one ever goes near his place; it is called the Hermitage—I think that *was* its name before he was known as the hermit. He has lots and lots of cats and birds—and a servant named Long Dick, who never speaks to any one. But why do you want to know? You can’t explore *him*—or the Hermitage. It is years and years since any one but Long Dick has been inside the house.”

“What a thrill,” retorted Trixie, “but we *are* going. Pickles and I adore cats—and cats adore us. It was Kits who in a way put the idea into our heads. We were thinking of how to become heroines,—and, to explore the secret lair of a real live hermit, sounds promising. You’ll come, Joyce?”

Joyce did not know what to say, but—well! it is so *very* hard to say “no” when girls, who you are longing to have as friends, ask you to do something you feel is not quite right and not actually wrong.

Crystal “capped” all by a suggestion.

“We’ll ask if he has a kitten for sale and offer ten bob,” said she, “that’s quite a good excuse. What fun if he sold one! We’d give it to Mademoiselle as a peace offering. She is such an old cat herself she’d be sure to take to it.”

So, with ten shillings, in readiness in case of being asked their business, the adventure-seekers started off.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” quoth Kits, “but never mind! We shall have fun anyhow.”

The gates of the Hermitage were chained and padlocked. Even though the “barriers” were rusty they held good, and a faint depression cast itself over the spirits of the explorers. It was one thing to walk in at the front gate on the pretext of buying a kitten, and quite another to creep through a hole in the hedge—if one were to be found.

Even Trixie demurred over this.

“He might take us for burglars and have us locked up,” she said. “And anyhow there would be a row. Come along, girls, and we’ll have a scout round the outside of the premises. Something may turn up.”

“It looks mysterious enough for a dozen ghost or burglar stories,” said Noreen. “What are you doing, Pickles?”

Pamela had scrambled up into the boughs of a big chestnut tree, and, balancing herself very carefully, peered over into the tangled, over-grown garden on the other side of a sturdy brick wall.

“Can’t see anything,” she proclaimed, “too many trees. There’s just the outline of a house beyond, but it looks like a ruin. I think the hermit must have gone, and the place is empty, so we might just as well climb over, eh? *Hullo!*”

“What is it?” chorused her comrade from below. “*Can* you see anything?”

“Yes,” replied Pickles, “A bird,—a parrot!—a ripper,—grey and pink, it’s a cockatoo I suppose, it’s flying straight for the wall. I believe it has escaped from somewhere. Lie low, chums, and we shall catch it if it comes over. *Then* in triumph we will invade the Hermitage.”

It was a glorious piece of scouting, though the deep, bracken-filled ditch was not the driest of resting places, and no wonder that cockatoo was interested in the row of outstretched figures lying there so quietly.

Crystal half raised herself.

“Pre-tty poll,” she wheedled. The bird balanced restlessly on the wall, uttering a harsh sqwawk. “Clucko, pretty,” soothed the same voice, and the

cockatoo—being perhaps as curious as its would-be-captors—came flitting down amongst the figures in the ditch.

Grab! Trixie had him fast and rose in triumph. That bird must have had acquaintance with sailors, for its language was horrible,—but it could not get free.

Now the road was open indeed. Over the wall scrambled Kits in style, and after her came the Crew, giggling and whispering. *This* was the finest game of Tom Tiddler's ground on record! Trixie went second with the Sqwawker as they had at once named the captive. Apart from the mystery of the place, the Hermitage grounds were *not* inviting.

"The house *can't* be inhabited," urged Crystal, "look at the windows! half are cracked, and the other half have no glass at all. The parrot is just a stray one."

"I'm going inside," said Kits firmly, and mounted the grimy steps leading to a door. Grasping the handle, she was about to give a violent push when the inner handle was turned, and the door flung wide. Before the startled girls appeared the very strangest-looking old man they had ever seen. He was tall, and would have been handsome had his grey hair and beard been less shaggy; his eyes were dark, and just at this moment very angry in expression, his black alpaca coat was thread-bare, but in spite of shabbiness there was no mistaking him to be a gentleman.

"How dare you come here," thundered Old John, preparing to roar out a regular tirade of wrathful denunciation, but Trixie was raising the Sqwawker for inspection.

"He flew over your wall," said she fearlessly, "And we brought him back. If you don't want him we'll keep him."

Old John fairly spluttered. He was so taken aback he did not know *what* to say. But he took the cockatoo very tenderly into his embrace, muttering a few words as he smoothed its feathers.

"Good afternoon," said Trixie. "Next time we see a parrot on the moors we'll leave it alone."

And she turned away.

Old John hesitated.

"It was my mistake," he apologized. "Of course, you did the right thing. I would not have lost him for a bag of money. Now, I suppose you'll want a reward?"

He fumbled in his pocket, whilst Trixie in a fine blaze of temper, faced him.

“We’re not *beggars*—or thieves,” said she scornfully. “You can keep your reward—and your sqwawking bird.”

Old John stared. His experience was that young people were all afraid of him. He disliked his fellow creatures, but boys—and girls—were especially hateful.

Yet—as he looked at Trixie of the red locks, her moon face quivering in resentment, he had the grace to feel ashamed.

“I . . . I . . .,” he stammered, “I’m afraid I—”

Crystal slipped forward, smiling sweetly.

“If you are really obliged to us for bringing back Kiwi,” said she, “you *might* let us just come in and see your cats. We adore cats, and we wanted to see yours.”

The hermit of the moor backed down the passage, he was certainly having an experience!

“Nicholas is in here,” said he, “he is the finest cat in England. I can’t have a herd of school girls running all over the house looking at what doesn’t concern them. Cats and birds are my hobbies—and vastly better ones than most.”

The Crew was on its prettiest behaviour. It did not reply, and if elbows were nudged, and winks exchanged, it was only because the hermit was marching ahead and could not see them.

What a joke it was—actually penetrating the Ogre’s Castle. And *what* a Castle!

There were no carpets, only thick linoleum, and there was only one big table and one chair in the room into which they were ushered. But if it had been crammed with the grandest of furniture, those girls would not have noticed, for they were all swooping upon the very loveliest cat they had ever seen.

Nicholas was a tortoiseshell Persian of enormous size, with a perfectly ideal coat of long, soft fur. If the Hermit had expected his pet to shew claws to these gurgling girl-worshippers he was mistaken. Trixie had actually gathered him into her arms, and was crooning over the sleek, tiger-like creature as though he were a child, whilst Pickles stroked him into sleepy content.

The Hermit stared amazed, but his resentment against the invaders was melting altogether. Kiwi perched on his shoulder, ruffling perturbed feathers and resigning himself once more to captivity, whilst Nicholas purred lazily, as much as to say “Welcome, strangers!”

“Nicholas does not often approve of strange faces,” said Old John. “You young ladies must be cat-lovers.”

A chorus answered him, whilst Nicholas purred confirmation. The guests were harmless!

Old John the hermit must have had a streak of nice feeling left under the crust of self-love, for he actually smiled, as he invited those girls to come and see his birds.

How eagerly he was followed! And what a surprise awaited the guests.

A large room—a really enormous room, some sixty feet long, had been turned into an aviary, and from cage and perch, from leafy grotto of foliage and twigs, and from the marble edge of large, pool-like basins of water, came the song of feathered choristers.

Kits and Crystal, who were foremost of the group of girls, stood with clasped hands, and eyes wide with admiration.

“How *lovely*,” they whispered, “how lovely!”

Indeed, it was the prettiest sight; and not the least pathetic was that of Old John, standing with outstretched arms and upturned face, whilst dozens of his little favourites, and the bigger birds too, came circling down to perch on shoulders, arms and head. They loved him as he loved them. It was a charming little idyll in the midst of this hidden home.

The girls were quite sorry when they had to go—and shook hands gratefully with their host.

“It’s so funny to have cats *and* birds,” said Pickles, to him at parting, “They are such enemies as a rule.”

Old John’s eyes twinkled.

“Even enemies can become friends at times and with careful treatment,” he replied. “There, off you go, and don’t tell any one you’ve been here. Don’t come again, either. After all, I want no one and nothing but my pets. Don’t forget. If you say a word about the Hermitage, I shall consider you are dishonourable and treacherous. Good-bye.”

It didn’t sound very polite, but, as Crystal remarked as they tramped across the moors:

“You couldn’t expect a leopard to change *all* his spots at once.”

It had been such a successful afternoon, and Kits was “extra glad” Joyce should have been able to enjoy a Crew enterprise unflavoured by law-breaking. So interested were they, too, in discussing Nicholas and his master, that they did not notice the black bank of clouds rolling up over the

sky so quickly, and—the storm broke suddenly, as storms have a way of breaking over Yorkshire moors.

A mighty clap of thunder was followed by a few monster drops of rain.

Noreen and Jane, who were leading stopped as if they had been shot.

“Ow!” gasped Jane. “What a jump that gave me.”

“And now for the deluge,” added Pickles, skipping over a tiny stream. “Why *didn't* we notice the sky? We'd better run, comrades, and run with a will. There's going—”

“It's not going . . .,” retorted Kits, “it's *come!*—and I hate lightning.”

A vivid flash had zig-zagged out from the heart of the storm clouds, and was succeeded by another crash. Down came the rain.

“It's a case of buckets not drops,” said Trixie, turning up her coat collar. “Poor old Crystal! it's bad luck, for, of course, you'll have one of your priceless colds.”

Crystal tried to laugh, but she was shivering too. She was very delicate, in contradiction to her high spirits and love of sport, and Trixie's frown was one of real anxiety as she looked round.

Two miles at least before they reached the school, and it was impossible to walk very fast over the heather. The twins too were huddling close to each other, and trying bravely to hide the fact of nervous fears.

“I hate being out in a thunderstorm,” said Pickles. “Of course, I'm a coward—but I'll be honest. If we were only near the Cave I should bolt for the burrow.”

“So should we,” chorused the twins, perking up. “It is so much nicer ‘all to be afraid together’ and not have superior comrades poking fun.”

“What about the Hollow?” suggested Crystal. “We shouldn't get wet, and the undergrowth and all that tangle of thorn trees, and gorse wouldn't be like sheltering under forest trees.”

“The Hollow it shall be,” replied Trixie. “Take my arm, Crys. That's right, Kits. We'll all help each other. There's a path down to the left.”

The storm was becoming quite alarming. The sky was dark, with lurid linings to the black clouds, and the thunder was so deafening they could hardly hear each other speak.

One by one they clambered down the narrow footpath, sliding rather than walking, and bringing showers of gravel down too. But it was a relief to be sheltered from that deluge of rain, and the thickly growing thorn trees made a splendid refuge.

They had not reached the bottom of the Hollow yet, and, as Kits balanced on a ledge of rock, choosing between two footpaths, she gave a faint exclamation of surprise.

The Hollow was already tenanted; below them were the ragged tents and caravans, which told of a gipsy encampment, in fact, it really seemed like a gipsy colony, though at the present moment there was no sign of the gipsy folk. Yes, though! as the girls stood looking down, a boy—of about sixteen—scurried across from some bushes, uttering a peculiar cry. Instantly half-a-dozen men came out, heedless of the rain, or trusting to the shelter of the trees, as they stared with scowling glances towards unwelcome intruders, who had evidently discovered a secret lair!

CHAPTER V

“GIPSIES,” said Trixie, peeping over Kits’ shoulder. “What horrid looking men. I had an idea present-day gipsies were rather jolly. I don’t think we need climb right down there, eh, Kits?”

“No,” replied Kits, quite positively, “I don’t think we will. They don’t look pleased. One of them is coming to speak to us.”

“And the others are creeping round the other way,” added Noreen. “Shall we climb up again? I don’t like the l-look of them a bit.”

The tall, black-haired man below was shouting up at them, but the roaring of the storm prevented them hearing what was said.

“I think he’s asking what we want,” said Trixie, shaking her head vigorously. “And more gipsies are coming out from the tents. What *horrid* faces they have. I do believe I’d rather brave the storm, only Crystal——”

“Quite likely the rain is nearly over,” said Crystal, “it couldn’t *last* at the rate it was coming down. I’d much rather go. There are such crowds of gipsies, and those other men are coming round behind us.”

Pickles did not wait to argue. She was clambering up the path and wishing devoutly it was as easy to go up as it had been to come down.

Some of the younger gipsy boys began to jeer and shout at sight of so hasty a retreat, but the first man called a warning to them not to come again—or to speak about things that did not concern them.

“I don’t understand half what he is saying,” said Kits, who had grown rather pale, “b-but—I believe no one knows they are there. . . . W-we couldn’t see any t-trace of them from the top, could we? and hardly anyone p-passes the Hollow.”

Trixie and Pickles were safe on the moor above. It was still raining far too hard to be pleasant, but perhaps not quite the proverbial cats and dogs. The lightning too was less vivid.

“We can’t be wetter than we are,” shivered Kits. “And it won’t take very long to reach the Court now. Crystal, would you like a sedan chair?”

But Crystal refused with great decision, and managed to keep pace with the longer legs of her companions, though she had no breath and very little life left in her by the time she reached the school.

Miss Trennet and Mademoiselle received them in the hall, and for once Mademoiselle forgot to scold or raise hands of horror, as she helped bundle

that dripping, shivering Crew off to Miss Sesson's room.

Bed, hot bread and milk, and a long lecture on the thoughtlessness of going so far from home in such threatening weather, were the reward and conclusion of a successful adventure, though Crystal's heavy cold and Pickles' cough remained for the next week as reminders that they must be more careful in future.

The term was in full swing by the time Crystal finally left the sick list, and many were the sympathizers over her having missed several important classes through that unlucky chill.

But Crystal was not one to complain.

"I'm out to win the Parraton Scholarship," she laughed. "And I'm not going to be stopped by missing a few classes. Mr. Hinton has been awfully jolly too, and has given me endless notes so that I can link up my French literature and algebra."

"Does that mean you will be a book-worm till after the exam?" asked Kits, anxiously, "because—there's the shed, you know, and ye cookery book."

"Of course," agreed Crystal gaily. "And we are going to experiment too. I don't believe in grinding away at the same old tune all the time. All work and no play makes this Jack far too dull a boy. We'll experiment on the first half hol., and, in the meantime, I'm going to work."

"Gwenda will have to look out then," laughed Kits, but she glanced round the room first to be sure Joyce was not present. The Parraton Scholarship was not a subject to be mentioned by the girls in No. 8. Kits knew that Joyce was longing for Gwenda's success, whilst she herself, naturally hoped Crystal would be winner. Joyce had been "coming out" since the arrival of Kits, who, with friendly enthusiasm, wished to draw the girl into her own set. The Crew was such a jolly, honest little band, and Kits herself could see nothing but fun of the best kind in their frolics, though I think she did understand Joyce's sensitive fear of failing the darling mother at home.

Kits herself, was liking school better and better. Miss Carwell was one of the best. Severe when necessary, but a real friend to her girls, whilst gentle, clever Miss Trennet was always ready with patience to untangle the skeins of trouble her pupils brought her.

The thorn in Kits' bed of roses was Mademoiselle, who kept an eagle and disapproving eye on the girl who had arrived at Clynton Court in a grocer's cart, and had managed to be mixed up in at least half-a-dozen scrapes since!

Crystal was by no means half-hearted in the matter of the Scholarship, and somehow the frolics of the Crew were suspended during the next week or so. There were no more mysterious Hermitages to explore, and the knowledge that that gipsy community was still located in the Hollow prevented the girls from wandering so freely over the moors.

Miss Evelton was delighted to find Kits so regular at her cricket practice, and the girls were growing every day more excited about the cricket match with Beech College fixed for June 20th.

“Ten days after my concert,” said Joyce. “I *am* glad it is not till then. I am so excited about the concert, only I wish the girls would not talk so much before Teresa. I’m afraid she is disappointed.”

“Nonsense,” retorted Kits. “You sing twice as well as Teresa, who, by the way, is being taken up by the Prims. They asked her out when Mrs. O’Fyne came down last week. Well, they’re welcome. Where are you off to, Joyce?”

For Joyce, basket in hand, was turning down the passage towards the front door, and away from the garden entrance.

Joyce flushed.

“I was only taking some shortbread to a little lad I know,” she replied, “he broke his leg some weeks ago, and Miss Carwell allows me to go and see him. His father works for Farmer Perkins.”

Kits was interested. Joyce was so fond of slipping off alone, and she had often wondered what she did with herself as it would have been too far for her to go home.

“Let me come too,” she coaxed, “I often go with mother on her district, and I rather like it, especially where there are children. Would he like chocolate caramels? I’ve got a box of them. Wait one tick.”

Joyce was quite pleased. She was very fond of Kits, in fact, she had begun to discover for the first time the joy of having a real chum and pal. Gwenda was to her “worshipper” a very superior person to be waited on, served, but never chatted to as an equal.

“Crystal is going to experiment to-morrow,” said Kits, as the two girls tramped along side by side. “We *shall* have fun. Oldest clothes and linen masks. You’ll come, Joyce? We want you. Of course, you’ll have to end in becoming one of us—and we’ll promise not to include you when we go for a prowl over old Perkins’ hayricks, or invade private woods on a birds-nesting expedition.”

Joyce looked pleased.

“And they don’t think me a prig?” she asked. “I *am* glad. I am having the nicest term I ever have had at school, and it’s all your doing, Kits. You seem to *know*, even though you are so different. I’m such a donkey in lots of ways.”

“Especially in taking shortbread to lame kiddies,” retorted Kits, “and helping Miss Trennet with copying when you know she has a headache. We all have eyes in our heads, Joy, and your sisters aren’t the only people to have an example set them. Is this the cottage? There, some one has seen you and has come to the door.”

There was no mistake about the welcome Joyce received from these humble friends of hers. Jimmie’s mother’s smile lighted up her tired face, whilst a shout from the couch was the little cripple’s greeting. Joyce was soon seated beside the boy, shewing him the shortbread, and bringing quite a collection of small books from her pocket. The mother beamed on her visitors.

“The hours Jimmie lies and watches for you, Miss,” she said to Joyce, “you would not believe. And talk of you! Why, there’s no one in the world like his lady with Jim.”

Joyce crimsoned.

“I’ve done so little,” she replied, “but I love coming. And when the leg is better, Jimmie, I am going to get leave to come and help you with your crutches. I had crutches once, and it is quite fun hopping along when you know how to balance.”

“I’ll come too,” smiled Kits, “one on each side. We’ll have some fun, and if you like reading, Jimmie, there are lots of old boys’ books at my home which you would like to read I am sure. I will write and get them for you.”

Jimmie’s eyes sparkled. He loved reading, and he liked these two pretty young ladies coming to see and pet him up. Presently, the younger boy Walter came in, and Kits, who had got over a first shyness, made fresh laughter by shewing some simple conjuring tricks. It was extraordinary how quickly the time flew, and how much they themselves enjoyed the visit. Kits was as sorry as Joyce to leave the cottage, and what a glow it gave her round her heart, as she listened to the poor mother’s thanks. To cheer up Jimmie Wane was *almost* as nice, and, in some ways, even nicer than a jolly game of tennis or cricket.

Everything was “nice” according to Kits, who was in a wonderfully cheery and self-satisfied mood, as she slid down the bannisters, nearly falling into the arms—not of Mademoiselle—but of Crystal.

“Hillo!” was her gay greeting. “What’s the matter? Toothache, or a singing lesson? You look quite gloomy. Something must have exploded in the wrong place.”

Crystal perked her fuzzy head on one side.

“N-no,” she replied, “but I have had a hectic afternoon looking for some of those notes Mr. Hinton gave me. They’re gone—and I’ve searched everywhere. It’s a nuisance. At present I want to scratch someone, but I don’t know who!”

Kits grimaced. Though Crystal, with a great effort, was trying to make a joke of her loss, it evidently troubled her.

“Let me look?” she urged, good-naturedly, “the boys call me a nailer for finding lost belongings. We’ll begin at the first possible place and go on to the most impossible.”

Crystal gave the speaker’s hand a squeeze.

“You dear,” she replied, “but ‘nuffing doing’. You see, it can’t have got anywhere but where it was,—unless it were *taken*. And—it can’t have been taken!”

Kits rubbed her forehead.

“It sounds like Peter Piper of the pickling pepper,” she said, “repeat it slowly. Do you mean—the paper must be where it was put, unless it was taken which is impossible? In that case it must still be ‘there’. Where is ‘there’?”

“In my desk. There’s one virtue I do possess, Kits, and that is tidiness. I *am* tidy—at least in drawers and that sort of thing. Mr. Hinton’s paper was folded and slipped into a rubber band with three other papers. I remember yesterday catching the rubber on the paper pin holding two sheets together. And yet the paper is not there now. It was not there three hours ago. Some one must have taken it. I hate saying it, but it’s true. Only—why?”

“We shall have to find out,” replied Kits, “come back to the schoolroom. Miss Trennet will be there and she will help. Of course, it seems as if it were some one who did not want you to win the Parraton. But that is absurd.”

Crystal chuckled.

“It makes one laugh even to dream of Gwenda,” she said, “and she is the only one directly concerned. No, we must find another solution—and have another hunt.”

But both hunt and brain-racking were useless. The paper had gone. Miss Trennet was most sympathetic.

“Mr. Hinton will be here again next week, dear,” she said, “he will set you another paper.”

“I think I shall write to him,” said Crystal, “for it was just a link-lesson. I can’t get on with my reading unless I do it first. Don’t worry, Miss Trennet. I daresay I mislaid the wretched thing.”

Teresa Tenerlee was seated at her own desk on the other side of the room. She was busy sealing an envelope.

“Do you happen to have asked Joyce Wayde?” she demanded carelessly.

Crystal shot the speaker a quick glance, and her colour rose. She did not pretend to misunderstand.

“Don’t be so beastly mean, Teresa,” she commanded with energy, and walked out of the room, her arm round Kits’ waist.

Kits said nothing, she was too shocked at the bare hint. She frankly disliked Teresa, and had been afraid of taking up the cudgels for Joyce lest a lively quarrel should result. The idea of *hinting* such a thing!

Crystal made no comment about it, but Kits noticed how she searched out Joyce, and made a special point of persuading her to join the “research” party next afternoon.

Crystal *would* have spent an hour at least of that spare time in study, but she was handicapped, and at a standstill. But there was no grumbling. Complaints of things being “too bad”, or wild accusations were not in Crystal’s method of life. She was the merriest leader and general supervisor in the afternoon’s proceedings. And oh! what a mess those girls did make of themselves in the pursuit of science!

Pickles, with white of egg and lamp-black, was making an ancient boot polish guaranteed to produce a glorious shine on any boot. It produced a glorious nigger-mask over the pert features of Miss Pickles. Trixie was gingerly stirring a compound guaranteed to mend all broken china, whilst Crystal hovered as high-priestess of the ceremonies over a brew of superlative glue. Kits, perched on a shelf, read aloud from the book of cookery amidst peals of laughter and calls for a repetition of some choice description.

“Something is *smelling*,” said Noreen, presently, “pooh! how horrid. Crys, it’s the glue, do take it off. Kits, can’t you find a cure for rheumatism? I rather like the medical ones,—or a posset. Find a treacle posset.”

“One sec,” urged Kits, and leaned forward to obtain a better light.

Crack! That shelf had not been designed for a seat, and Kits, thinking only of ye *anciente* cookery book, clutched, swayed, and fell, knocking

Crystal's arm, as that worthy was in the very act of lifting the saucepan of glue off the stove. Over went the glue amidst squeals, yells, and a general flight. Crystal was dancing with pain as some glue had splashed her hand, though she laughed too, at sight of Noreen trying to plunge aside and escape the fatal flow which encircled her boots.

Glue, glue, everywhere, and oh, the smell too!

It was no sort of luck that Miss Pasfold and Mademoiselle should be passing down the road close by, as Kits flung open the hut door, and staggered laughing out.

The two ladies turned and instantly advanced, Mademoiselle pouring out a stream of rapid enquiries in French.

Kits retreated, Mademoiselle advanced.

"It's only . . . only our experiments' hut," gasped Kits. "Miss Carwell knows all about it. She gave us leave."

Crystal was on the threshold.

"Do ask Mademoiselle *not* to come in, Miss Pasfold," she pleaded, "she won't like the smell. We've spilt some glue."

Miss Pasfold sniffed. She was a mean-featured woman, who knew perfectly well she was most unpopular with her pupils, and rather gloried in the fact.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, Crystal," she retorted. "Mademoiselle and I wish to see what you were doing. I am quite sure Miss Carwell has no idea——"

She paused. Crystal, with a naughty twinkle in her eyes, had stepped aside. Mademoiselle passed into the hut, sniffing and jabbering. She insisted on knowing the origin of that so detestable smell—she found the answer beneath her feet!

Now Mademoiselle prided herself not only on her feet but her shoes! She was a plain woman, gawky and angular, but her feet were both small and well-shaped, her patent leather shoes quite irreproachable.

"It's glue," explained Trixie, pushing aside ye 'perfect cement'. "Take care, Mad——"

But the warning which Crystal ought to have given came too late. In vain did Mademoiselle try to advance. Her feet were positively *glued* to the ground.

The perplexed Frenchwoman stood speechless at first, staring at the floor, trying vainly to draw up her left foot. The glue was worthy of its

recommendation. The thin, yellowish fluid had hardened in a remarkably short time about those high heels, and the shining leather.

“You laugh, hein!” gasped Mademoiselle. “It is an impertinence, an insult. But what is it you do? My shoes, you will spoil, I cannot walk. I _____”

“You’re stuck,” gurgled Jane, tears of merriment rolling down her cheeks, “it’s glue . . . and isn’t it *splendid* glue! Crys . . . Crystal was making it and it upset. You’re glued.”

“Really, girls,” snapped Miss Pasfold, carefully remaining on the threshold, “Your behaviour is outrageous. You will be reported to Miss Carwell immediately on our return. Mademoiselle, I——”

“But I do *not* return,” almost shrieked Mademoiselle. “I do not move! this joke . . . it is no joke at all! I remain immovable. I do not lift my heel. It is for my shoes I distress myself.”

“It wasn’t really our fault,” protested Kits. “I asked you not to come in. The glue had only just been upset. It’s awfully good glue.”

Joyce was kneeling on a small, hard cushion doing her best to cut the stiff glue away from round the heel of the shoe. Mademoiselle glared down at her.

“You free me, but my shoes do suffer,” she groaned, “for you, Joyce, I would not have thought you would so disgrace yourself as to be here where the follies are practised. Yes, I move now, I depart, but I shall give the loud complaint to Miss Carwell. It will be ze end of your so bad amusement.”

And, with the air of an enraged turkey cock, Mademoiselle stalked away, followed by Miss Pasfold.

Crystal, moving to the door of the hut, stood arms akimbo, looking mournfully after the retreating figures.

“I was wondering,” she murmured, pensively, “how much we could safely charge Mademoiselle for the glue she has taken with her?”

Joyce and Kits were already beginning to clear up.

Trixie had charge of the book.

“When all’s said,” she remarked, “that recipe is a ripper. It’s a glue with a resisting power in it. I do believe if we patented it we might make a fortune. Shall we leave the book on the top shelf, Crys?”

But Crystal had turned back.

“No,” she replied, “we won’t leave anything worth having,—and it’s just as well we got that padlock, girls, for I’m positive I saw one of those gipsies creeping away just now into the wood. It’s in my bones we are going to have

trouble with those gentry unless we get them the order of the boot. I believe it would only be right to tell Mr. Plethwaite where they are, even though I hate interfering.”

“They might have revenge,” said Noreen, “don’t do it, Crystal. We can lock up the shed, and, if we see more gipsies we might buy a dog and keep it there.”

“True, oh, Queen Noreen. A dog it shall be,” replied Crystal. “Now for home and bread and marg. Next time we’ll try cookery, and eat our works of genius. What are you so busy about, Trix?”

Trixie grinned.

“Poetry,” she said, “Listen!

“A story I sing a story that’s true.
Of Mademoiselle and boiling glue,
If only we’d had some extraordinary luck,
We’d have gone on our way, and left her here stuck.”

Applause greeted this work of genius, and not the least depressed by the thought of lectures, or of lurking gipsies the Crew walked back to school, arriving just in time only for tea.

“Even if we get a lecture and lines—or a shortage of cake it was worth it, wasn’t it?” laughed Kits to Joyce, as she stood combing back her hair.

And Joyce tried hard to smile in return, though she could not quite bring herself to say “yes!”

CHAPTER VI

“NEW patent leather shoes for Mademoiselle,” quoth Trixie glumly, “if that’s not too bad. But Miss Carwell has not taken away our shed. That’s one thing I will say. Miss Carwell is a sport. She had Crystal and me up and cross-examined us in style. But she said we might go on with our experiments, if we promised to be very careful, and not encroach on her trust in us. There you are! Honour in a nutshell. We’ll make Miss C. an ancient cake in gratitude. You’re not going off to cricket again, Kits? We want to hold a Council about Joyce’s membership.”

As Trixie spoke Crystal herself came into the room. She was looking most unnaturally serious and worried.

“Is there a *ghost* of Clynton Court, girls?” she asked, perching herself on the wide window ledge, “I believe there must be, and it’s got a special spite against me. Those French papers Mr. Hinton sent to me by last evening’s post have vanished—absolutely. They have been taken out of my desk.”

Trixie and Kits stared.

“You don’t mean it?” queried Trixie, “I say, you’ll have to speak to Miss Carwell about it. What a most extraordinary thing.”

“More than extraordinary,” echoed Kits, who had gone rather white. “Are you positive, Crystal, that you’ve not overlooked the paper? Things do get caught up in the weirdest way.”

“Come and look for yourselves,” retorted Crystal, “but you won’t find. I am frightfully bothered over it, for I’m getting behind-hand, and the exam takes place in three weeks’ time.”

Of course, Kits and Trixie were quite sure they *were* going to find the paper, and, of course, they were mistaken. It was not there. What was more, Crystal could point to where, in freeing it from the rubber band, a small piece of paper had been torn away.

“You’ll have to tell Miss Carwell,” repeated Kits. “Some one is playing you a trick. I’ve often read about papers being stolen in revenge, but no one could possibly want to be revenged on you, and . . . and . . .”

“And it isn’t as if the whole school were going in for the Scholarship,” added Trixie, “There’s only Gwenda, and she would never do such a thing.”

Kits felt her colour rising, as against her will, she recalled what Trixie had said about Joyce.

Of course, Joyce was painfully anxious for her “heroine” to win. But was it likely a girl who was so sensitive in avoiding the very shadow of wrong-doing would stoop to such mean treachery?

Kits was angry at her own disloyalty and spoke to Joyce on the subject at the first chance.

“We can’t imagine who can have played a mean game like that even for a joke,” she added, and, in her own anxiety to chase away a tantalizing little whisper, looked hard at her companion.

Joyce went white, then flamed. There could be no question as to her embarrassment, and Kits’ heart sank in dismay. Would Joyce explain her blushes? But no!!

“I’m glad Crystal has told Miss Carwell,” was all she replied, as she turned away.

Kits was more than uncomfortable. Why was Joyce so odd? She ought at least to have shewn indignation. Nothing of the sort! and when, later, Noreen and Jane searched her out to tell her the Council offered her “special membership” in the Crew, she disgusted them by replying she did not want to be any sort of member.

Trixie and Pickles were loud in their resentment of such treatment. They had been prepared to help Joyce to a happy niche in the ranks of her school-fellows—and she had rejected their friendly offer. Well! her loss. The Crew at least would not be bothered about her any more.

Crystal was particularly silent during the passing of this resolution, whilst Kits looked worried.

Was Joyce a humbug and a sneak?

Kits was so proud of what she called her boy’s code of honour, and failed to see that she was inclined to narrow the wider code of generous judgment.

Joyce would have to prove her honesty if she wished to retain her room-fellow’s friendship.

And, though Kits did not say this in so many words, Joyce seemed to have found it out, and to retreat farther back than ever into her shell.

Kits was *not* asked to come and help Jimmie Wane with his crutches, and Kits shrugged her shoulders, looking the other way when she saw Joyce going off alone on her errand of kindness. *Was* she really good,—or a sneak?

Kits, questioning, looked up to see Teresa’s dark eyes smiling on her. That cat Teresa! But it was strange to see how friendly Teresa seemed to be to Joyce in these days. Twice she went out of her way to help her in finding

lost books or pens. Several times Kits noticed the girls talking together. It was within ten days of the concert at York, and Kits guessed Joyce was feeling very nervous about it. But she did not sympathize. Joyce was—so queer—not a bit like an honest, straight-forward chum, whose every action bore the full glare of day.

And Crystal's paper had never been found. Stranger still, it was the very day after Mr. Hinton's next class that Crystal's notes disappeared in the same way.

Poor Crystal! She was so loathe to tell of her loss, and quite possibly she would not have done so but for Kits' discovering her in tears at her desk.

Crystal crying was such an unbelievable vision that Kits felt inclined to rub her eyes and stare in amaze.

"What *is* the matter?" she asked anxiously, "have you a pain? Do come with me to Miss Sesson."

Crystal rubbed her nose vigorously, and managed to wink away those foolish tears.

"Bosh?" she retorted. "I was only being an idiot. Don't look so scared, Kits mavourneen. It's just because there's a streak of bad luck in my horoscope which tells me I'm not destined for a laurel crown,—*is* it laurel or bay, I wonder, for the winner of scholarships?"

Kits caught her breath.

"You don't mean to say you've lost *more* papers?" she questioned.

Crystal attempted a giggle, but it was a poor business, and there were more winks necessary to disguise the fact of tears.

"My notes," she whispered. "It really is a mystery, Kits. I don't mean to boast that I'm tidy. I'm not the least little bit what Mademoiselle would call 'possessed of ordaire,' but I take care of my papers, and I remember absolutely putting those notes just inside this exercise book. I thought to myself 'no rubber band this time'."

"Of course, some one is doing it on purpose," quoth Kits. "And to *you* of all people! Why, you can't have an enemy in the school. But it can't be allowed to go on. We must tell Miss Carwell again. It is a deliberate plot to make you lose the Parraton. And it looks awfully black against——"

"Hush!" said Crystal quickly, adding, with a faint, wry smile. "You don't know how I hate the idea of accusing any one, and, after all, those notes were not so very important. I believe I can remember nearly everything without them." But Kits was not to be appeased. She had seen Joyce Wayde come to the schoolroom door as they were speaking, and she knew Crystal,

also seeing her, had said "Hush." So Crystal knew whose name had been on the tip of her tongue!

"I shall go straight and tell Miss Trennet," said poor Kits, who was thoroughly miserable over the incident, "it's not fair on you or any of us that such a dishonourable girl should stay in the school."

"That's to say if it *is* one of the girls," replied Crystal, obstinately. "It might be one of the servants—no! of course, it couldn't be!—or my sub-conscious self. Don't look so tragic, Kits. I'm going to shut up my desk and trust to memory. By the way, don't forget we are spending to-morrow afternoon in the hut. I feel the glue episode is safely out of sight—and it is high time toffee de luxe, and some ancient cakes of ye golden ginger bread took its place in our annals."

Kits hugged the speaker. Crystal was the dearest of sports in the way she "took" this cruel and undeserved persecution. But if she were not prepared to fight in her own defence, why! Kits must do it for her.

Undoubtedly, Kits had an aggressive streak in her character, and took things far more to heart than Crystal herself.

Joyce did not attempt to chatter to her companion that evening, and Kits maintained a glum silence. It was not till just as the latter was getting into bed that the younger girl crossed the room, and laid her hand on Kits' arm.

"I want you to tell me," she asked, with a kind of quiet desperation in her voice, "whether you really think I stole Crystal's papers because I want Gwenda to win the Scholarship?"

Kits was thoroughly taken aback. Such direct attack was the last thing she had expected, but she was glad it had come. Turning, she faced the speaker. Joyce was pale, but her grey eyes were steady, their gaze unflinching.

Kits was aware of a thrill of self-reproach.

"I have been really thinking it," she replied, quite frankly. "I don't see how I could help it! Other girls, I am sure, have thought it too,—at least those who Crystal has told about it. She's so splendid herself, that her one idea is to hush it all up, for fear of the wrong person being blamed."

A tinge of colour deepened in Joyce's cheeks.

"I agree with you, Crystal *is* splendid," she said. "She *is* generous too, and I can never be grateful enough. I . . . I . . . know I ought not to be hurt, Kits, that you should doubt me. But I am. That's why I've not said anything. It was a silly sort of pride. Now, I feel I can't bear it any more. I must tell you that I never touched those papers or notes. I have never been to Crystal's desk. I would never, never do what you suspected me of doing,

were it to give Gwenda the Scholarship ten times over. Will you believe me, Kits?”

Kits was silent for a few seconds. Her eyes had never left the other girl’s face, she had watched, accused, judged. Now, at last, in the moment of crisis, she acquitted.

Bending impulsively forward, she kissed Joyce on the lips.

“I do believe you,” she cried, “I do and will believe you. I’ve been a pig to doubt you, only—oh, Joyce! if it’s not you—who is it?”

Joyce’s face, radiant as she returned her friend’s embrace, clouded over.

“If *only* I knew,” she sighed, “if only I could find out! I’ve thought—and thought, but I don’t see who it can be. I did think of some one—at first—but it was not fair to even whisper her name to myself, for she could have had no reason—or motive. But if I can help to clear the mystery, Kits, I’ll only be too thankful, both for your sake and Crystal’s.”

CHAPTER VII

“IF you mention notes *or* scholarships during the next twenty-four hours,” said Crystal severely, “I shall not be on speaking terms with you! It’s toffee, toffee that I need, and ancient cakes on which I feed. Honour, girls, we must put our backs into our job. A real cookery afternoon! And *next* week we might try scent distilling, or one of the prescriptions for rheumatism or ague. In the olden days ague seems to have been the most popular ailment to cure—or endure. Kits, will you and Pickles be answerable for the butter? Joyce and I are getting the brown sugar. Trixie will contribute the humble lemon, and the Twins will together bear the weight of the saucepan.”

“And don’t forget, Twins,” added Trixie joyously, “that if you *do* meet Mademoiselle, you won’t be able to hide that saucepan under your hats, you must sit on it! Once discovered and all is lost.”

The Council was being held, whilst the councillors sat perched—swaying, somewhat giddily—along the meadow railing. Crystal was as cheery and jaunty as ever, and seemed bent on keeping Joyce well to the fore during the meeting. Kits, on the other hand, sat rather aloof and silent, shewing no smallest desire to be a leader of the Crew.

Trixie was eating an orange with a philosophic air.

“What are we going to make as well as toffee?” asked Pickles, anxiously. “I fancied I heard the word gingerbread. If so, *do* let me get the treacle. Cookie at home makes jolly good gingerbread, but she says the secret is all in the treacle. Fowler’s is the stuff to give ’em! and—do you like bits of candied peel chopped up in it?”

Trixie rubbed her hands.

“Don’t make me too hungry, Pamela Irene,” she urged, “remember, dinner comes between, and it is pea soup and pie day, without pudding. What are you thinking about, Kits? You look as if you were trying to compose a poem on pie, but it can’t be done! There is *nothing* poetic about Mrs. Wiggles’ pies.”

Pickles was the one to answer such a challenge.

“You don’t know anything about it,” she retorted. “A poet can make poems on anything. I could do it on you if you liked, as to pie:—

“Why sit ye by the hearth, ladye?
Why on the bed ye lie?”
“It is because I’ve eaten,
Of Mrs. Wiggles’ pie!”

“There’s the bell,” interrupted Kits. “Don’t forget to meet me at the gate, Poetess Pam, as we’ll have to get the butter at the shop.” She did not glance at Joyce, though she knew the latter was standing quite near, a questioning look in her eyes.

Joyce was not feeling one bit like enjoying the fun of a cookery afternoon. If only she could have screwed up her courage she would have refused to join her chums. For she knew so perfectly well that there was an undercurrent of suspicion in the attitude of all but Crystal herself. Those other girls were asking—“*Could* Joyce Wayde have stolen those papers?” and they had not decided the final answer.

Besides Joyce’s sensitive conscience was worrying her as to whether she ought to join in what she felt perfectly sure the governesses would not allow if they knew. Yet, in gratitude to Crystal, she could not draw back.

So, in to the dining room trooped the merry Crew, the merriment just a *trifle* forced, because of the shadow which lay over the little band. For those young women were tremendous enthusiasts over their own particular champion and genius. Crystal, they vowed, *must* win the Parraton; and, if some sinister influence were at work to deprive her of it, it must be discovered and destroyed.

But such problems, such perplexing detective work, had nothing to do with toffee-making,—and Crystal had entreated that nothing “ugly” should intrude to spoil their fun.

The “obtainers of the sinews of war” gradually straggled hut-wards before half past two that afternoon. Pea soup and Mrs. Wiggles’ pie must have had a slightly depressing effect, for the embryo cooks looked bothered and perturbed in spirit as they displayed their wares.

Noreen and Jane were the latest arrivals, and came panting to the door armed with saucepan and large wooden spoon.

“We *never* thought we should reach here,” gasped Noreen.

“Mademoiselle followed us all the way to the Copse,” echoed Jane.

“And we had to double, and go through the stream to escape,” chorused the Twins together.

“You shall have a toffee medal,” promised Crystal. “As to Mademoiselle, she deserves boiling. She and Pasfold have never been young

or honest in their lives. One day we shall have to teach them better manners. Poor Twins! what roused her suspicions?"

The Twins looked at each other, and the rest of the Crew looked at them. Pickles giggled.

"I suppose," she hinted, "you tried to wash the outside of that saucepan, eh? If *only* we had a looking-glass! Your nose, oh Jane, looks as if it had burrowed amongst the flues, and the chin of Noreen has been up the chimney."

There was a roar of laughter, though the twins looked a trifle injured.

"We *did* put the wretched thing under the pump," said Jane, "it was black. It is black now. I—er—don't know if outsides of saucepans are ever washed, but this one *never* has been. Alice heard us pumping, and I suppose she told Mademoiselle. We had to hide the saucepan in the coal cellar and go back for it. That's why we are late."

"Better late than never," quoth Trixie. "Now, Crystal, *is* this toffee going to be seventeenth century, or modern? Personally——"

"We'll make it and see what it turns out," replied Crystal. "We've got all the stuff. Butter, sugar, and elbow grease; then lemon and patience,—mix all together, and then burn your tongue in your anxiety to get first help. That's the whole business. Got a match, Joyce?"

Joyce *had* a match, and tried to smile enthusiastically, but it was not easy. Kits was unmistakably hostile, and even Trixie did her best to ignore her.

If *only* she could escape and steal away to read to Jimmie Wane, or go in search of primroses for Miss Trennet.

Evidently Joyce had not the soul of a cook, and she would never have volunteered to stir that sticky, bubbling compound at all had not Crystal pressed the honour upon her.

"Your turn, Joy," sang Crystal, and the other girls, who had been laughing merrily over Pickles' "tasting" of half cooked toffee, drew back for the newcomer to take office.

Joyce stirred laboriously, her cheeks crimson, her eyes intent on her task. There was such a distinct check to the fun. A few minutes of awkwardness which Crystal vainly tried to bridge.

Joyce endured it as long as she could, but—tears were very near—as she laid down the spoon which Kits only just grabbed in time to save the toffee.

"You duffer!" said Kits. "You ought *never* to leave off for a second, didn't you know that?"

Joyce gulped, turned, and fled from the hut. She would have disgraced herself by tears had she remained.

“That’s a good thing,” said Pickles, “don’t frown, Crys. Of course, you’re an angel and a duck, but it *was* a mistake asking Joyce to join the Crew. She’s not one of us. She’s a crank, I think, and—well! you *know* what we all think.”

Kits stirred furiously. She seemed to have a grievance against that toffee! Crystal sat perched on the table.

“Of course, I know what you all think,” she retorted, “and I’m going to answer flat out. You’re not playing the game, Crew. I know you feel you’re championing me—and I hate it. Of course, the vanishing of the papers is a mystery, but I do *not* believe Joyce Wayde took them. I may be wrong, but I’m sure I’m right. I love to pride myself on summing people up pretty well. Joyce is not exactly a Crew star, but she’s straight. She might easily be a Prim, but she’s not. She’s too humble. In fact, she’s Joyce Wayde—not quite like any one else, but a jolly good sort as well as a problem. Do you understand? I hope so! And you need not look down your noses. You have made up your idiotic minds that Joyce is guilty. It’s not fair—and I hate it. Now, Kits, *when* you’ve finished splashing around you can raise that saucepan, and pour ye famous toffee on to this dish.”

It was impossible to protest or argue with Crystal. She’d said her say with a vast amount of decision. She had said most determinedly that she did not believe Joyce Wayde had touched her notes or papers—and her listeners knew she meant what she said.

Kits and Trixie longed to ask if Joyce had not taken those papers, who could have done so? but—well! the toffee was the great concern at the moment, and Crystal was not a very easy or pleasant person to argue with. She might even lose her temper, and say sarcastic things. She *could* do both, though she did not often indulge!

“Isn’t it perfect,” giggled Pickles,—only too glad to banish Joyce and her deeds from their midst. “A perfect picture of toffee as it ought to be. When will it be cool enough to eat?”

A gasp of pain from Noreen told of an unlucky attempt to reply to the enquiry.

“I think it would be *safer*,” said Trixie, “to leave that perfection to cool by itself. We might clear up and go for a walk. What about taking the saucepan to wash in the stream? We can’t return it to Eliza plus toffee-stick.”

“Righto,” replied Crystal, “we’ll gather primroses by the river’s brim, and feel good and sweet and full of ye virtues. I wish there were cowslips somewhere. Cowslip balls are fascinating and cowslip wine is a treat.”

“Pig!” chorused the twins, and chased Crystal from the hut and down the lane.

The saucepan was left to the charge of Kits, who bore it with the air of a martyr, and finally, deposited it by the side of the stream, whilst she went in search of a small bough to scour the sticky sides. A shout from her comrades drew her away. Crystal, lower down the stream, had taken off shoes and stockings and was paddling joyously.

“Come along, Kits,” she sang, “isn’t this fun? Take hands and advance—and we’ll chase the others as far as the pool. I want to skip and sing and dance. Oh, glorious!”

“Ow! a frog,” gasped Noreen. “A regular flopper! *I’m* not going to paddle. And it’s getting late. Come along, Crystal. We are all too thirsty to miss tea.”

But Trixie and Kits had already joined their chum, and the merry girls went dancing up stream. It was such a perfect day of May—the end of May—on the border-land of June. Crystal was still singing when a scream from Jane suggested an accident of some kind.

Back they raced, being met by the Twins, whose faces were quite pale with fear.

“Bees!” they gasped, “thousands. L-look. W-we shall never be able to take the saucepan back. L-look at the bees. They—they’ve filled it.”

Crystal advanced cautiously. There could be no bravado here! Ugh! it was quite true. A wandering swarm of bees, having left its hive, had found that toffee-coated saucepan and were enjoying the feast. Brown bodies covered the whole of the inside of the utensil, and quite a cloud of bees circled round.

“No saucepan for me,” whispered Crystal. “We shall have to leave it to the rabbits and pheasants. Perhaps the bees will reward us by making honey in it! Take care, Pickles. Bees are frightfully interesting at a distance, but if the queen takes a fancy to alight on your head the whole swarm follows. Back down this way!”

The retreat was prompt. Pickles brought up the rear sighing regretfully.

“I never thought I should be afraid of bees,” she said, “they’re so busy and jolly and cheerful. I suppose it’s the number. Hullo! Listen!”

A curious humming sound, growing louder and louder, reached them. The swarm of tiny insects had left the saucepan and gathered in a large cluster above the stream. The humming sounded quite loud and threatening. This was too much for the heroines of Clynton Court, and away they fled as though an army were in sight, rolling, tumbling, slipping in their haste to get away.

The voice of a keeper, raised in angry protest, reminded them that they were trespassing, and that pheasants were nesting!

Kits, the foremost now in flight, halted to explain to the burly gamekeeper, who stood frowning on the path before her.

Mark Talkin had, however, recognized the young lady who had saved his master's little son and daughter, and the frown gave place to a grin, as Kits panted out the story of pursuit.

"I keep bees myself, Missie," said he. "May be I'll be gettin' that there swarm. No, I ain't afraid of 'em. Bees is canny things. If you ain't afraid of them they won't hurt *you*! They has their likes an' dislikes too, but treated proper they are harmless sort of creaturs. Friendly too. I allus tells my bees my secrets and there ain't no blabbing."

"Is that really true?" asked Kits. "How wonderful! I didn't know bees were like that. And I love honey. We're awfully sorry we've trespassed so far into the woods, we never thought of the pheasants."

Mark chuckled.

"The master would make you welcome, Missies, pheasants or no," he replied. "I thought at first you were a bunch of them varmint gipsies. They're about somewhere, that's sure. And they won't get off easy if I lays hand on 'em."

He touched his hat to the girls as he spoke, going off down a side path, leaving the Crew to go its way back to the hut.

"I wonder if we ought to have told him of the Gipsy camp?" said Kits. "I wish some one would move it on. Look, Pickles, wasn't that a gipsy boy scuttling down the lane? And we never locked the hut door!"

Alas! Kits' eyesight proved to be as true as her dawning fears. The hut door was open . . . and not only the toffee, but spoon and plate, and a blue scarf belonging to Crystal had vanished too.

"Little *beast!*" said Trixie hotly. "And we shall never make such a perfect brew again. Shall we go round by the village and tell Hodges the policeman? We shall never be able to leave anything here now. You'd better bring your cookery book back to school, Crys."

“Yes,” replied Crystal. “Lucky they took my scarf and not that. And no, —I don’t think we’ll tell Hodges, Trix. I’m a coward, of course, but I’m rather scared of gipsy vengeance. Surely some one else must know they’ve got a camp in the Hollow? Perhaps they *can’t* be moved on. I believe in leaving gipsies and bees alone, however interesting they are. And anyhow we’ve had a jolly afternoon.”

Kits stifled a sigh. It *had* been a jolly afternoon, but she did wish she had not got to go back to No. 8, and Joyce. That out-of-favour room-mate was causing Kits no end of worry. She hated the “unclean” feeling of not being quite chums with a girl she had looked on as a real friend. She had believed in Joyce and her goodness so thoroughly. It was hateful to suspect her of treachery and deceit.

How could Joyce’s innocence or guilt be finally proven?

That was the question which concerned Kits just now far more than French grammar or English history.

How could it be answered?

CHAPTER VIII

JOYCE had gathered her primroses, and regained some at least of her peace of mind. She and Miss Trennet, the English governess, were real friends, and they had a common interest in botany. Besides primroses Joyce had brought back a fern long and vainly sought as a gift to her mistress, and, as she went down to the garden room to put away her basket after bestowing her present, she was humming quite a happy tune.

It is bad to be suspected of some wrong-doing of which we are innocent, but far worse to be suspected when we are guilty! So argued this philosopher, and was wondering when the mystery would be cleared, when she saw Teresa Tenerlee coming towards her.

Joyce was not a saint—and she never had liked Teresa! She made no secret of the fact either, and would have passed the girl, who was a puzzle to her into the bargain, when Teresa stopped.

“I believe I’ve got a cold coming,” was her unexpected remark, “so even if I’d been going to sing at the concert I should not have been able to.”

Joyce flushed. She knew Teresa had been wild because Mr. Roberts had not chosen her for the honour, so this remark was embarrassing.

“I hope if you have a cold it will be well enough for you to come to York,” she said, rather stiffly. “Mr. Roberts is taking all his pupils.”

Teresa gave a little shrug which she prided herself as being quite foreign!

“I should have loved to go and sing,” she retorted, “but I should hate listening to you. Isn’t that catty? Never mind, we are rather like that to each other, eh, Joyce? But I mean to return good for evil. *Some* of the girls are saying you have stolen Crystal’s notes and papers, because you want Gwenda to win the Parraton. Don’t pretend you’ve not guessed that. I like to call a spade a spade.”

It was just what Joyce was sure Teresa hated doing, but she was so surprised at the way the other girl was talking that she was silent in sheer amaze.

“*I’m* quite sure you’ve not touched those papers,” went on Teresa airily, “for the very simple reason that I’ve guessed—and more than guessed—who is guilty. But I’m not going to say—yet.”

Joyce flushed hotly.

“If you really know, you ought to say,” she replied indignantly. “It’s the meanest trick in the world. And whoever has done it—and knows I am getting suspected—ought to be expelled.”

“Quite so,” agreed Teresa, in her sweetest and most aggravating tones. “And Miss Carwell would expel her too. I heard her telling Miss Trennet and Crystal so. She was making a regular pijaw of it. The girl will be expelled as soon as she is caught. And she is sure *to* be caught sooner or later.”

Joyce wrinkled her brow.

“You talk as if you knew she was going to do it again,” she said slowly. “I don’t understand you, Teresa. We are not friends, and . . . and we’ve never told each other secrets. Why are you telling me of all people that you know who is playing Crystal up such a mean trick?”

Teresa laughed in her most mocking way.

“You want to know too much,” she retorted. “And I don’t intend that you should call me a fibber or something equally complimentary, but I’ll make a bargain. If I *can* prove to you that the girl I suspect has really taken Crystal’s papers will you let me do so?”

Joyce paled.

“You mean . . .,” she stammered. “You mean . . .”

Teresa came close.

“That girl,” she said, “does what she wants to do at night. I saw her going down to the schoolroom on the night Crystal’s notes were taken, but I cannot say I actually *saw* them stolen by her. I mean to watch though. I can watch with particular ease, and I’m convinced in my own mind that she will play the same trick again. Now, after all that preamble, I am going to ask you a question. Would you like me to call you when that girl goes down to the schoolroom again? Would you like to be a witness, and so clear your name and help Crystal to win the Scholarship, even though you wish Gwenda to get the Parraton?”

Joyce walked to the window, and stood staring out.

She did not trust Teresa. Instinctively she felt the girl had some ulterior motive in making such a proposition. And yet the offer sounded straightforward enough. If a second and less worthy motive were to be discovered would it not be that Teresa felt Joyce would need all her honour to insist on her acting in a way to rob Gwenda of the certainty of victory? Crystal was Gwenda’s most dangerous rival. And Joyce was asked to make Crystal’s fight for success easier.

Satisfied that this might be a sufficient reason for Teresa's strange choice of her as a confidant, Joyce turned back to the waiting girl.

"Yes," she replied, in low tones, "I shall be quite ready to come if you call me, though . . . I wonder you do not ask Miss Pasfold?"

Teresa flushed a little, but quickly recovered her composure.

"That was a nasty dig," she said jauntily, "but I'm not quite such a sneak. You will see just as much as there is to see, and you can do what you like about it afterwards. I shan't say one other word, and if you take my advice, you'll wait to find my motive for telling you all this till you see the girl who likes taking little midnight trips to the schoolroom."

"Wait one moment," urged Joyce, "I must know——"

But Teresa had whisked herself off down the passage, singing a gay little ditty in a voice which sounded perfectly clear from any sort of cold!

It was from Crystal that Joyce heard the story of the stolen toffee, and tried to shew proper interest in its disappearance.

"There are always a lot of gipsies on the moors," she said. "Every one wages war against them. If you like I will write to Dad and he will speak about it at the next meeting of magistrates?"

But Crystal shook her head. She was still afraid, she declared, of having an "evil eye" cast in her direction.

Joyce was less constrained this evening when Kits joined her in her bedroom. If Teresa really was going to unravel the mystery of the stolen papers her name would very soon be cleared. Kits was surprised at the other's manner, but, fresh from a chat with Crystal, she was prepared to meet Joyce half way.

"Have you heard the latest?" she asked, "We were attacked in the garden room by the Prims. *Actually!* I believe they must have forgotten the grocer's cart for the time, anyway they wanted to know if Trixie, Pickles and I would help in the pastoral play which is going to be held in Mr. Plethwaite's grounds. Miss Carwell had been to tea with Lady Marigold, and the pastoral play idea was suggested there. I think Miss Carwell had hinted that Lady Marigold wanted Crystal and me to act, but Crystal won't. She says the Parraton is enough for any one term without the pastoral. Would you like to join, Joyce, if there is still a part? Miss Trennet is going to compose a play with Ursula Gibbs, and the Prims, from the legend of Aucassin and Nicolette. Miss Trennet is going to read us the legend this evening during sewing class and there will be great discussions. I suppose it's hopelessly ignorant, but I've never heard of Aucassin *or* Nicolette, have you?"

Joyce smiled. She was ready to smile at anything, for oh, how lovely it was to hear Kits talking so cheerily, with no trace of her recent stiff manner. *All* was going to be well that ended well.

“I think it is a legend of Provence,” she replied, “and a pretty shepherdess and her lover. I shall look forward to the sewing class, for Miss Trennet reads aloud beautifully.”

“She’s a dear too,” said Kits, “I shouldn’t want to listen if Pasfold read. She’s a cat. Joyce, I feel so jolly this evening, and I suspect I owe you an apology. Have *I* been a cat too?”

Joyce winked back a tear.

“You’ll never be anything but Kits—my friend Kits,” she replied, in low tones. “And if you thought I’d done a mean thing it was not your fault but my own. I’m such . . . such a goose imagining people suspect me and looking guilty when I’m not. I’ll never *quite* explain how it is.”

Kits hugged her, and the two went down to tea hand in hand, Kits feeling quite triumphant in having accepted Crystal’s “declaration of innocence”. The Prims were unbending too in a wonderful way to the girl who Lady Marigold delighted to honour. Kits was forgiven her startling entry to Clynton Court, and Pickles openly rubbed her eyes and stared at sight of Roseleen and Pearl, one on each side of Kits, drawing up a list of “characters” for the pastoral.

Miss Trennet always took the keenest interest in any entertainment got up by the girls, and appeared at the head of the long table, lined by busy workers, with a small book in her hand.

“You will all have heard about Lady Marigold’s invitation, girls,” she smiled. “And I am going to read you the legend from which some of your school-fellows are weaving their pastoral. That will help us *all* to be more interested in making the play a success.”

There was a murmur of approval, a general settling down to listen—and then Miss Trennet began to read aloud in her clear, quiet voice.

“Would you like to hear the dear old legend of brave Aucassin and his lovely Nicolette, for it is the story sung over and over again by the troubadours in the days of long ago, when in the smiling land of Provence lived the old Count of Beaucaire and his one son Aucassin?”

Garins of Beaucaire willed that his gallant boy should marry a rich princess, but Aucassin would not listen, for he loved Nicolette, the loveliest maid in Provence, who as a little maid had been stolen from her home and sold to the Saracens. Kindly Jean de Moubris, one of Beaucaire’s chief

vassals, had bought young Nicolette and so saved her from slavery. But the Comte de Beaucaire would not hear of his son wedding a nameless orphan!

De Moubri was in despair. How could he prevent a lover seeking his beloved? At last, in fear of the Comte's anger, he placed Nicolette in a lonely tower set amongst pleasant groves of orange and myrtles.

"Here," he thought, "Aucassin will never find her."

It is true Aucassin was in despair. In vain his father raged, forbidding the name of Nicolette to be mentioned. Aucassin could speak no other.

At this time, Beaucaire was in jeopardy. The Count de Valence invaded the lovely territory. The shepherds fled in terror to hiding places in the mountains. Old and crippled the Count could not ride against his enemy.

Aucassin stood before his father.

"Reward my success by a sight of my Nicolette," he bargained, "and the army of our enemy is doomed."

Garins consented, and Aucassin rode forth at the head of a gallant troop, inspired by a passion which claimed victory.

The Count de Valence fought fiercely, but in vain. Nothing could withstand the impetuous charge of young Aucassin.

Beaucaire was saved.

What rejoicings filled the land.

The young hero asked for nothing but his Nicolette.

He was refused.

Prouder than ever of such a son, the Count insisted that his son's bride must be royal.

Aucassin, in despair, wandered into the forests alone and there found—Nicolette! She had climbed in peril of her life from her tower prison and was searching for the lover who greeted her in such rapture.

Together they fled, but the ship which was to carry the Knight and his lovely bride to some fair isle of dreams was captured by pirates.

Aucassin was placed on board one ship,—Nicolette on the other.

To complete the hopelessness of the situation a fierce storm swept the seas. Aucassin was flung exhausted amongst broken wreckage on the coasts of his own Provence. But Nicolette had vanished.

Saddened in a deep despair, the young man returned to Beaucaire only to learn his father was dead. The call of duty saved him from committing some mad act. Aucassin became Count of Beaucaire and a lenient ruler. But he remained unwed.

Two years later a Moorish maid came wandering along the mountainous paths towards the Castle where Aucassin lived. She carried a guitar in her hand, whilst her black curls fell to her waist, half concealing the beauty of the young face.

Whilst knights and pages gathered round, the wanderer began her song,—the sweetest ever sung beneath those Castle walls. It was the story of the gentle Aucassin and poor Nicolette.

“Nicolette,” cried one of the listeners, “was she not drowned in the tempest at sea?”

“Nay,” said the Moorish maid. “She lived, and, being sold to slavery, found a father in the ruler of that distant land. The King recognized his long lost daughter and would have wedded her to some neighbouring prince. But Nicolette, escaping, came as a Moorish maiden in search of her only lover.”

Messengers had already reached Aucassin who arrived in time to hear the last words.

Throwing himself from his horse.

“It is she!” he cried, “it is she my Nicolette!”

It was true. They had found each other—and not all the troubadours of France can find words to sing the tale of their wedded happiness.

We leave them amongst the roses of an eternal fame which crowns the true romance of Aucassin and Nicolette.”

“It’s awfully pretty,” said Kits, “but how in the world can we act it? We can’t have fighting, or pirates, or lonely towers.”

“Who would be Aucassin?” asked Ursula Gibbs, a pale-faced girl of seventeen, with a most unromantic snub nose and spectacled eyes.

“Kits!” came a chorus from the Crew; and, though some of the other girls looked questioningly at the elders, they found the idea had already been approved. Kits was to be Aucassin—and Roseleen was chosen as Nicolette. Trixie was a “conspiring” handmaid—and Teresa was a mysterious and villainous shepherd, who helped to carry off the unfortunate Nicolette.

“Of course, we must cut our coat according to the cloth,” said Miss Trennet, “but I am sure we shall be able to make the prettiest pastoral of it, even without the galleys or pirates.”

Altogether this pastoral play had caught on amazingly, and, for the next two or three days, the girls of Clynton Court could talk of nothing else—even of the concert at York, or the great cricket match!

“Are you getting nervous, Joyce?” asked Kits, who, as Aucassin, and the best bat in the cricket team, was finding life strenuous. “I should *hate* to

stand up on a platform and sing to a lot of strangers. How the boys would chaff me too if they were amongst the audience.”

Joyce shook her head.

“I don’t believe I shall think of the people,” she replied. “Mr. Roberts told me to imagine the audience was a field full of cabbages, but I don’t think I want to even do that. I’d rather remember they were people who I was trying to give pleasure to. Then I’ll do my best.”

Kits sent a shoe flying across the room.

“You are priceless, Joy,” she declared. “If any one but you made that remark, I should have said ‘prig!’ but you aren’t—one bit. You said it because you meant me, just as I might say I’m going to play up against Beech College, because I should choke with rage if those beastly boys swanked over us.”

And Kits, feeling all the better for using the forbidden slang, tumbled into bed.

Joyce did not go to sleep very easily that night. She was restless and kept waking. Perhaps, after all, the concert *was* rather on her mind. Anyhow she started up, very wide awake indeed, when a distinct tap sounded on the panel of the door.

What a bound her heart gave too, for she guessed instantly what the summons meant, and glanced nervously across at the opposite bed.

Kits was fast asleep, her face pillowed on her curved arm.

Again the rapping—this time impatient—at the door. Joyce slipped out of bed, put on shoes and dressing gown, and stole across the room.

Outside, another dressing-gowned figure was awaiting her.

Teresa, flushed and triumphant, caught Joyce’s arm.

“Come ever so quietly,” she whispered, “the girl I saw before has just opened Crystal’s desk.”

CHAPTER IX

JOYCE was trembling violently. She was a highly sensitive girl, and she shrank from this spying upon a school-fellow, even though by doing so she would right a wrong.

Joyce could not help pitying—almost sympathizing with—the unknown wrong-doer, who must be feeling so *awful*. It did not occur to her that a girl capable of such meanness must be hardened and indifferent about discovery.

Teresa evidently did not wish the thief to know of their coming. The schoolroom door was open, and a blind must have been left partly drawn up, for they could see the moonlight falling across the floor within. The staircase branched from the schoolroom landing, leading in opposite flights to the two wings of the house.

Teresa caught her companion's arm, and drew her back towards a curtained alcove as a shadow fell across the moonlight. Someone was coming very softly—very stealthily out of the room. Joyce closed her eyes, then re-opened them. It needed all her self-control as well as Teresa's warning grip to prevent her from crying out aloud, for there, already moving across the landing to the foot of the second flight of stairs, was Gwenda Handow herself. Joyce could hardly believe the evidence of her own eyes. Yet, how could she mistake?

It was Gwenda, in her Japanese dressing gown, her fair hair hanging in plaits down her back. Joyce had had a full view of her face too, pale, large, with blue eyes fixed on some distant object. She had not seen the girls hidden by the curtain, though she passed so close that her dressing gown fluttered against Joyce's foot.

A few seconds—and she was out of sight.

Joyce did not move. She was stunned, frozen, incapable of movement or speech at first.

Gwenda! Gwenda her heroine and ideal—the girl who had saved her life, and who had always gone so serenely on her way. Gwenda the saint! Gwenda the genius! Oh, it *could* not also be Gwenda the thief? Joyce's world was toppling down about her ears. She was overwhelmed.

Teresa looked at her curiously.

“Wake up, Joyce,” she whispered. “You didn't dream it you know. This is the third time I have seen Gwenda coming down to the schoolroom, and

each time Crystal has lost her papers. I sleep so lightly—and I have the end room to myself. She woke me up. Come along,—I want to peep in and see whether Crystal’s desk has been disturbed. She’s so particular now-a-days to leave all her papers in rubber bands.”

Joyce roused with an effort.

Teresa was right. This was not a dream, it was real and true. They had seen Gwenda coming out of the schoolroom, but oh! surely that did not mean she had been stealing Crystal’s papers?

Slowly she followed her companion, her feet feeling as though weighted by lead. How desolate the schoolroom looked with the one half in heavy shadow, the other moon-lit and mysterious. How silent and empty it was—and yet . . . and yet it might almost have been haunted by ghosts which lurked threateningly in the corners.

Teresa was pointing—and Joyce had to follow the direction of the outstretched finger.

Crystal’s desk was open—the only open desk in all the long row. Not a word was spoken as the two girls crossed the room, and stood there looking down.

The pile of exercise books lay untouched, so did the writing paper, envelopes, and little odds and ends of personal possessions which drift into a school-girl’s desk. But a bundle of papers confined by two rubber bands seemed to have been flung down in haste, making confusion amongst other loose papers in the centre.

The impression given was that some one had been looking at the papers when a noise disturbed her, and they were hastily dropped.

Joyce half turned away, but Teresa, closing the desk, came up to her.

“Well?” she asked.

Joyce looked up. Teresa’s brilliant dark eyes were searching her face pitilessly.

“I told you,” went on Teresa, “that I knew who the thief was,—but I didn’t mean to have you raging and calling me a liar. I knew Gwenda would come again—probably for the last time. She was certain no one would ever suspect *her*. And she has absolutely set her heart on getting the scholarship. I don’t blame her. If I’d been in her place I might have done the same. She’s over-worked, and neurotic—and it was a big temptation. It was the link-lesson which must have given her the idea. She knew how important it was, and must have been glad Crystal missed it. Now she’s lost—everything. She’ll be expelled, and, though it serves her right, I’m sorry for her.”

Joyce listened. How strange it was that she should be listening to Teresa finding excuses for Gwenda! Teresa was not Gwenda's friend. Gwenda had not saved Teresa's life.

"We shall have to go and tell Miss Carwell after prayers to-morrow," went on Teresa. "What a disgrace it is! Gwenda must have been mad. Good luck for Crystal though. She will be pleased. Come on, Joyce. Don't look so queer. *Your* name's clear. I suppose you'll only be too glad to tell the tale. I don't blame you. Honest Injun *just* at first I thought you were guilty. I'm glad I've helped to clear you."

Joyce put her hand to her head.

"Gwenda is my friend," she said.

Teresa shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear!" she urged. "You needn't rub it in. Gwenda will be expelled. Cheer up! The Crew, as they call themselves, will hail you with applause. Crystal is their shining light. We'd better get back to bed. Seeing was the *only* way of making you believe."

Joyce was recovering from the shock which had so completely dazed her.

"Teresa," she said hoarsely, "I am *not* going to tell Miss Carwell Gwenda is the girl who took Crystal's papers. I don't care what happens. I will *not* do it. Would you do it yourself if you were in my place? Gwenda saved my life. She . . . she . . ."

"Miss Carwell will have to know," said Teresa firmly. "It is not fair on Crystal otherwise. The thief must be exposed. Things must be put right. After prayers we will go and get it over."

But Joyce was standing, her back to the door, her white face very set and determined.

"I've not been able to think properly yet," she said, "but a way must be found. Promise me, Teresa, not to go to Miss Carwell without me. Promise me not to say one word . . . without telling me."

Teresa's eyes seemed to narrow, but Joyce could not read their expression.

"Very well," she agreed, in an off-hand manner, "but I'm going to play the game. You'll have to, too. Gwenda knew what she was about, and it is not fair on Crystal to keep silence."

"I want to be fair on Crystal," said poor Joyce, despairingly, "and I want to save Gwenda. I'll find some way. I *must* find some way . . . of doing both."

Teresa yawned. She seemed to have gone suddenly sleepy and uninterested. Joyce had no more to say, and she had nothing to reply! Her one idea was to get back to bed.

Joyce opened the door of No. 8 very quietly. She was cold, stupid with distress, still groping amongst the ruins of her belief.

Gwenda—a thief!

She had forgotten Kits, and started when a sleepy voice asked her where she had been.

Kits lay blinking and frowning, trying to think clearly.

“It’s not time to get up,” she grumbled. “What *are* you doing?”

Joyce flung off her dressing gown and got into bed.

“It is just one o’clock,” was all her reply. She did not care *what* Kits thought,—and yet Kits’ question started a new train of ideas.

Kits would remember in the morning that she had left the bedroom. She would repeat her question.

What would Joyce reply?

To and fro the sleepless questioner tossed. To and fro in hot rebellion against fate, divided too, between two duties. But gradually the scheme already born in her brain began to shape and develop. Gradually it fixed itself as the only way.

The only way to save Gwenda—and repay her debt. The only way to prove her love and devotion to the girl she had looked up to as a saint.

Towards dawn Joyce fell asleep, waking late, and then only, because relentless Kits had dragged the clothes off her bed.

“ ’Tis the voice of the sluggard!” sang Kits, who, firmly resolved not to judge too hastily, had been eager to put fresh questions. Joyce rose wearily. How her head ached. She rested her throbbing temples against her hand.

Kits stood brush in hand, doubtful.

“Aren’t you well?” she asked. “Weren’t you well last night? What a duffer you were not to say. Here have I been imagining all sorts of weird things. Come along to the sick room. I expect you’ve got a chill.”

Joyce shook her head.

“I’m quite well,” she replied, in low tones “Only, I mean, I have a headache. Please, I would rather not talk.”

“Oh, is that it, eh,” retorted Kits, flashing out at once, and returning to the dressing table, where she turned her back on her companion.

Joyce's headache must have been a very bad one judging by her wan face and listless air. She took long over her dressing, and seemed purposely to linger so that she should be late for prayers. Not till Kits had gone downstairs did she leave the room. And she was not the only girl to be late. Teresa was waiting for her outside her own door.

"Well?" she asked, "what about Miss Carwell? Or are you going to speak to Gwenda first? I suppose she will confess now."

Joyce linked her hands tightly together.

"I am not going to speak to Gwenda," she replied. "I will tell you exactly what I am going to do, and I believe you will help me. I believe you guessed what I should do . . . and you will be glad. For, if . . . if papers have been taken again from Crystal's desk, . . . I am going to take the blame."

Teresa's dark lashes screened her eyes. She did not want Joyce to see the look of triumph in them. She managed to mask the tones of her reply.

"You must be mad," she said. "Why, you'll be expelled and disgraced. Why should you do it? Gwenda won't be *quite* so mean as to allow you to make such a sacrifice. It's all ridic'."

"No it's not," said Joyce, speaking more firmly, "it is the only way. Gwenda is . . . is so splendid really. She saved my life. She is good as good can be. She never would have done what she has done if she hadn't been over-worked and nervy. I'm sure she couldn't help it. And she will know *why* I want to take the blame. She will let me do it."

Teresa shrugged.

"You are perfectly insane," she replied, "but it's your own funeral. I thought you *would* make a martyr of yourself. You see, I'm quite honest—and we've never been friends."

Joyce gave a little shiver. Teresa's *honesty* chilled her. She thought she could see the whole plot.

Teresa, knowing Gwenda had yielded to a sudden temptation, had planned to use it for her own ends. She was jealous of Joyce. Jealous of the singing-master's preference for the other girl, and his frank avowal that Joyce's voice was sweeter and truer than her own. Teresa loved the limelight, and few could dream how she longed to sing in public. And Joyce had balked and humbled her.

Now—Teresa saw her own day coming.

She had counted on Joyce's love of self-sacrifice and devotion to Gwenda.

“Of course,” said Joyce, “you will not tell any one the truth. I have a perfect right to save Gwenda from herself. When I have gone she will realize what might have been. You promise, Teresa, not to tell?”

“Oh, I’ll promise,” replied Teresa easily, “but, of course, you know you will be expelled? Miss Carwell will have no choice. She gave out she meant to expel the girl who took Crystal’s papers. She will send you away in disgrace.”

“For Gwenda’s sake,” whispered Joyce beneath her breath, and her whole face seemed to light up as she spoke.

Teresa tapped impatiently with her foot.

“Well, you’d better let me know definitely, and then I shall know what to be at,” said she, “the girls will be coming out of prayers directly, and in the ordinary way I should come down with you and tell Miss Carwell the truth. If you are going to take the blame for what you didn’t do it will be better not to drag my name in at all. As soon as Crystal has missed her papers, I suppose you’ll trot along and own up? Mark you, Gwenda will not raise her finger to save you. You’ll get no thanks from her. And you won’t be able to go back on what you say.”

“I know,” said Joyce, “I know all that. But I am going to take Gwenda’s place if you faithfully promise never to tell any one?”

“Righto,” replied Teresa, “what a quaint sort of saint you are. But I shall not be sorry to see your back. Mr. Roberts *may* be able to give proper attention to me now. Ta-ta. I shall go down to breakfast. There’s the bell. Being awake half the night makes me hungry.”

It did not make Joyce hungry. To go down to the dining hall and face those questioning, curious comrades was more than Joyce could do. Sick at heart, still dazed by the horror of discovery, she returned to her bedroom to wait till the time for action came.

Expelled! Oh, it was terrible, terrible! And what would they say at home? What sort of an example would this make for the sisters who looked up to her for a pattern?

Joyce sat by her bedside, her face buried in her hands. She would have to tell that darling mother she was innocent, but that she could not clear herself. What a wonderful comfort it would be. Joyce could smile there. Her mother would not press for the secret her child could not give.

It came as the most beautiful help and consolation to the girl in her hour of self-sacrifice that her *mother’s* trust would remain unshaken, and that her parents would allow her to bear this shame without insisting on an explanation. So very, very few parents would have allowed an innocent

daughter to be expelled and yet remain silent, especially when Miss Carwell and her mother were friends.

Joyce was calmer after that silent hour's struggle. As she had told herself, this was the only way she *could* act, and she had prayed for strength to carry her resolution through.

The only difficulty was that she would have to say what was not true. She would have to claim what did not belong to her. And yet already the path was opening before her.

Kits suspected her again.

Yes, she knew it. Kits had suspected before, and had then trusted her word. Now, she would have no pity on a liar and deceiver. The way would be opened for her.

Slowly, Joyce went downstairs. By this time the day's lessons would have begun, and Crystal's loss if she had sustained one, would be discovered.

There was no need to go into the schoolroom, and Joyce passed by, going down a further flight of stairs and along the passage to Miss Carwell's sitting room.

Voices were raised within, and Joyce, taking her courage in both hands, opened the door.

Kits Kerwayne was standing opposite her head-mistress, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling. She gave Joyce one glance—withering and annihilating, then repeated what she had been saying.

“Here is Joyce,” she said. “Will you ask her yourself, Miss Carwell, why she left our bedroom last night, and what she went to do?”

CHAPTER X

MISS CARWELL turned at once to the newcomer. Her own face was very grave and stern.

“You hear what Kits is saying, Joyce,” she said. “We are waiting for an explanation. Kits is sure you went downstairs last night long after you retired to bed. Why and where did you go?”

Joyce caught her breath.

“I went down to the schoolroom, Miss Carwell,” she replied, “that is all I can say. I . . . I cannot tell you *why* I went.”

Kits gave an inarticulate cry of indignation and drew aside, staring at her companion in contempt.

“I *knew* it must be you. I knew it,” she exclaimed. “Oh, and I thought you were straight. I thought you were a friend—and *good*.”

“Hush, Kits,” said Miss Carwell gravely, “it is not for you to judge—or speak. Joyce, I insist on your confessing the whole story. Did you go to Crystal Colton’s desk last night?”

“Yes,” said Joyce, “Oh, please don’t ask me more questions. I know you’ll expel me, I know you will. I don’t ask you to let me off. Only don’t ask me to *tell* you any more.”

She covered her burning face with her hands. The sight of the contempt in Kits’ eyes brought anguish to her heart.

If she worshipped Gwenda as a heroine and ideal, Joyce had learned to love Kits as a friend. And that friend was both judging and condemning her.

No wonder Joyce cried aloud in her pain, “Don’t ask me to tell you more.” She could not have lied deliberately with Kits standing there to listen.

And she had said enough. There was no shadow of doubt in her listeners’ minds that she was the guilty girl.

Kits’ most emphatic “Oh!” told a tale of what reproaches and scorn would have been hurled upon her had it not been for Miss Carwell’s presence.

Miss Carwell looked so shocked too. She *was* shocked, horrified. Even though Kits had furnished the reason for Joyce’s action she could hardly have believed in the latter’s guilt had not Joyce herself come forward.

Now she had no choice.

“There is no need for me to ask more, Joyce,” said Miss Carwell sternly. “You have condemned yourself. You deliberately robbed a school-fellow, who has shewn you nothing but kindness and consideration. Gwenda will be the first to condemn you for what you have done. She herself is so honourable, so generous in her dealings, it will be a real grief to her to think you could have sunk to such treachery, pleading that it was for *her* sake. As to your punishment, expulsion is the only possible one. I could not ask your school-fellows to associate with a girl capable of such conduct. But I am grieved for your mother. If I could have spared her such grief I would have done so. But you give me no alternative.”

Joyce cowered, her face still hidden by her hands. It was the most terrible of ordeals. Yet how much . . . more . . . terrible . . . it would have been for Gwenda. For Gwenda . . . who had saved her life. For Gwenda who . . . was guilty!

As in a dream she heard Miss Carwell telling Kits to go, and she herself moved to the door, hoping to escape. But there was no escape. Her mistress called her back. Kits passed her, and Joyce, unable to resist the impulse, looked up at her. There must have been piteous appeal in those grey eyes, for Kits flinched and hesitated, whilst the look of youthful condemnation softened to one that was almost pity.

“Good-bye, Kits,” whispered Joyce, and Kits, with an effort, held out her hand.

“I . . . I’m sorry for you,” she jerked out, then opened the door and went out.

Joyce was alone with Miss Carwell.

It was the worst part of the ordeal to Joyce, for now her mistress was remembering the crime committed less than the sorrow this trouble would bring on Joyce’s mother who was her friend. Kindly, patiently, she talked to the silent girl, who shewed so little penitence for her sin, who had so little to say of the reason of it, but who sat sobbing, moaning, but obstinately determined to give no confidence.

Finally, sentence was pronounced.

Joyce was to go home to-day. Miss Carwell was going over to the Grange first to see Mrs. Wayde and tell her what had happened. Joyce would follow during the afternoon.

Joyce had nothing to say, no appeal to make. She knew her mistress was disappointed and angry with the way she was behaving, but she dared not

speak. After all, she had not been forced to lie. Miss Carwell had been convinced of her guilt by Kits before she even asked her question.

The next few hours were nightmare to the girl, who was telling herself this was the only way to save a friend.

The exultation of self-sacrifice might come later, but just now Joyce was in the depths, merely enduring her self-chosen shame in silent anguish.

And yet there were gleams of light in the darkness. Miss Sesson, who came to pack—or rather to help her pack, gave a shrewd glance at the white, sad face of the condemned prisoner. Then, she came across and laid her hand on her shoulder.

“My dear,” said she, “I don’t ask your confidence and I don’t expect it. But if I’m not very much mistaken the clouds will roll by one day, and the sun shine all the brighter for their coming.”

Joyce gasped. Was it possible the kindly matron, with whom she had always been a favourite, could have guessed her secret? If so, would others? Silently she took Miss Sesson’s hand and kissed it.

“Thank you most of all for not asking questions,” she whispered, and the matron, going away later, shook her head wisely.

“That’s an innocent child and a good one,” she told herself. “Now, whose wicked malice can have got her expelled? But there! truth may be hid at the bottom of the well, but it’s bound to come to the surface sooner or later.”

Joyce could not eat the dinner brought her on a tray, and, oh, how thankful she was when the maid came to tell her the cab was at the door. But—the ordeal was not yet over. Fate was being very cruel to Joyce, for, as she went down, the girls belonging to the first three classes were coming up to the big schoolroom. Joyce, burning-cheeked and ready to die with shame, had to stand aside to let the girls pass.

Some of them, purposely pitiful, turned their heads aside, or pretended to be talking in forbidden whispers to comrades, but others stared contemptuously at the girl who had been expelled.

Joyce longed to faint, or for the staircase to give way beneath her. She felt she should scream or go mad under the scrutiny of those bright, accusing eyes. Then . . . it was Gwenda herself, who passed. Serene, grave, self-composed Gwenda, whose mild blue eyes so regretfully surveyed this foolish, mis-led champion. For one moment Joyce’s allegiance wavered, for Gwenda’s head was very gently shaken with the quiet superiority of condemnation mingled with the pity of a friend.

And yet . . . here she stood . . . in Gwenda’s place.

Then—Gwenda had passed, leaving her poor little scapegoat breathless, indignant, trembling, to face other questioning or condemning glances.

The Crew were coming upstairs. Kits and Trixie, the Twins, Pickles,—and finally, Crystal with Miss Trennet beside her.

Crystal had seen the stationary figure standing on the landing above and her colour rose. As she came abreast of Joyce, the girl who had been so heartlessly robbed paused, held out her hand and grasped that of the other.

“Au revoir, Joyce,” she sang out in her clear tones, so that all might hear, “for, *of course*, you’ll come back again. It’s only prize duffers who believe you, even if you do say you walked off with those papers. We’ll give a feast in honour of your return—later. Au revoir.”

“Crystaile! Crystaile!” called the vinegar tones of Mademoiselle from the passage below. “You receive one fine and one mark of disobedience. Is it not known to you that to speak upon the stairs is forbidden? Silence, instantly!”

But Crystal had said her say, and marched on into the schoolroom amidst the curious and not very approving glances of her companions. Even the Crew frowned upon their leader and inspirer, for had it not entirely condemned the guilty Joyce for her sake?

Meantime, Joyce, feeling a strange tingling of joy amidst her woe, had taken Miss Trennet’s hand as the English mistress paused to say good-bye, and then, moved by an instinctive conviction, leaned forward to kiss Joyce’s cheek.

“God bless you, child,” was her parting greeting, and Joyce went down to the waiting cab feeling that it was not all black night around her. But, if Joyce had gone, buoyed up by the knowledge that she was sacrificing herself for love’s sake, Kits for one was feeling less than comfortable in remaining.

Kits had been furiously indignant over what she termed Joyce’s hateful double dealing. She had condemned with inexorable finality. Joyce had been treacherous in the worst way she was sure, and when school was over that afternoon she sought out Crystal ready to blame her with considerable heat.

“What *was* the use of telling Joyce you thought she was innocent when you knew she was guilty?” she asked, bluntly.

Crystal, perched elf-like on the bough of a chestnut tree, screwed her features up into a grimace.

“A little less pepper please, my admirable Kits,” she pleaded. “And, if you want a nice, direct reply to your question, here you are. I *don’t* know Joyce is guilty. I don’t believe she *is*. She might have been St. Margaret

waiting for the dragon as she stood on that landing. And as I was the dragon's tail, I had to wag myself at her and explain why I hadn't bitten."

Kits laughed.

"Nonsense apart," she urged, "why did you do it? Every one is furious with Joyce because of her meanness to you. We are all delighted she has gone because we could not associate with a thief and a sneak. And then you turn round and say 'Au revoir.'"

Crystal chuckled.

"I did say *au revoir*, and I meant it," she replied. "What's more, I am prepared to wager my cookery book to a penny that Joyce will be back before the end of the term. Murder will out, even though it's only a sort of social suicide. Joyce never took my papers, and why she said she did so is a mystery, but—you know my funny little way, and my love of experimenting? Well, I'm going to experiment in detective work, and if I don't end by clearing Joyce Wayde,—I'll eat my own cookery book, parchment, binding, ink and all."

Kits rubbed her brow vigorously.

"I never was any sort of use at mysteries or riddles," she declared. "And I don't believe you are right, even though it is deep in my bones that I love poor old Joyce and believe she is ever so good. Yet—why in the world should she say she has done what she has not done? And the very fact of her doing it, because she wanted Gwenda to get that scholarship casts a cloud on Gwenda too. I'm afraid, Crystal, we've got to swallow facts."

But Crystal was not to be argued out of her conviction.

"I always had the digestion of an ostrich," she retorted, "but—all the same I am not going to swallow the fact that Joyce purloined my notes and papers so that Gwenda might win the Parraton. Now, write *finis* over the chapter, my dear old Puzzle-head, and leave me to my job. Joyce has gone,—and there is one person who frankly and definitely rejoices thereat."

"You mean?" queried Kits.

Crystal laughed, as she slipped off down the passage.

"Teresa Tenerlee," she called back over her shoulder, "Teresa the song bird, who will now be ravishing our ears at York. Lost, stolen or strayed—a clue to the great school mystery. Begins with a J, and ends with a T. When—I've got the answer to the riddle, Kits, I shall deserve twice as big a laurel crown as if I'd won the Parraton. And in conclusion take my advice and believe in Joyce's innocence."

But Kits turned away with a sigh.

It was just precisely what she could *not* do.

CHAPTER XI

THE expulsion of Joyce Wayde could not fail to cast a shadow over the busy community at Clynton Court.

Miss Carwell looked worried, Mademoiselle was more fault-finding than ever, everything “hung fire” and the climax was reached when Pearl Willock retired to the sick room under suspicion of being about to develop mumps.

“Mumps, of all things in the world,” groaned Pickles. “Why, I’d rather have scarlet fever right out. You do get some compensations with that; pity for one thing, convalescence and probably a jolly seaside holiday, not to mention invalid delicacies! But *mumps*! You are laughed at for becoming a freakish sight, you can’t swallow and you get no petting, or holiday afterwards.”

“It isn’t certain that it is mumps yet,” said Kits, “possibly it’s quinsy, or just a swollen gland. I heard Miss Sesson telling Miss Trennet that Dr. Trinton is away and she did not think much of the locum. The worst of it is that during the period of—do you call it suspicion?—we are in quarantine. Teresa Tenerlee is in despair, because she has been so much with the Prims of late that Miss Carwell won’t let her go to the concert at York. I’m really sorry for her, she looks so glum, but Miss Evelton will be glummier if it is mumps and the cricket match is off.”

Crystal yawned, rolling over on the grass with Pickles.

“It’s all very depressing,” she declared, “and it is our duty, Crew, to fight against being swallowed up in the fog. If we can’t go to the concert, and if we mayn’t bowl Beech College, we are still at liberty to seek enjoyment in the by-lanes of existence. What shall it be? A decoction to cure ye mumps, recommended by ye ancient book of quick roads to health, or an exploration over the moors? I have heard a story of an old mine—coal, I suppose—and a road leading into one of the galleries. Now that would be a thrill. Have any or all of you ever read Jules Verne’s *Child of the Cavern*? Good! Don’t you remember the part where the mysterious child or some one is gripped by a monster bird? Think of it! A haunted gallery—two golden eyes—a hoarse croak—and the subsequent heroism of the Crew. Shall we make reality of it? I feel like desperate adventure. Mere toffee would cloy as badly as a pillow fight.”

“You might have given us all that in instalments,” urged Pickles, sitting up and shaking her bobbed head vigorously. “I’m not quite sure whether you

are still sane, or if my hearing is defective. What do you say, Kits?"

"I agree with Crystal," agreed Kits. "I want some fun. I want a thrill. I don't feel one bit good, and if we don't do something soon, I shall quarrel with everyone."

"Good!" applauded Trixie, "I like the sperrit of that. It augurs well. There's only one little item I'd like to mention. Don't old mines store choke damp in their depths? and don't some of the gases explode if you use an ordinary candle to light the way?"

There was a murmur from the Twins which applauded the note of caution.

Crystal only laughed mischievously.

"There never was a thrill yet which didn't include a risk of something unpleasant," she retorted, "but real heroines always skid by the something in a glorious fashion. We will take a proper lamp, however, as I don't want to commit suicide. Depend on me for the Davy! and we will forgather at the garden gate at 2 p.m. to-morrow. That in order? Half holiday—three hours of undiluted adventure—return of Crew as lively as crickets and full of knowledge concerning abandoned coal mines. That's what I like. It is widening one's perspective. Yesterday we learned how to perfect toffee-making. To-morrow, we discover the haunted galleries of a coal mine which burrows into the bowels of the earth. That is true education."

"If I had an empty flour sack handy," said Trixie thoughtfully, "I should put you in it and boil you. I never heard such gas. Why, if you put your nose inside that mine there will be an explosion. Come away, Twins, and leave her to cool. If we *do* go down the old pit road to-morrow it will only be to save her from spontaneous combustion."

Kits stretched her arms over her head.

"What a lot of nonsense we have been talking," she said. "And really the only thing worth thinking of is—will the cricket match come off on the 20th?"

"Not to mention the pastoral," added Crystal, "I do envy you being Aucassin, Kits. Fancy being a hero—even for an hour. Gorgeous! Now, let's go and learn the latest about the mumpy one."

But enquiries were left unsatisfied that day at least! A very worried-looking matron told them it was too early yet for the doctor to decide about Pearl's illness. They would have to wait patiently for some days.

Kits, rather bored, strolled off to the library. She was not fond of reading, but for once it would be something to do. She regretted her decision though when, standing before the big bookcase, she found Teresa.

Kits thought instinctively of Joyce, as she looked at the only girl in the school of whom Joyce had ever said a hard thing. And, strangely enough, Kits had always been in sympathy with Joyce's opinion, though Teresa had been quite friendly and nice to her.

What *was* so antagonistic about her? She was pretty, dainty, witty, clever, with the gayest ways and apparently the kindest heart. Of course, she could and did flare up in rages at times, and she could say nasty things. But who could not?

Teresa did not look very pleased to see Kits!

"It's too bad about the mumps, isn't it?" she said.

Kits laughed drily.

"I don't suppose Pearl got it for choice," she retorted. "And there's still a chance that it is not mumps."

Teresa frowned.

"Anyhow by the time the idiot of a doctor has made up his mind, it will be too late for the concert," she replied petulantly. "It's a shame. I *did* so want to sing. But I never have any luck. By the way, did you know I was coming to No. 8 to sleep now Joyce has gone? We shall be companions."

She looked at Kits from under her lashes.

Kits raised her eyebrows.

"Why's that?" she asked. "You slept alone in the end room, didn't you? Who will have that room?"

"Roseleen. Pearl is in the sick room, and their bedroom is to be disinfected. The alteration will only be till the end of the term, but I hate it. I like my room to myself."

"So do I," was Kits' curt response, "but it need not make much difference. I shan't bother you with talking."

And she walked across to take a book at random from the shelf. She did not care if she had been rude to Teresa. She did not like her, and she hated the idea of sharing her room with her.

Crystal did not forget about the lamp—or the rendezvous for the Crew next day, and not one member was missing from the ranks of the band, which took its way over the moors.

Trixie was in wild spirits. The atmosphere of school had been horribly dull of late. It was time they had some fun. Joyce's name was not mentioned, but it was annoying to know they were all trying to forget her and not succeeding. Joyce knew the moors so well that she would have been invaluable to-day. How tiresome it was!

Crystal would have liked to say she wished the Parraton had never been invented.

“I wonder how our friends the gipsies are?” quoth Kits, pointing towards the Hollow which they had left on their right. “I suppose they are still there. If they weren’t so ferocious-looking we could have our fortunes told. Now, Trixie, what’s wrong? Lost your way?”

Trixie considered.

“I got our bearings from the milk boy,” she said, “I braved every eagle eye and interviewed him at 7 a.m. He is a youth of some common sense, named Walter Wane. He said two of the Court young ladies had been good to his brother, and, in consideration thereof, he chanced being late on his milk round whilst he told me the way to the old Track, as the road into the mine is called. He also added that the galleries *are* haunted, and that Farmer Perkins’ son Tom had seen the ghost. Got a pain, Twins?”

The Twins gurgled. It appeared they did not like ghosts, and would not proceed with the adventure if their name was mentioned. Trixie and Crystal grinned—but yielded. Ghosts after all were only an “extra” in the adventure. Pickles, the scrambler, was the first to spy the moss-grown track which formed a lower road, whilst the upper led to Panberry village.

Kits was completely puzzled.

“I thought people had to go down in cages into mines,” she said, “and that they were ever so deep. This is just like a road leading to a tunnel. One might be near a Tube station.”

“That’s the Gravlock mine anyway,” said Pickles. “And I suppose this is a sort of back entrance. Look, there are rusty lines laid down for the trucks to go on, and that waste ground may have been where the coal was shot. It’s splendid. I’ve never been to this part of the moor before. Come along, Crystal. The ghosts are calling.”

“I wonder who the ghosts were?” said Crystal the curious, as she picked her way daintily over the rough track towards the entrance of the mine, which looked like a gigantic hole in a mass of rocky wall.

Crystal went first—the lantern held high as she led the way, her chums gathering more closely about her as, leaving the light of day, they entered the gloom of the tunnel.

“To think,” said Noreen, her voice booming and echoing in the silent gallery, “we have lived so near adventure and never indulged in it before.”

“We are the Children of the Ca . . . vern,” chanted Pickles, “only . . . I don’t par . . . ticularly want to meet any spec . . . tral bird. Toowhit . . . too . . . who.”

“Pickles,—you *beast*,” gasped Jane nervously, “you are giving Noreen and me the creeps. How much farther are you going, Crys?”

“Till we want to turn back,” retorted Crystal. “When we are deeper in the depths we might sit down along the rails and listen for the ghosts. We haven’t began adventuring yet.”

“*Listen!*” said Trixie, “I thought I heard a tapping. Would there be any chance of our sitting on toads or adders?”

“We are sure to find out if we *do*,” replied Crystal cheerily, “and I fancy you are right about the tapping. It may be the—er—unmentionable. Shall we sit down here, there’s a ledge along the wall where we can perch?”

The Crew was quite ready to obey. Kits, in fact, was the only one who shewed any curiosity to go farther.

“Do lend me the lantern, Crys,” she begged, “I want to find the gates—you know what I mean, there are lots of gates in mines, shutting off the galleries. It’s a ripping place!”

Crystal yielded the lantern. She had given her ankle a slight twist and was not sorry for a rest. Kits proceeded alone. What a great big place a coal mine was,—and here, where she paused, many passages or galleries branched off in different directions.

Kits, peering this way and that, felt a sudden quick stab of fear, as out of the blackness ahead of her a round disc of light suddenly shone out, casting a long beam over the rough floor of the gallery. To Kits it had the appearance of a long, pointing finger, whilst behind it loomed a shadowing figure, which vanished with the swift extinguishing of the light. Yet it had been there, and Kits stood trembling, afraid to raise her lantern, the light of which could not have travelled as far as that strange illumination. And, as she stood there, a faint, strange cry rose, swelling to a wail of pain.

This was too much even for a would-be heroine, and Kits in no less panic than the Twins, gripped the lantern and fled helter-skelter back to where her companions waited. The latter were no longer ranged along the ledge, but stood clustered in a frightened group, asking each other if that could have been Kits’ voice they had heard, and wondering what had become of her. It was a relief—and rout—when Kits came whirling back down the dim, dark gallery, her lantern waving, her legs and arms going like windmills, her face shewing white and scared, as she raised the light to make sure those were comrades in the path before her.

“Quick!” panted Kits, the panic still on her, “I saw . . . I saw . . . oh! I don’t know w-what I saw. It must have been a ghost. It l-looked like a man. Oh, quick!”

“Run! Run!” screamed the Twins, and led the way in headlong fashion.

Never did ghost produce a more complete retreat of invaders. Crystal must have forgotten her twisted ankle, for she managed to keep pace with the rest in splendid style, though her face was white with pain when they reached the outer air once more.

“Hurt?” asked Trixie, slipping an arm round her. “You do look queer. Here, Twins, don’t indulge in hysterics, but go and fetch some water from the stream.”

Crystal giggled faintly.

“It’s all right,” she replied, “the Twins’ need is greater . . . than mine. It’s only my ankle, got twisted on the rail. Come, Kits, give us a graphic description of the ghost. No one minds now.”

“Do let’s get out of s-sight of the entrance first,” pleaded Noreen. “I daren’t look that way but I have to! And if I see a ghost in the shadows I shall d-die of fright. Do come round the corner first.”

No one could withstand so piteous an appeal, and the Crew, slowly and pantingly, made its way to the upper track where sunshine and bird-song absolutely mocked the idea of nervous fears. Kits was almost ashamed to tell her tale after all, she had only seen a light, held by some one very indistinctly outlined. It might, indeed, have been some other explorer interested in searching the galleries of the mine.

“Shall we go back and kill our coward fears?” asked Crystal, her eyes twinkling with mischief. But so emphatic a chorus shouted “No!” that she could not repeat the suggestion.

“After all,” summed up Trixie, as they wended their way back to school, “we had an adventure and a thrill. And we ought to be content. I don’t think an awful lot of a coal mine really. There’s nothing to see but coal, and I prefer to see that burning merrily on the winter’s hearth. To-morrow, we will devote to cricket, eh? Crystal and I will watch and applaud, whilst Kits shews us what she is going to do on June 20th.”

And the vote was carried unanimously.

As Crystal concluded “too much of a good thing is good for nothing,” and ghosts for the moment had had their day and ceased to be. Later, ah! *later*, unheard of adventures would be undertaken and achieved.

But true Clyntonites would realize that members of the cricket eleven were bound to practise in and out of season in the hope of beating those sneering opponents of Beech College.

Possibly Miss Evelton might have hinted that this *esprit de corps* was just a trifle late in developing.

But Miss Evelton was prejudiced.

CHAPTER XII

PEARL was out of quarantine! Clynton Court was out of quarantine! That "idiotic little doctor" had scared every one without any reason. The swollen gland had become normal and those happy Prims were once more re-united.

The only two people with a serious grievance against the mumps were Teresa and Kits.

Teresa had not sung at York! Mr. Roberts had not taken any of the Clynton Court girls to the concert! And—bitterest pill of all for Teresa—he had taken Joyce.

Yes, he was so blind and so obstinate, so altogether foolish that he had quietly and firmly refused to believe Joyce Wayde was a criminal of deepest dye, or even an erring school girl, and, having interviewed Joyce's mother, had carried off a reluctant Joyce in triumph.

Clynton Court heard the news through the gossip of the maids, who shewed Pickles and Crystal a report of the concert and the triumph of Miss Joyce Wayde in the local paper. Poor Teresa! She was furious, and all the more furious because no one was a penny the worse for her fury. Then too, that mump scare had robbed Teresa of her bedroom, and flung her into the unwilling company of Kits. Kits didn't want Teresa and Teresa didn't want Kits. So there it was.

Kits rebelled inwardly, and outwardly behaved with what she was pleased to describe as "cold politeness." Teresa was neither cold nor polite. She scowled upon Kits and occasionally flamed. No matter! The concert was over at least,—and the day of the cricket match had dawned.

Miss Evelton did not mince matters. She said quite plainly that if those Beech College boys were beaten at all it would be owing to Kits' batting. Hence the reason why Kits awoke to fame on the 20th of June. Every one was polite to her—excepting Teresa, who sulked. Even Mademoiselle smiled and excused her pupil's lack of attention.

"To-day it is ze cricket," she declared. "*Enfin!* To-morrow, it must be French verbs and poetry to perfection. Now, you may go—all of you."

And all of them went joyously, even though only a comparative few were playing cricket.

“You must be feeling now what it is to be in the public eye, Kits darlint,” said Crystal, when the “darling of the Crew” appeared in her neat cricketing kit. “How wonderful it must be. Tell me exactly what it is like? But we should never see eye to eye. If I played professional cricket I should be looking round for admiration instead of looking at the ball. Ah, there’s Miss Evelton calling you. Twins, come to me. I want to discuss the one important point, detail, and business of the afternoon. *Has* Miss C. risen to ices? and, if so, are they strawberry and vanilla?”

The Twins giggled and nodded. There *were* ices, there *were* éclairs, and there were cakes of every size, shape and consistency.

“I never felt more glad in my life,” said Crystal contentedly, “that I do not play cricket. Think of the self-control our Kits will have to shew at tea time? Only one ice and no cakes, or woe betide the top-score. Pickles, there you are. What do you say to a feast in the Cave in honour of Kits? I really think she deserves it. She’s been a bit limp lately.”

Pickles grimaced.

“That’s because she took Joyce to heart,” she replied. “Of course, we were all beastly sorry about Joyce, but if girls will prig what isn’t theirs’n, when they’re caught they go to pris’n. Here come the boys. Rather a nice-looking lot, but somewhat bumptious. When they are beaten they will be better. Let’s go down to the field and talk to them. I’m so jolly glad we don’t live in the days when it was the biggest crime to look at a boy. Now we not only look but annihilate them.”

The Beech College boys, however, did not prove to be easily annihilated. They patronized the Clynton Court girls with quite good-tempered tolerance. They even chaffed them on their ambitious hopes of beating a College team. Crystal and Trixie had to decamp at last, for fear of coming to blows. And presently the game began.

Hadie Eldon, the Captain of the team, and a strapping lassie of the all-British type, won the toss, and the Clynton Court girls went in first. It was not a brilliant innings. Some of the “back-bone” of the team shewed distinct symptoms of nervousness, and Millie Danford was bowled first ball. Kits even in this early stage of the game “twinkled” cheerfully as a star should do, and brought respect to College hearts by sending a ball crashing across the lane beyond the hedge for four.

On the whole, Clynton Court deserved its tea after the College had been brought out at the end of a first innings with a mere ten runs more than its opponents. And tea was all in Clynton Court’s favour, as Crystal serenely

pointed out to her chums and two grinning College boys—cousins of the Twins.

“Boys,” said Crystal, “even boys in a cricket eleven with a reputation wobbling in the balances cannot say ‘no’ to a seventh ice, or a tenth dough nut. You’ll see how it is. Clynton Court will win—not because of bowlers or batters—but because of its restrained appetite. Nothing personal, Morton major and Morton minor; if you cast your eye over to that table where three of your eleven are feeding, you will believe in my prophecy.”

“How you girls can jaw,” protested Morton major, “but wait and see. Our fellows are biding their time. They mean to give you *socks*! Girls need it badly. I say, those *éclair*s are good!”

How they all laughed, and teased, and quarrelled with all the greatest good humour. And yet with what anxious ardour they bestowed themselves later around the field to watch the final fight.

This time Kits was on her mettle. And she knew, with the self-confidence which is not mere swank, that she could bat.

The College boys eyed that slim, workman-like figure with distrust and apprehension. They had already marked down Kits. And they had reason for their fears. The boy who stood on the burning deck could not have stuck to his job with any greater tenacity than did Kits to her post. Right and left sped the balls, and Beech College ground its teeth, sweated, ran, changed bowlers, grew gloomy, and finally, after some of the best bowlers had given that slip of a girl up as a very bad job, an unlucky ball rose high in the air and was caught by Barnes major.

But—it was caught too late. In vain did Beech College rally its forces and tell itself that even if the Clynton Court score was staggering they could not exceed it. They did their best—that was the maddening part—they did their very best—and it was not good enough. The Beech College Captain made a brilliant stand, but a twister from the Clynton Court Captain drove him back to the tent with a fine score which was not a winning one.

Clynton Court was twelve runs to the good when the stumps were drawn, and, after a few seconds of gloomy resentment Beech College had the good sense to obey its sporting instinct, and yelled its cheers to the “better man”.

It was a glorious victory, and Kits was just where the proud Crew had already placed her—right at the top of the tree.

How those girls cheered her, as they carried her shoulder high round the field. And how the College boys joined in, shouting and cheering, till the brakes that brought them carried them out of earshot.

Miss Evelton and Hadie Eldon were triumphant.

A return match had been arranged, and the reputation of Clynton Court was established.

Kits retired to her room, very hot, very happy, and with only one very small crumpled rose-leaf tucked away out of sight. For—she had missed Joyce's applause even amongst the rest; and, remembering how Joyce had looked forward to this match, she found it necessary to dash away a tear drop.

What an idiotic girl Joyce had been. Yet, stop! *why* was she idiotic? Did Kits to-day count that friend of half a term idiotic or splendid?—guilty or not guilty? Crystal had vowed she was innocent, was Crystal right?

"If only I could be sure," sighed Kits, as she re-tied her hair, "I would love to have her back again. Having Teresa in here is almost as bad as having to sleep in the same room as a black-beetle. Ugh! and it is awfully mean to say it. Coming, Pickles, coming!" And—alas! for the refining influence of school!—Kits was sliding down the banisters in the same bold style as on her first day at Clynton Court.

No wonder the solitary Prim, who passed with Teresa down the passage, sighed as she remarked that Kits had not the faintest idea how to behave.

Teresa smiled.

"I don't like her," she replied, "and I don't think Miss Carwell would if she knew *all* about her."

A remark which left Roseleen wondering what special law-breaking that grocer-cart girl chiefly indulged in.

And, after the cricket match was over, things—or was it the girls themselves—went limp again for a time. The pastoral play was still a central point of interest. But there was a good deal of dull work attached to it. The girls were to make their own dresses, and some of them were not at all in love with their needles.

"The dresses will be awfully jolly," said Trixie, one day as she sat completing a head-dress for one of the "ladies of the Court." "But the girls want an awful lot of keeping up to it. Half of them are thinking far more about the picnic on the 8th. Picnics are all very well, but the pastoral play is a bigger affair altogether. The Prims don't rouse up the right enthusiasm. I expect it will be better after rehearsals."

Kits responded in an absent manner. She had lost half her interest of late in the play. Other things crowded it out.

The Crew was in search of a new thrill and she would have liked to supply it—only it was so difficult.

Crystal was working with re-doubled energy for the Scholarship, and the merry comrades who looked on her as leader missed her badly.

Kits was coming from the schoolroom where she had vainly tried to persuade Crystal to come down to the hut to make a real plum pudding, when she met Mademoiselle with her face tied up in red flannel. Mademoiselle pounced on her prey, like any old kite, and cornered Kits neatly.

“You have no occupation, you *mon enfant*,” she observed glibly, “then you will be kind enough to take this letter of importance to ze post, is it not so? Here is ze money for ze stamp which you will place for me. I give you my thanks also.”

Grim sort of thanks for most unwilling service! though, of course, there were compensations, since in the ordinary way it was not permitted to the girls to go into the village post office which was also the village stores. This rule, formed because of the wrong-doing of some former pupil, who had used the office for sending telegrams and telephone messages to forbidden friends, had often been a trial to the Clynton Court girls, and Kits ran upstairs now for her purse, intending to purchase certain coveted biscuits which she had wanted for some time. She searched in vain, too, for any member of the Crew to accompany her, but the girls must have gone down to the playing field, and it was too far to go after them.

It was a blazing hot day. A day for iced drinks and crisp biscuits rather than plum pudding! and Kits was thinking wistfully of a scheme of Trixie’s to get permission next day to go down to Farmer Perkins’ hay field, when close to the village she spied Joyce Wayde.

Yes, it was Joyce, but grown so thin and pale that at first Kits hardly recognized her.

Kits’ impulse was to look the other way, then—Crystal’s indignant challenge echoed in her ears. Crystal had never been any sort of special friend to Joyce, yet she had believed in her innocence even against Joyce’s own confession.

Joyce had crimsoned and turned aside, but Kits was following her now; a few seconds later, and her detaining hand was on the other’s shoulder.

“Joyce,” said Kits, “where are you going? I . . . I wanted to see you. We have missed you awfully. The Crew wanted to ask you about the Gravlock Mine. Poor old Joyce! are you having a rotten time?”

She drew her trembling companion down on to a felled tree trunk in a tiny copse near the road, and placed her hand on Joyce's.

"Poor old Joyce!" she added.

"*Don't*," pleaded Joyce, then—after another fight with her emotion—she managed to ask a question. "How's everything going on at Clynton Court? I heard about the cricket match and I was so glad."

Kits thumped the unoffending bark of the tree.

"It's beastly," she observed, "too beastly. You did not take Crystal's papers. There! I feel better now. Some fact has got settled in its place. Now, Joyce, answer me. How did you get tangled up in that business? You must have been mad, or else it was one of your straw-splitting games. Do tell me, —or have I forfeited my right to be your friend because I was a brute at first?"

Joyce's laugh was shaky.

"You know how I love you, Kits," she replied, "nothing alters that. If you love a person you go on loving them. *Their* feelings don't alter yours. And oh, I am so glad you have spoken to me, even though you'll probably get cross. For . . . for I can't tell you one word about—those papers. You've got to go on thinking I am either mad or bad, just as the rest of Clynton Court must think I'm bad."

"Crystal doesn't think it," retorted Kits. "She says she is going to prove it too. And Crys is the cleverest girl in the school."

But Joyce's face shewed no rejoicing at this news.

"Please, please," she entreated, "tell Crystal *not* to do anything. Tell her it would break my heart to find out the truth. Oh, what am I saying? You must forget what I said, Kits, or . . . or I shall wish I hadn't met you. Do please, talk of something else. You were asking about the mine—the Gravlock Mine, what did you mean?"

Kits was hopelessly perplexed. Here was a conundrum. Surely, if Joyce were innocent, she was the very first girl in the world who did not want to be cleared! Did she wish to shield a guilty person? Kits had already scouted that idea, for who *could* Joyce want to shield? What enemy could Crystal possess?

Kits could not name one! As to Gwenda Handow—the only other interested person in the Scholarship—the thought was too ridiculous. Gwenda was beyond suspicion.

So Kits . . . like many another would have done—banished the problem, and was tempted to a still more absorbing topic. Briefly she told Joyce the

story of the exploration and its result. Her account of the “ghost” was vivid, and Joyce was interested as well as relieved at the change in the conversation.

“I don’t remember when the Gravlock was being worked but it was ages ago,” she said. “There was a terrible accident there, and the young son of the owner—Sir William Gravlock—was killed. That was why the mine was abandoned. I never heard of it being haunted, and I have never explored it. I shouldn’t think it is very safe to go down the galleries. I will ask Owen Ilanth about it though. He will be able to tell me, because he has often been in. He is tremendously keen.”

“Thanks awfully,” said Kits. “When will you see Owen Ilanth? and where shall we meet next time? I expect some of the Crew will come too. Anyhow Crystal will. She hated your going.”

“Crystal is a darling,” said Joyce, “but—I don’t know about our meeting, Kits. I’m afraid Miss Carwell would not like it. You . . . you see, I was expelled because I wasn’t a fit companion for any of you. I don’t want you to get into a row . . . or to do what’s wrong.”

How like the old Joyce! Yet Joyce had been expelled. It didn’t match one bit!

“Bosh!” said Kits. “You are a sort of martyr, I believe, sacrificing yourself for a sinner. Never mind! We won’t plan a meeting but I’ll write after seeing the Crew. Hullo!—there’s the Ferret. That’s Pickles’ name for her.”

Joyce flushed to the eyes. Miss Pasfold was coming up the road and she had seen them. Not only seen but was coming towards them, her thin lips tightly compressed, as she had a trick of doing with them when vexed. She ignored Joyce altogether and addressed Kits in vinegar tones.

“You had better come back with me, Kits,” she said icily, “since you take such wrong advantage of your freedom and your mistress’s trust as to deliberately meet and talk to a girl, who she had expelled for dishonourable conduct.”

Joyce gave a little sob of distress, and slipped quietly away. Kits saw her go, and a fighting light came to her eyes.

“Joyce is neither dishonourable nor guilty of what she was accused,” she said hotly. “And I only met her by accident. Now I’m going to the post office—for Mademoiselle—so there!”

And away whirled Kits, leaving an indignant and irate mistress to return to school with her complaint against a rebel.

CHAPTER XIII

“KITS! KIDDLY-WINKS darling. Kitto, come here. Farmer Perkins——”

But Kits waved her hand towards the group of comrades, laughing—though without merriment.

“I’m off for a lecture,” she replied. “The Ferret has hauled me before the Tribunal. All news when we meet. I’m longing to hear about the hay!”

The Crew looked at each other.

“What’s in the wind now?” asked Trixie. “Nothing very serious, I don’t suppose. The Ferret always has her knife into one of us. If only she could be called to more congenial duties elsewhere, and take Mademoiselle with her, how happy we should be.”

“Cheerio!” retorted Pickles. “Life’s not too bad with a vision of old Perkins’ hay field and strawberries and cream.”

The Twins gurgled. Strawberries and cream held a special appeal to them—and seemed infinitely more attractive than mines and ghosts.

Kits returned from her interview with Miss Carwell hot and ruffled.

“Cats, cats, cats!” she grumbled, dropping down on to the floor beside Trixie. “How I should like to punch the Ferret’s head. How surprised she would be.”

Trixie chuckled.

“What’s gone wrong with the works?” she asked. “Have the Prims been seeing you ride in any more grocers’ carts?”

“No,” said Kits shortly, “but I actually dared talk to the black, black sheep whose fleece is a deal whiter than my own. I mean Joyce. Don’t sniff, Twins, or I’ll punch *your* heads. Where’s Crystal? She would boil too. Well, I met Joyce, looking rotten, and we had a pow-wow. She was promising to find out all about the Gravlock Mine, when along came the Ferret. Then the band played. *She* got cross and rude—and I got crosser and ruder. In the end, of course, she complained to Miss C., who had me up, jawed for an hour—and forbade me under pain of severest displeasure, if not expulsion, to speak to poor old Joyce again. I didn’t make any promises and that made Miss C. stiff. You know how she goes? ‘Very well, my dear, you know the consequences of disobedience. I must insist on being obeyed by my girls. If they will not understand this they have to go.’”

Kit's mimicry was perfect, and the Crew cheered merrily.

"All the same," concluded Trixie, "Joyce is a conundrum which I've given up. Leave her alone, Kits. It doesn't do to champion freaks, and Joyce *is* that. Instead, let us discuss the programme for to-morrow. I do wish every day were garlanded with strawberries and cream, not to mention half holidays. We must start directly after dinner, and make a bee-line for the farm. The hay is grand . . . and as dry as a bone. We will forget our ripening years and indulge in a rare old romp. Then, when we are literally dying of thirst, we will suzzle in strawberries and yellow cream."

"It does sound good and nice," replied Kits, "I wish I'd known before I went down to the post office and I'd have bought a bottle of elderberry wine. *Then* we'd have had syllabub. That's the joy of existence. Syllabub and farm-house cake."

"Glutton!" stormed Pickles. "You make my mouth water and the hunger pangs grip me. Why is one always hungry at school? It's not because we don't eat enough."

"We have to feed our brains," replied Trixie. "Here comes Crystal looking like a double Parraton and a thribble blue-stocking. Come down from Olympus, Crys, and listen to the feast of strawberries, etc."

Crystal shook her head dolorously.

"I'm in mourning," she replied, "do you know, I've been and gone and lost my pearl arrow brooch. And I'm horribly afraid I must have dropped it either in the Gravlock Mine, or on the way to it. I only wear it with my long tie, and I've not put that on since the day of the expedition. I am sick about it. You know what a favourite of mine that brooch was."

Yes, they all knew, for Crystal had often told the tale of how her favourite Uncle Jack had taken her to choose that brooch the day before he sailed for Africa where he had died of black water fever three months later.

The ringing of the tea bell stopped the tale of commiserations, but afterwards Kits found her chum in the garden room.

"There's heaps of time for us to go as far as the mine, Crys," she said. "You and I don't have to go to the singing class or the literature lecture, thank goodness! so we could skedaddle off and be home for supper. I know you won't have any peace of mind till you have been. That sort of bother nags at one, and creeps into lessons and everything. Have you any idea where you dropped the brooch?"

Crystal beamed. She was worrying badly over her loss.

"You saint," she said, "it has been the shock of my life, missing that arrow. And I've been remembering. My tie came undone in the mine when

we were perching on the ledge. I caught my sleeve button in the ends of it—you know it has knotted ends like a sash—and I expect I jerked out the brooch then and never noticed in the dark. I was just wondering whether I could go on a voyage of discovery. Here's the lamp. I brought it, you know, and hid it behind the croquet box."

"Good!" said Kits, "we'd better put in some more oil and start right away. If we find the brooch at once we shall be back by six or a little after. We won't bother to search along the track till we are sure the brooch is not in the mine. By the way, is that ankle of yours all right again?"

"Good enough," said Crystal, "I shall tread like a cat, then it doesn't jar a bit. You *are* a ripper, Kits. I'm sure you must hate coming."

Kits only laughed.

"I don't hate coming at all," she retorted. "I believe I rather enjoy the idea. I wonder if we shall see a flick of the ghost's tail. We'll have a story for the Twins. Wait here, Crys, whilst I go and wangle oil out of Alice."

Kits was a special favourite with the maids. She had a friendly way with her and often asked after their home folk. Alice's brother Mike had been enriched since her coming with various bags of sweets and story books, and there was no trouble made over the re-filling of the lamp.

"What a jolly evening it is," said Kits, as they tramped over the moors. "And really school is not too bad a place. How I should have hated the old business of walking two and two and only going the regulation 'there and back.' I had no idea we should be allowed to go out alone, or have half the fun we do have."

Crystal rubbed her nose.

"I'm afraid there is a rule," she replied grimly, "about not going out less than three in a batch, but I think it applies to the juniors who have to have a senior with them. Two seniors must count as much as two ju's and one senior. Anyway I'm fairly certain the Prims often go out on their lonesome, and we are quite as serious as the primmest Prims to-day."

"I do hope we find your brooch," said Kits, jumping over a small heathery bank, "or it will spoil to-morrow's fun. I *am* so sorry for all the girls who don't belong to the Crew. You'll have to come home for a week of the hols, Crystal, just so that my brothers may know you. We would have a glorious time. By the way, will you know the result of the Parraton before the holidays begin?"

Crystal shook her head.

"No, not till the middle of August. Dad and I will be in Switzerland then if all's well. So I shall have compensations even if I don't win it. And

somehow I'm not as keen, you know, since that perfectly beastly business with Joyce. Poor old Joyce! I never felt more certain of anything than of her innocence. It's right in my bones."

"It is a puzzler," replied Kits, flushing. "And I believe I'm quite ashamed of ever having thought her guilty, and yet—if *she* did not do it—who could have? There's no rhyme or reason for any one else, excepting Gwenda herself, to tear up your notes. And Gwenda simply could not do such a thing. So there we come toddling back to the starting point. That's why I say 'give up,' and try not to addle my brains any more over it, except to wish nothing of the kind had ever happened."

"Ditto, brother Smut," retorted Crystal. "Come along, Kits, and let's slide down this bank, it will save us going round. I always was one for economy. Do you know I am actually feeling a bit creepy already. *Why?* It's always been my ambition to tackle a ghost. Now my legs have a most cowardly desire to bolt."

Kits only laughed. She did not take the speaker seriously at all.

"You old humbug," she said, "I don't believe you have a nerve in your composition. As far as I go myself I'd sooner any day meet a ghost than a bull. The Twins are always drawing the long bow about the mad bulls which go frisking over the moors."

"Once," said Crystal, her eyes twinkling, "according to school legend, Mademoiselle was chased by a bull and rescued by Farmer Perkins. Mustn't it have been priceless? Mademoiselle ran into the river and managed to scramble on to a rock where she perched, screeching, till help came. What a concert! the bull bellowing and Mademoiselle squealing. How I'd have loved to be there—only I should have been expelled for heartless behaviour. Now, *cave*, Kits. We won't talk, eh? Those echoes give me the jim-jams."

Kits looked curiously at her companion. Was Crystal *really* nervous? She had thought it only her nonsense, but Crystal certainly looked pale, and slipped her hand through Kits' arm as though afraid she might vanish.

Fear is infectious too. Kits was wishing the Twins and Pickles had joined them in this search, as she and Crystal passed into the gloom of the underground tunnel. It had been so easy to laugh at Noreen and Jane. It was not so easy at all to laugh at themselves. The old foolish stories, told by Alice for their special benefit, came to daunt them as they walked slowly along the gallery. They did not speak, and yet the silence seemed full of sound. The drip, drip, of water, the sighing note of the wind whistling between the crevices of the wall, the distant echoes of their own footsteps, added to the eeriness of the adventure.

It was difficult too to be quite sure how far along the gallery they had gone, or where the party had seated itself.

Very slowly they moved forward, Kits holding the lantern so that the beam of light travelled along the floor as well as the ledge above it.

“This is the place—I’m sure,” murmured Crystal, at last. “Hold the light closer will you, Kits? Now, along here. You see, it would be easy for such a little thing to hide itself amongst these stones and bits of coal.”

Kits obeyed, and inch by inch the ledge and floor were searched. Suddenly, Kits gave a little cry and set the lantern down.

“I’ve got it,” she exclaimed aloud, “hurrah!”

For the moment their fears were forgotten.

“You darling,” gasped Crystal. “You absolute duck. I *am* glad. My dear old brooch, and I wouldn’t have lost it for a pension. Kits, I’m most awfully grateful, you can’t think. Shall I hug you, you clever old thing?”

“Take care,” warned Kits. “Over goes the lantern! Ow! if the wretched thing hasn’t gone out, and it will be the last word to re-light.”

Crystal had pinned her recovered treasure firmly into her blouse. At first, the knocking over of the lantern seemed a mere trifle, but before Kits could strike a match she had stopped her.

“Wait a tick,” she urged, “is it safe? Might there not be some sort of weird gases which would cause an explosion if we lighted a flame? Don’t let’s risk it. It’s a straight road back and we can creep close to the wall. It won’t seem half such a long way going back.”

Kits yielded with a sigh. She wished she was not remembering the “Child of the Cavern” and the monster bird which lived in the mine!

But Crystal might be right. She knew more about gases and explosions than Kits herself pretended to do, so the matches were put up, and the girls were about to turn back when a streak of light, shining from far down the gallery, startled them.

Not daring to speak, they shrank back against the wall, staring with terrified gaze to where that light, steadying, cast a broad flare around the distant spot. Evidently the place was where two of the galleries crossed each other.

Some one was standing there, lantern in hand, hesitating as to which way to take. Then, a second and third light shone out of the darkness, grouping themselves together.

Kits caught Crystal’s hand, squeezing it hard.

The first fear of being about to see the ghostly forms of long-dead miners had vanished, only to be replaced by a still livelier alarm. For, the men—some five or six in number—could be seen quite distinctly amidst the surrounding darkness.

They were gipsies.

Yes, there could be no mistake. The girls could see the ragged clothes, the characteristic caps—the rough, shaggy heads and generally squalid appearance of the group, and their hearts sank in dismay.

The gipsies of the Hollow were lawless creatures to whom every wrongdoing and crime were attributed. They were the dogs with a very bad name, partly at least deserved, and the two school girls naturally trembled at the thought of meeting a gang of such ruffians in the lonely mine.

They would quite likely be robbed and kidnapped, such things *were* done, and search for them prove vain. Yet to attempt to run away was out of the question. They would be overtaken as swiftly as a greyhound overtakes a scurrying rabbit. Their only hope was that the gipsies would not see them. Certainly they would not be looking for them!

How lucky that that lantern *had* been overturned.

Crystal was edging back, drawing Kits up with her so that both girls stood on the ledge itself.

There they must wait till the gipsies passed within a few feet of them.

Ah! they were coming now. Six of them, bunched together, laughing and talking in an excited way.

What had they been doing in the old coal mine?

What secret did they hide in those empty galleries?

There was no answer for the girls who only asked themselves such questions, since fear was strong upon them.

Fear which crystallized into a kind of quiet terror so that it was a wonder they did not betray their presence by falling from the ledge.

The gipsies were abreast of them now. They could see the dark, unshorn faces, the grimy clothes, the bare, unwashed feet. If a glance from one of the men reached the ledge those girls were caught! But the gipsies were not on the look out for crouching school lassies. They were arguing some important question, disputing, laughing, snarling—and so passed, whilst the unseen watchers held their breaths, feeling the perspiration gathering over their brows.

Safe! Almost safe at least.

The men's backs were turned now, they were hurrying down the gallery towards the opening.

Kits placed her lips close to Crystal's ear.

"Shall we follow?" she whispered. "Their lights will guide us—and . . . we *must* see which way they go."

Crystal stiffened. She would much rather have waited hours on her perch than take the risk which lay in Kits' suggestion. Yet the latter was right, and Crystal was far too much of a sport to give way to her fear.

Without replying she slid down from the ledge, and the two girls, keeping very close, followed the disappearing lantern light.

Once, Kits heard her companion's sharp intake of breath, and felt her reel and stumble. Crystal had caught the heel of her shoe in the broken rail which ran along the track, and had wrenched her bad ankle. But she made no complaint, and limped gallantly along.

The gipsies could not have seen them, even if they had looked back, and they must have been still talking and arguing, for they did not hear the footsteps of their followers.

Crystal was leaning more and more heavily on Kits' arm, and when at last the two emerged into the twilight evening of the moors, Kits was alarmed at sight of her companion's pallor.

"Sit down on the bank, you poor old thing," she whispered, "and . . . and I'll do a bit of scouting. *Don't* faint for goodness sake, Crys. Think what would happen if you did and some of the gipsies came back! There, that's better. Now, I'll climb that bank and see which way the wretches have gone."

Crystal was only too glad to sink down on to a boulder near. She felt sick with pain and faintness. In spite of high spirits she was not at all strong, and the recent alarm had shaken her as much as the pain from her twisted ankle.

Kits had "screwed her courage to sticking point," and, creeping up the side of the bank, lay flat amongst the heather, wriggling forward till she obtained the view she wanted.

A few seconds later, she was back to Crystal's side.

"They are going straight for the Hollow," she panted, "and the best thing we can do is to go towards the Hermitage and take the lower road from there. It wouldn't be a bad plan to go in and see Old John and ask him to let you rest, whilst I go and dig up some sort of conveyance. You'll never get home over the moors with that bulgy foot."

Crystal smiled faintly.

“What a nuisance I am,” she whispered, “but . . . yes, . . . I do feel rather green. I——”

She stood up for a moment, then re-seated herself hastily, her face white as a sheet.

Kits wagged her head gravely.

“You’ll *just* have to stay here,” she said reluctantly, “whilst I go and get help. It’s as sure as anything that you’ll faint if you try to walk a single yard!”

CHAPTER XIV

CRYSTAL yielded without a murmur. She knew there was nothing else to be done, and was too great a philosopher to argue or refuse to accept the inevitable. Of course, she hated being left alone. She was terrified of the gipsies' return and longed to crawl away. But it could not be done; so, instead, she grinned weakly and whispered thanks to her chum.

Kits was not losing time on her errand either, and the wonder was that she did not sprain her ankle, as she ran stumbling over the rough heather-covered moor.

It was not very far to the Hermitage, and this time Kits had no scruple about climbing the wall, even though there was no Kiwi to re-capture.

Old John was not in the garden, and Kits stood tugging vainly at the rusty bell-pull to attract attention. The bell was not ringing to-day, and with the picture of Crystal, half fainting on the rock, before her eyes, Kits put manners into her pocket and ran round the house peering into the windows, till to her own relief she spied Old John himself in the act of flinging up the casement.

Kits' greeting was the familiar one of a former acquaintance who had been friendly received.

"*May* your servant come and help my friend to your house?" she pleaded breathlessly, "she's hurt her foot. I'm so afraid."

Then she stopped. There could be no mistaking the most unfriendly glare of Old John's eyes as he viewed her from the open window.

Regardless of her request he waved her away with a most indignant gesture.

"Off my premises you go, young woman," he commanded, "how dare you come thrusting yourself where locked gates tell you are not wanted? I'll send for the police and give you into custody if I see any of you round here again. You're after no good! You're in league with thieves. I know all about it. There were men prowling round the house last night. Friends of yours, no doubt. Youth and innocence make a pretty blind. Off you go—or I shall be losing my valued friends. There's a plot to steal my Nicholas, but it won't succeed. I——"

He paused for breath, whilst Kits stood round-eyed, amazed, indignant, literally not believing her ears.

Of course, Old John must be *mad*, or perhaps the dust of the coal mine had blackened her face. She began to explain.

“Don’t you remember?—I’m one of the girls who brought Kiwi back. You showed us Nicholas. He’s a darling. You couldn’t really dream we’d want to steal him.”

But the old hermit interrupted again, shouting his remarks at the top of his voice.

“Do I remember! Of course, I do. I remember a pack of impudent young women who tricked me into believing Kiwi had escaped. Unheard of! But when I heard those footsteps in the night I knew what it meant! You’re after Nicholas. You’re in league with burglars. If you don’t go at once I’ll ’phone for police. I’ll lock you up and keep you prisoner. Off you go, you pert baggage, or I’ll take the stick to you.”

The veins on the old fellow’s forehead stood out like cords, he shook his fist so threateningly that Kits’ courage gave way. He was raving mad, of course. Really a more dangerous foe than the gipsies.

Not daring to argue, explain or plead, Kits did just what you or I would have done in her place, and took to her heels. She had scaled the wall and stood, perched atop it to regain her breath before jumping into the lane, when she heard someone running down the path behind her, and saw Long Dick, the silent servant, brandishing a stick as he came. Evidently he had been sent to drive a stalker off the premises. Kits shouted a defiance before she jumped.

“Your master had better take care,” she called. “We belong to Clynton Court School, and Miss Carwell will have something to say if Old John doesn’t learn proper behaviour.”

Then she sprang down, still panting and quivering with indignation.

But—it was no use to boil over Old John’s ingratitude and insolence, since poor Crystal would be feeling worse and worse if her chum did not return. And, oh, surely no friend in need was ever more welcome than Farmer Perkins, who Kits espied on the road below her, driving along at a jog trot over the moors toward his farm.

Farmer Perkins had evidently been to market, for there was a fine white pig covered by a net standing in the back part of the cart. But “necessity knows no law,” and Kits, clambering on to a very rickety stone wall—which wobbled as perilously as Yorkshire stone walls have a trick of doing, waved both arms, shouting at the top of her voice in the hope of attracting attention.

Oh dear, oh dear! Was the farmer *deaf*? He didn’t look round and he was even flicking up the old grey mare. Kits *yelled* and swayed . . . ending in a

sob of relief, as Farmer Perkins suddenly pulled up Brown Nellie and looked round.

Down came Kits . . . down came part of the wall too!—but she had managed to jump clear of those toppling stones, whilst the kind old farmer had turned his horse's head, and was driving up the hill towards her.

Kits met him half way, gasping out such a jumble of a tale that it was a wonder he could make any sense out of it!

But when he heard there was a lame lassie waiting near the old mine entrance with a sprained ankle, he was all sympathy and kindness.

No matter that he himself was anxious to be home with his purchase at the earliest moment. No matter that he had a dozen jobs crying to be done. The lame lassie came first and Kits, half-crying in her gratitude, climbed thankfully up beside him.

Then, of course, the story had to be told over again, and Farmer Perkins' face darkened as he heard about the gipsies.

"They're no good to anyone," he declared, "and I'll make it my business to be round telling the police about them, though I'm afraid they will take a deal of moving on. It's curious how slack the authorities are about those folk who are the biggest curse to us farmers—worse than foxes by a deal, and vengeful too."

"That's what we've always been afraid of," said Kits. "You won't say who reported them to you, will you? I hate gipsies."

They had reached the road near the old mine entrance now, and there was Crystal, waving to them in welcome. Her foot was better now she declared, and she was most delighted to see the farmer's cart. Kits gave a vivid description of Old John's rudeness which tickled Farmer Perkins immensely.

"You can't look to a pig for anything but a grunt, little ladies," said he, "and Old John never has treated his neighbours as anything but a set of burglars, who he's dead sure mean to steal his cats and birds. He's a crank who'll end his days in a straight weskit I shouldn't wonder. And now here we are at your school marm's place. I'll drive you up to the door, lassies, for the little lame lass won't like walking for a day or so."

"Don't you make any mistake," laughed Crystal, who was looking much more like herself now, "I'm going to come to your hay field to-morrow, and when I have a big plateful of strawberries and cream before me I shall forget all about a ricked ankle."

"*And gipsies,*" added Kits, as she jumped down and helped Crystal on to the doorstep. Then, with renewed thanks to the smiling farmer, and an

assurance that they would be quite ready for a romp in his fields next day, they hurried indoors.

Miss Carwell looked very grave when the two absentees reported the story of their adventure—or rather *one* absentee as Crystal had gone straight to the matron to have her ankle strapped up.

“You ought not to have gone near the old mine on any excuse whatever,” she said. “You must have known I should not have liked it. I am sorry, Kits, for I do not believe you or Crystal would willingly have betrayed my trust, but if anything of this kind happens again, I shall have to make boundaries for you senior girls, or insist that one of the mistresses goes with you if you go beyond the grounds of the Court.”

This was a terrible blow, and the Crew looked woefully glum when Miss Carwell’s warning was repeated to them.

The freedom from restraint and the joy of being treated much as boys of a public school are treated with regard to liberty had been the pride and joy of the Clynton Court girls, and *esprit de corps* was strong with them. No wonder the Crew passed an instant resolution not to go anywhere near Gravlock Mine again.

“Though there wasn’t any need to place it out of bounds,” laughed Trixie, “since I’m positive none of us would ever have wanted to go again. Poor old Kits! You and Crystal must have had a hideous time.”

“With the one bit of good luck—that Crys found her brooch,” added Kits brightly, “though I know I shall have nightmare to-night. I hope Teresa will like it.”

Those two room-fellows at No. 8 were certainly no nearer being friends than when Joyce left!

Teresa had even given up trying to chat to Kits or win her comradeship. The two were antagonistic and Teresa, having given up the attempt to be friends, was quite skilful in bestowing pinprick annoyances on the other girl.

“I can’t stand her,” Kits told Crystal, the day after the finding of the brooch. “I only wish she would pay a call on Old John. What a shock it would be to her. She is a little cat though herself, so they might get on well. She rubs me up the wrong way horribly when she starts purring with Pasfold. Why *are* you laughing, Crys? I’m sure you agree.”

“I love you in your ginger-beer bottle mood,” replied Crystal. “Pop, bang, fire! But why bother about Teresa? She can’t help herself, poor thing! She’s not English. How I’d hate to be a mongrel and have a temperament. She must long to kick herself sometimes. She’s only happy when she’s

singing. Well, she can sing—just as prettily as I can—what *can* I do?—when I come to think of it I’ve not got a single parlour trick.”

“You’ve got the jolliest good temper and the best imagination of any girl at the Court,” retorted Kits. “Now the Crew is shouting, and the sun is shining, your ankle is plastered and I am hungry—for strawberries, so do not delay—time will not stay . . . and I can’t even race you to the gate.”

It was a real summer’s day for the holiday, and those laughter-loving school mates had the merriest time in that big, blazing hay field upon which the sun was pouring relentlessly down.

No wonder the arrival of the strawberry feast was hailed with gasps rather than shouts of joy, and Pickles’ suggestion of carrying the strawberries to the top of the newly piled rick was scouted with contempt.

“I’m not going to move one inch farther than I need,” declared Trixie, as she sprawled under the shade of a weeping willow near the stream, “this is ideal, and what’s the use of searching for anything super ideal? Hullo, Kiddly-winks, who’s your friend?”

Kits had uncurled herself from the depths of a hay nest and had gone quite briskly off to where a farm boy, curly-wigged, shy, and very youthful, stood hugging a puppy and making awkward signs of wishing to speak to Kits.

The rest of the Crew watched with an interest which increased to lively curiosity *and* jealousy, when their companion returned plus that small white puppy, with its black and tan markings.

“Isn’t it a real beauty,” cried Kits, holding the fat butterball of a dog up for admiration. “And it’s mine. The boy is Walter Wane. Joyce used to take me to see his brother who broke his leg. Walter recognized me and went off for the puppy which he and Jim wanted me to have. I simply couldn’t resist it, though goodness knows what I’m going to do with the darling.”

“We’ll all help to take care of it, the angel,” said Trixie, possessing herself of that puppy and kissing it rapturously. “My dear, what a wet tongue you have got! What shall you call it, Kits? It ought to be Jumbo if a boy called Jim gave it to you.”

“Couldn’t be better,” replied Kits, snuggling down in the hay. “Do you hear, Jumbo? Attention! Cats! Rats! No—*not* cream, you saucy dumpling.”

And only just in time was the jug of yellow cream rescued from the fat puppy’s close attention.

It was the grandest feast—a perfect conclusion to an ideal holiday, whilst the gift of Jumbo added an extra beam to Kits’ smiling face.

“I’ll ask Alice to find a corner for him to-night,” she said gaily, “and to-morrow, I’ll see Dawton the gardener. He might let me have one of the small sheds near the old piggeries, only really and truly Jumbo ought to have a silk-lined basket and be treated like a gentleman.”

“He would much rather be treated as a puppy,” retorted Trixie, “he looks a sport.”

And in this case looks did not belie that saucy puppy-dog. Alice accepted the charge quite readily. *But*—it happened to be her evening out—and somehow it *quite* escaped her memory to say anything about Jumbo to the other girls, with the result that Master Puppy, finding an empty and dismal lamp-room very dull quarters, went off as soon as the door was left open on a voyage of discovery.

It’s wonderful how much a puppy can find too when it is out for discoveries, though the first intimation his new mistress received of his successful exploration came in a dismayed howl from himself, and a perfect scream of indignation from Mademoiselle.

Kits was in the middle of a letter home, describing the perfections of her new pet when those echoing sounds warned her of disaster, and, with one gasp of dismay, she dashed for the class room door, followed by Pickles and Trixie.

Outside in the passage, stood Mademoiselle towering over a cringing and guilty puppy dog, whilst in the angry Frenchwoman’s right hand was held the wreck of her best Sunday hat—a creation which she herself was convinced was stamped as being the equal of the finest French model.

“But where,” cried Mademoiselle, in a crescendo of indignation, “did come this dog of so destructive a spirit? It is not of ze school. It will depart *instantly*! But see . . . what it has done! My new toque it is destroyed—as also shall be that most abominable of dogs!”

CHAPTER XV

“OH, MADEMOISELLE!” came a chorus of appealing voices—and Kits, quite overlooking the fact that Jumbo was a sinner, caught him up in her arms.

That was quite enough, and I don't think Mademoiselle was at all sorry to be able to turn her vials of wrath upon some one who could better understand the enormity of the crime committed than that squealing puppy!

“It is you then,” she scolded, “*You* who do make such indifference to ze rules, who laughs at ze ordaire of school conduct, and who without permission brings to ze school of Clynton Court an animaile which destroys and makes ze sport of ill mischief.”

Kits sighed.

“It *really* isn't my fault, Mademoiselle,” she protested, “though, of course, Dad will buy a new hat to replace yours. And I'm awfully sorry Jumbo got into mischief. He was given me by one of Farmer Perkins' boys and Alice promised to take care of him till to-morrow. It . . . it's awfully bad luck.”

It was a straight-forward confession, and Mademoiselle was too just not to accept the apology.

“You are honest, you Kits,” she approved, “And for that it is good. Always I like well the honesty. You shall tell me at quiet this story of a dog so destructive. Afterwards he shall go! Is it not so? It is *incroyable* to have such an animaile in ze house. I have no pity when I look upon my hat so chic and so new.”

“But, Mademoiselle,” pleaded Kits. “You *couldn't* be so cruel as to want to turn a poor little darling like this out of doors. He didn't know any better, he really didn't. It's puppy nature to tear things.”

But Mademoiselle was not to be softened. Her hat was ruined, in the most complete fashion, and the culprit must be punished.

Nor was Kits trusted to carry the sentence of banishment out alone and unaided. Mademoiselle accompanied Jumbo and his mistress to satisfy herself that that animal of destruction was placed behind lock and key in a cupboard-like strip of room where old wooden boxes and bottles were kept.

Kits' regret that that “creation” of a hat was spoiled speedily vanished when she found a deaf ear turned to all entreaties for better quarters for that

helpless pet. Angry tears came in her eyes and passionate protest to her lips.

But Mademoiselle paid no heed. That puppy was to be punished. *Bon!* It was only right. If it were cold and hungry, or if it actually cut itself amongst the empty bottles it would be a lesson to it in the future. And to-morrow, if the gardener could find no shed for Jumbo's head-quarters he would have to be returned to those who gave him.

Very hot and rebellious, Kits rejoined her chums who had only been spectators of the first part of the drama.

"Well?" asked Trixie, "what happened? Mademoiselle's vinegary glance was enough to pickle any puppy. Has Jumbo been turned adrift? or are we having him for dinner to-morrow—in the soup?"

Kits frowned.

"Mademoiselle is a mean cat," she retorted, "And—well! if it wasn't for being afraid of how she would pay Jumbo out I would put him in her bed!"

A remark which set the Crew off into a wordless giggle.

But—if Kits and her friends thought they had heard the last of Jumbo for that night they were mistaken!

Kits awoke about half past eleven to hear distinct though distant sounds of woe coming from the direction of the prison in which Jumbo was confined. The girls in the main part of the building would not be able to hear, but Kits, having once listened to those pleading little yelps, felt *something* must be done if poor Jumbo were to live till morning without breaking a blood-vessel.

Teresa was sound asleep, her head almost invisible under the bed clothes, one black curl only left astray over the pillow. Slipping on dressing gown and shoes Kits crossed the room and gently opened the door, a faint smile on her lips as she wondered whether the Prims were being awaked out of their beauty sleep. If the Prims, however, were slumbering on undisturbed by puppy cries it was more than could be said for others. The door of No. 7, was being opened and Trixie's red plaits were visible, followed by a sleepy, freckled face.

"Hill-o!" murmured the owner of the freckled face. "You heard him then?"

"*Heard* him," echoed a voice, in which suppressed laughter lingered, "I should say so, my dear!"

Kits grinned widely. Pickles, Crystal, and Trixie, stood grouped on the landing, whilst from far below pealed the plaintive tones of Jumbo's song of distress.

“I’m going to comfort him anyhow,” said Kits firmly, “it’s cruelty to dumb animals to leave a wee puppy alone in the dark.” And she turned resolutely towards the stairs. One by one her three chums followed her. It was a thrilling undertaking. Even the dull old school passages and staircase looked somehow different to-night. Bogies lurked in the shadows . . . The ghost of Mademoiselle padded silently in pursuit. When a mouse squeaked Noreen opened her mouth to yell, and was only silenced by Crystal’s handkerchief promptly used as gag.

“We ought to have brought a poker,” teased Trixie, who could never resist upsetting the nerves of the Twins, “in case of burglars, you know. Oh dear! I do wish we were going to fry eggs and bacon or discover a monster dish of sausage rolls or something solid instead of merely rescuing a puppy dog from its nerves.”

“Brute,” quoth Kits. “Your cookery book has increased your appetite horribly. And I hate to *think* of eggs and bacon when I haven’t even a biscuit to fill the gap it creates. My poor wee Jumbo! Listen to him. It’s heart-breaking.”

“I wonder Mademoiselle hasn’t been down to strangle him,” said Pickles. “You’re too soft, Kits. A jug of cold water carefully emptied over your howler would quiet him more than any petting.”

But Kits deigned no reply. She had already unlocked the door of the box and bottle room and there, perched on the top of the box, sat Jumbo. He had not broken a blood-vessel, but it was a wonder he hadn’t, for he had been playing the oddest game of skittles with those bottles, whilst the boxes were tumbled in all directions. Perhaps he had been looking for another hat of distinction, and, failing to find one, had done his best to damage everything within reach. Nor did he seem either repentant *or* heart-broken but wagged his stump of a tail, cocked his head on one side, and, with whining welcome, came ambling across in search of something eatable.

“Naughty dog,” said Kits in sepulchral tones. But Jumbo made a dash at some blue bobs at the end of Crystal’s dressing gown girdle and nearly swallowed one in his joy.

“He *is* a pickles,” said Trixie. “You’ll have to give him some awful beatings, Kits. Only you won’t—and he’ll grow up a terror. Look at his impudent nose.”

“Anyhow he’s not going to be left here to howl,” said Kits, “I’ll turn my hat out of my hat box and put him in there. I daren’t take him into my bed for fear he eats my hair. Puppy dear, you are a real nuisance you know. Tomorrow, you’ll have to go and learn manners.”

Jumbo gave an absurd bark and snapped joyously at a curl.

Crystal began to look grim.

“He’ll have your nose next,” she warned. “You had better leave him alone here. He’ll give up howling when he’s tired, and he doesn’t look heart-broken.”

But Kits was obstinate, and carried Jumbo off in her arms. One by one the *less* sympathetic comforters of a sleepless puppy trailed upstairs. The Twins were yawning prodigiously.

“You’ll swallow the stairs or crack your jaws if you go on like that,” warned Trixie, “hullo, Crystal, what are you scouting after?” For Crystal, leading the way now, had paused to point to the schoolroom door.

“It’s open,” she replied. “And it was closed when we came downstairs.”

Noreen and Jane hugged each other.

“Burglars?” they gasped. Crystal looked at Kits.

“Don’t let Jumbo bark,” she whispered, “I want to see who is in the schoolroom. Whoever it is must have heard us.”

Kits put a restraining hand over Jumbo’s mouth, but the puppy, having found a piece of pink ribbon to gnaw, was placidly content.

Crystal had already entered the schoolroom, the others close at her heels. Not one of them spoke.

The blinds were drawn, but the summer’s night was almost as light as day, and, in the pale moonshine, a figure could be seen moving slowly round the room towards a distant desk.

“Gwenda!” whispered Pickles, in a gasp of astonishment, but Crystal caught her arm and squeezed it. “Hush,” she murmured, “don’t speak. She doesn’t know we are here. Don’t you see? *She is walking in her sleep.*”

Gwenda was turning back already towards the door. She had on her Japanese dressing gown and her eyes were wide open, her cheeks rather paler than usual.

Slowly, deliberately, she moved round the long table near the window and came towards the group of girls. But it was quite evident that she did not see them. Her eyes looked straight before her, there was none of the nervous fluttering of the lids which was a trick of hers. Crystal signed to the Twins who left the doorway, and came edging along the wall so that the way was left clear. Gwenda walked past, crossed the threshold, turned to the left, and so passed out of sight.

The girls grouped now on the landing looked at each other.

“I’ve never seen anyone sleep-walking before,” said Pickles. “She *did* look queer. If I’d been alone I should have thought she was Gwenda’s ghost.”

“Shall you tell Miss Sesson, Kits?” asked Jane, “I thought only people who are likely to go mad walk in their sleep.”

Trixie chuckled.

“Most people would be mad then,” she retorted, “but shall you say anything, Kits? Gwenda can’t know she does it and she might smash herself up.”

Kits stood hugging Jumbo with unconscious vigour till between pink ribbon and her fast embrace he was nearly strangled.

“I . . . don’t . . . know . . . quite what . . . to do,” she replied, looking at Crystal, whilst a hundred confusing thoughts jumbled together in her brain.

Crystal, slightly flushed, looked unwontedly serious, as she moved forward.

“No, Kits,” she said, speaking quickly, yet with a note of hesitation, “don’t say anything. Girls, don’t *any* of you say anything for a week. Just a week. It’s quite likely Gwenda won’t sleep-walk again for ages. Perhaps something had been worrying her in the day. Of course, Miss Carwell will have to know—later, but—it isn’t just a freak request. Honour, I have a real reason for asking. And I don’t want to say more now. It’s . . . it’s quite important, and rather secret. Will you just all come back to bed and not mention anything about Gwenda even if we are called over the coals for rescuing Jumbo?”

Trixie and Pickles exchanged glances—they could see there was some mystery over this but had no key to it. They gave the promise though. Crystal could generally rely on that! Her comrades not only believed in her genius but trusted her completely. As for Kits, you see, she had got part at least of the key to Crystal’s meaning, and her heart beat fast as she thought of what all this meant.

Gwenda walked in her sleep. Did Teresa know that? Would Crystal ask Teresa? How would Joyce stand when all this tale was told? Yes, that was the problem!

How was Teresa connected with Gwenda and Joyce in that old mystery of stolen papers? Kits felt sure there was a link somewhere, but she could not find it, though she had an idea Crystal was beginning to find a clue.

The problem of Jumbo, however, seemed a livelier problem for Kits to solve that night. In spite of all coaxing that puppy *refused* to rest in his mistress’s hat box. He pushed up the lid in two minutes and was bundling

himself out on to the floor. Kits tried taking him on to her bed—and for five minutes this time peace reigned. Then came a suspicious sound of tearing, and Kits was only just in time to save the counterpane from being deprived of a whole length of fringe.

It ended by poor, sleepy Kits having to put on her dressing gown for the second time and trotting off downstairs again along with that wilful pet. There was no pity—no, not one *smallest* spark of it—in her heart as she bundled Jumbo back to his bed amongst bottles and boxes, and she was entirely deaf to the pathetic howl which followed her as she ran lightly upstairs.

“Puppies are darlings—but they are demons, too!” was Kits’ last thought as she snuggled down in bed, and fell sound asleep with Jumbo’s longest drawn howl echoing in her ears.

CHAPTER XVI

“YOU look rather pleased with yourself, Teresa,” remarked Crystal, as she selected a book at random from the library shelf and turned to look at the girl perched on the window seat.

Teresa was not energetic, and whenever she could escape Miss Evelton’s eagle eye she would slip off to the library to read.

She looked up, rather surprised at Crystal’s remark. Teresa knew who her friends were and they were very few and far between! In fact her only confidant in the school was Olna Raykes, the girl who Kits called “the ferret.”

“Yes,” said Teresa, “I’m awfully pleased with life. Mr. Roberts is going to ask Miss Carwell to let me sing at his own concert given at Sunboro Town Hall. He says my voice has improved a great deal of late.”

“Very nice too,” agreed Crystal urbanely, “Something to soothe you whilst Olna is away. You must have missed her tremendously. Let me see, it is three weeks ago that she had to go home, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Teresa indifferently, “her mother died. Mr. Roberts is going to write to Dad about my going to London to a big singing master there. I shall love it.”

“Joyce Wayde had a jolly good voice, too,” said Crystal cheerfully, “I liked Joyce.”

Teresa’s bright face clouded.

“Did you,” she replied, picking up her book again. “I can’t say I agree. She was a poor sort. I think Miss Carwell was very wise to send her away.”

“Do you, now,” purred Crystal, assuming rather a confidential manner. “Now I’m not so sure. I never did think Joyce took my papers. By the way, Teresa, do you know whether Gwenda ever walks in her sleep?”

She asked the last question very suddenly, and the effect it had was electrical.

Teresa went white as a ghost and the book fell from her hand. She stared at Crystal, seeing the keen expression, half enquiry . . . half accusation, in those magnetic green eyes. Then, with a supreme effort, she made answer.

“No,” she replied, “I didn’t know.”

“Oh,” said Crystal, twirling on her heel, “just so. I’m going to ask Joyce Wayde if she happened to be aware of the fact. I shall be awfully interested

to hear her answer.”

Teresa, if possible, went whiter and there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes now.

“You aren’t allowed to speak to Joyce,” she retorted, “Miss Carwell is most keen about that. Joyce was expelled because she confessed she had taken your papers. You would get into a frightful row if you tried to have anything to do with her.”

“I wonder if I should?” mused Crystal.

“Of course, you would. And serve you right! How Joyce had the cheek to own up I don’t know. I suppose because Kits saw her come back from the schoolroom.”

Crystal was sucking her thumb but she removed it to reply.

“If Joyce went down that evening, and *if* Gwenda happened to have been walking in her sleep——” she hinted, but Teresa interrupted.

“Why *should* Joyce have gone? She must have had some reason.”

Crystal chuckled.

“Ex-actly,” she said, “it is that reason which I am going to try and find out.”

She did not wait for Teresa’s further argument, but went dancing off, more than satisfied with what she had learned.

And the next thing would be of course to interview Joyce.

But—there is many a hitch to best laid plans, and Crystal, to her disappointment, learned that Joyce was away from home for a day or so. Should she tell Kits her suspicions, and ask her help?

Crystal was perfectly well aware that Joyce loved Kits and that she loved Joyce. The very fact of their friendship, cemented afresh after a period of doubt and suspicion, might lead to Kits blundering. No, on the whole, Crystal decided it would be better to wait till *she* saw Joyce and asked the all-important question.

In the meantime, each busy day made fresh claims on the time of every member in that world of girls. Crystal’s interest and zeal in her work for the Parraton Scholarship were undiminished, and the exam. itself took place next week. After all, the affair of the stolen papers *could* wait till that was over.

And then, too, Kits was so extremely busy with the pastoral play in which she was one of the chief actors.

Mr. Plethwaite’s beautiful grounds made ideal setting for the dainty pastoral, and Lady Marigold—whose small children were to take part in the

play—was more than generous in the giving of dresses and material for the young actresses.

“It will be the best entertainment Clynton Court has ever given,” was Pearl Willock’s declaration, and Kits was immensely tickled to find the Prims were actually smiling upon her.

For Kits was a born actress, and in her “Squire’s” suit made the ideal of a youthful hero. And she couldn’t “make love” to Pearl without the latter unbending, when off the stage, into something akin to friendliness.

The Crew thoroughly enjoyed the rehearsals.

To see Kits of grocer’s cart fame, swaggering in satin tunic and long parti-coloured stockings, whilst she embraced her “Nicolette” appealed to the Crew’s own sense of humour.

But there it was, and Kits was actress enough to believe for the time she really was a disconsolate young Prince filling the world with his sighs for his missing shepherdess.

It was after one of the last of those rehearsals that Kits, returning alone from the Manor, found Pickles awaiting her at the gates. Pickles’ pert features were wrinkled with a puzzled frown, but her eyes were a-twinkle with merriment—and some indignation.

“News! What news!” she chanted from afar, as Kits came up panting.

“News?” the latter echoed, “What do you mean? Joyce is home again if you want the latest. I——” She checked herself as she spoke. It was Crystal, not Pickles, who had been asking so tenderly as to where Joyce was and what doing in these days.

But Pickles was wholly interested in dealing out information!

“There’s a thrill and a squeal at the Court,” she said, “in other words the band is playing. Crystal has lost her temper for one thing. You will certainly lose yours for another! Miss Carwell is stiff as a poker, and the Pasfold is seriously asking Mademoiselle whether you are not imposter, burglar, or German spy in disguise.”

“What bosh you do talk, Pickles,” replied Kits, half irritably. “Are you just humbugging, or has anything happened?”

“Happened?” retorted Pamela Irene, rolling her eyes heavenwards, “I should just think something *has* happened! I can tell you the records of Clynton Court are smashed out of existence, and the chief actors would seem to be yourself with our only Crystal as aider and abettor. That’s to say if the Hermit of the Hermitage is to be believed.”

“Double Dutch,” scoffed Kits, becoming sceptical. “You are merely drawing on your fertile imagination, my child. But it is not the first of April.”

“Honest Injun,” quoth Pickles, dropping her bantering manner, “there is a row. Quite an out-of-the-ordinary-row, in which Miss Carwell takes sides entirely with the accused, and Mademoiselle wobbles in the hope of being able to say ‘*Enfin!* nevaire did I believe in the so wholesome influence of the Kits.’”

“I give up,” said Kits, in despair. “*Are* you going to talk plain English, you aggravating Kid?”

Pickles spluttered—but she “climbed down” in pity for her chum’s impatience.

“It’s plain English fact,” she replied, “that the gentleman commonly known as Old John called about half-an-hour—or may be an hour—ago at the Court and insisted on an immediate interview with Miss Carwell.”

“His cat—the cat—the beautiful and bountiful Nicholas has been stolen. Imagine what an awful shock for the Hermit. I think it has sent him clean off his rocker. Anyway he began to storm and rage as soon as he set eyes on Miss C. declaring two of her girls, if not half a dozen of us, had stolen his cat. Miss Carwell was fairly bowled over by all accounts. Crystal was the first to hear of it, and away she bounced as fast as her rather crocky foot would let her to defend her reputation. The Hermit denounced her, and began describing you. Naturally Crystal told Miss Carwell the whole story from beginning to end. She then proceeded to tell Old John that she should summons him for defamation of character. He couldn’t do anything but splutter, and between you and me and the doorpost it was all as good as a play.

“Really, Kits, don’t get apoplectic. Of course, hermits are *not* like other people and if Old John hasn’t any sense or manners left he can’t quite help himself. He’s mildly mad like the March Hare. But come along. You are going to be the crowning touch to the drama. Pastoral plays are not in it!”

Kits *was* apoplectic.

“I never, never heard of such a thing,” she declared, “the impudent old rascal! To say . . . to dream we should want to steal his old cat. But he was getting the wind up about it before. He’d heard footsteps round the house. Perhaps the gipsies have taken a fancy to cats instead of the hen roost. I shall tell him so.”

And Kits marched along, head erect and a very fighting light in those grey eyes of hers.

Old John was certainly getting the worst of it, and must have been already regretting having left the seclusion of his hermitage to face a world of women.

Kits, white with indignation, was the last straw.

Crystal, fast recovering her temper as she saw the humiliation of the enemy, grinned at the newcomer.

“What I maintain,” Old John was saying hoarsely when Kits entered, “is that there is no one else, *can* be no one else to have stolen my cat. I have had no visitors. I have seen no one. There has been no one near the place.”

“Pooh!” scorned Kits, plunging into the fray, and quite regardless of Miss Carwell’s presence, “is it likely you would ever *see* thieves? Have you told the police? and have you been to the gipsy camp? If not, you’d better go. You *must* know we couldn’t break into your house. You *must* know you are talking nonsense! You must *see* you are just wasting time. You can easily have it proved that we never touched your cat. It’s too ridic’ for words.”

“My dear Kits!” gasped Miss Carwell, whilst the last of Crystal’s anger vanished in a suppressed giggle. But Old John was standing to face this very plain-spoken lassie, his own eyes kindling.

“I believe,” he muttered, “I *have* made a mistake. I suppose . . . I’ve made a fool of myself.”

He turned to Miss Carwell with a very pathetic mixture of dignity and grief.

“I apologize, Madam,” he said, “to you and these young ladies. I can only plead my unhappiness at loss of a favourite. I love my cat Nicholas as if he were my child. At first I could only think it possible he had been stolen by the girls who had so admired him and who had been the only strangers to enter my house for years.”

Poor old Hermit! Out went Kits’ hand. She could be generous as well as indignant.

“Crystal and I are just as sorry as you that Nicholas is lost,” she said frankly. “And if we can help in any way to find him we will, and we’ll bring him back. I think I know how you were feeling when you came.”

This was heaping coals of fire and the Hermit was completely won over. He shook hands not only with Kits but with Crystal and Miss Carwell too, muttering more apologies in broken tones.

Miss Carwell was smiling in pitying amusement when she returned to the girls after seeing her visitor out.

“He is a strange old man,” she said, “poor fellow! I believe at one time he kept open house at his splendid home at Buckleigh. Then he lost home, sweetheart, and mother within a week, and he has been a crank ever since. Now run away, girls, and think kindly of poor Old John instead of making fun at his expense. I am sure he loves his cats and birds very truly.”

Kits nodded.

“I’m awfully sorry for him,” she agreed, “though I was furious at first.”

Miss Carwell smiled again. She did not agree at all with Mademoiselle in thinking it a pity Kits had ever come to the Court, and she admired the girl’s generosity of spirit.

“Let’s hold a council,” said Crystal, as she tucked her arm through Kits’ and went off in search of the Crew—who were not very far off—and all agog to hear how the accusation of cat-stealing had ended.

“You should have seen the Prims’ faces when they heard the story,” laughed Trixie, “they were the very essence of outraged respectability. Pearl icily remarked that, of course, if there was any truth in the story we should *all* have to be expelled. Poor Prims! They’ll be nerve-wrecks before they leave school finally.”

“But I’m thinking of Nicholas,” said Kits. “What are we going to do to help find him?”

“Nothing!” chorused the Twins, “What *can* we do?”

“He may have been caught in a trap,” added Pickles. “And if so he would be dead before now.”

“Or he might really have been stolen by gipsies,” said Crystal. “And if so that will be a job for the police.”

So Kits was “argued down,” and, having no counter suggestion to make, yielded to the force of argument.

There was plenty of teasing in store for the Crew concerning Nicholas the cat, but the matter was soon forgotten with so many other “really important” affairs, and even Kits might not have thought more about it had she not met Joyce Wayde the very next day.

Joyce was climbing a heathery hill with a book tucked under her arm and Kits spied her as she returned alone from a visit to the Manor where she had been to take a message to Lady Marigold concerning the play. Impulsive Kits instantly forgot that stern veto placed on any intercourse with a culprit who had been expelled, and scrambled in pursuit of the friend she now so firmly believed in.

“Crystal *will* be glad to hear you are home again, Joy,” she laughed, seeing Joyce’s flush of pleasure. “She wants to ask you some questions. No, don’t ask me what they are. But one is a thrill! Tell me where you can meet her and I’ll arrange. She’s awfully busy, with that old scholarship on her mind, but she won’t be too busy for that.”

Joyce sighed.

“Crystal is splendid,” she said, “but she shouldn’t bother about me. Nothing can alter things. I . . . I don’t want her to try to.”

“What!” asked the amazed Kits, “don’t you *want* to have your name cleared, Joy?”

“No,” she whispered. “It cannot be cleared.”

Kits said nothing, nor did she get up and walk away. She was remembering how Gwenda had once saved Joyce’s life. If Joyce had any reason to think Gwenda had taken the papers it was just like her to sacrifice herself.

But—Kits had left the questioning to Crystal and was not going to break her promise!

To avoid doing so she changed the conversation.

“We had such a flare in the pan yesterday,” she laughed—and plunged into the story of Old John and his cat.

To her surprise Joyce became quite excited.

“I wonder,” she said, “if it was Nicholas the cat I saw being taken in a sack across the moors by one of those horrid gipsies? It was when I came home early yesterday morning. I saw a man—he wasn’t more than a boy—with that sack, and he hid behind some stones when he saw our cart. He was quite near the Gravlock Mine entrance. Do you know, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised. The gipsies are awful thieves, and that cat must be worth a lot of money. We might tell the police.”

Kits’ eyes sparkled.

“If we wait to do that,” she said impulsively, “it might be too late. The gipsies will take poor Nicholas off as soon as they can if they have him. *Joyce!* what an adventure it would be to go and try and find him.”

Joyce hesitated.

“We have no lamp,” she replied, “I don’t see how we can. It would really be dangerous in the dark.”

Kits laughed, and dived her hand into her pocket, producing a flashlight.

“We wanted it for the pastoral,” she explained. “To make a ‘shaft of light’ in a dark dungeon. It will be the very thing. Come on, Joyce. I promised Old John we would find his cat if we could. And I really believe we are going to do it!”

CHAPTER XVII

“**I** REALLY DON’T think we ought,” began poor Joyce distressfully. But—Kits gave neither herself nor her companion time to think. She caught her hand and raced her down the hill.

“If *only* you’d seen the Hermit,” she cried, “he was too pathetic for words. At first I raged—I should have liked to call him all the bad names under the sun. But when he got to the repentant stage I couldn’t help pitying him. He’s a little queer in his head and that’s why he’s a hermit. His cats and birds are his family and he’s devoted to them. Come along.”

And Joyce came. She didn’t like coming. She would have liked to run off in another direction, but she knew Kits would still go on alone.

So like obstinate, impulsive Kits, who had already reached the entrance to the old galleries.

“There’s luck in threes,” laughed Kits under her breath, “and this is my third visit. The last one was mixed. We found Crystal’s brooch, but she hurt her ankle and we had a hectic time. This electric torch is much better than any Davy lamp. Lady Marigold lent it me. It’s a beauty.”

It certainly *was* easier for the girls to find their way along between the rusty rails with that steady shaft of light lying before them.

“This is a real dungeon,” said Kits, “but I’m not going to think of ghosts. I want to reach those cross roads. I think the gipsies have a hiding place close by it.”

Joyce did not reply, but she was heartily hoping no gipsies were in hiding!

The girl explorers had never gone so far into that dim place of mystery before, and if they had confessed the truth, every step forward brought its thrill of fear. To Kits especially the memory of those gipsy faces seen by the light of flaring lanterns was very vivid. Yet, a desperate resolve not to play coward drove her forward. Of course, she *could* have argued herself out of the conviction that Nicholas was here quite well, but she did not attempt to do so. Her line of argument was simple.

Gipsies were thieves. Did she not remember the lost toffee? Nicholas was valuable. And Old John *had* heard footsteps round his house. She herself knew the mine was a gipsy hiding place. And, if so, was it not likely

stolen goods would be brought here instead of being taken to the camp in the Hollow?

“Here is where the galleries branch,” said Joyce, “did you think this was where——” She broke off, answering her own question.

“Look!” she exclaimed. Kits was already looking. To the right some sort of explosion had partly wrecked the passage and a narrow cave-like opening yawned in the wall.

Joyce drew back, but Kits, raising the light, advanced.

“I believe this is the very place,” she whispered. “See, Joyce, here’s some paper—and hay. There’s a regular cave inside over that coal block. I’ll go first, but keep close behind.”

Joyce obeyed. The coal block was only about three feet high and Kits, scrambling over, jumped within. As she did so she gave a cry of excitement. There, wired in by fine wire netting, was Nicholas the cat. Nicholas, big, sleek, mysterious in that weird way in which all cats especially big ones *are* mysterious.

He had been curled round on some hay when Kits first flashed her light on him, but now he rose, thrusting against the wire and mewing piteously. Evidently Nicholas, the darling and pet of the Hermit, did *not* enjoy his present quarters, even though he had been behaving like a philosopher.

Kits had no fear of animals. Indeed, she loved them so passionately that she took their appreciation as granted. Handing Joyce her torch, she dropped on her knees before the prison, hastily unfastening the wire which had been securely fastened so that the prisoner could not escape.

“Poor old pet,” crooned Kits, “you poor Nicholas! What would your master say if he saw you now. Never mind! You’ll soon be home again.”

And Nicholas, shivering, purring, still restless and uneasy, snuggled in his liberator’s arms in the most amazing fashion.

“We’d better make haste,” faltered Joyce, “I’m not *sure* but I rather thought I heard footsteps. It would be dreadful if we were caught by the gipsies here.”

Kits hugged Nicholas closely. She felt that come what might come, she would not part with Old John’s pet.

And Nicholas understood. Of course he did, and being wise as all pure-bred cats are, he gave his whole trust to the rescuer from durance vile.

But Joyce, who had clambered back into the passage first, gave a gasp of dismay as she returned to her companion’s side.

“Some one *is* coming down the gallery,” said she, “it must be gipsies.”

Kits felt rather as if some one had emptied a bucket of cold water over her. She had really been feeling the end of the adventure must have been reached.

Not a bit of it! Indeed the real adventure was only just beginning.

It was lantern light which shewed its dull glimmer far down the gallery. From the way it wobbled you could guess that whoever was carrying it was swinging it to and fro.

Nearer, nearer. It was time to be planning how to meet the enemy.

“Up the passage,” quoth Kits, “we . . . we don’t know how many men are coming. We daren’t risk creeping along by the wall. Quick!”

“I don’t think——” began Joyce, but she was not allowed to argue, for Kits had already slipped her tell-tale torch into her pocket and was groping forward along the second gallery which ran across the first.

For some way they moved on at snail pace. Joyce had insisted on leading because both her hands were free. They could no longer see the lantern light and they themselves were in complete darkness.

“Isn’t it perfectly *horrid*,” whispered Kits, “I don’t believe I *should* have come if I’d known what was g-going to happen. I’m ever so sorry, Joyce.”

She half feared Joyce might reply that she always had thought it a wild goose chase, but Joyce was too generous to breathe anything like those hateful four words “I told you so,” which seemed to her—as they seem to me—hatefully mean and petty.

“We’ve got Nicholas,” whispered Joyce, “and the gipsies have *not* got us—yet! Wait a moment, Kits. I . . . I . . . don’t quite like going on. There’s something creepy . . . in my bones which tells me . . . there’s danger. I’m going to throw a piece of coal forward. Listen.”

Kits listened . . . and swiftly that same current of fear ran through her veins, for the piece of coal instead of skating quietly along the passage must have dropped into some unseen hole close to them. A hole—or an abyss. Bump; thud . . . bump! That lump of coal was a long time reaching the bottom of that pit. A faint splash came with its final echo—then silence.

Joyce was the first to speak.

“Give me your torch, Kits,” she said, “or I will take it if you will tell me which of your pockets it is in. It is Providence which warned us. I *knew* there was danger.”

Kits did not reply. This was the worst moment of all.

A few seconds later the light of the electric torch travelled along the gallery floor showing them the deep gap right across the path, where that

terrible explosion had torn the rocky coal apart as one might tear the closed jaws of a dog, leaving the terrible gap between.

It was death these adventurous lassies had been saved from, and even as they whispered their prayers of thankfulness, they heard a loud shout behind them.

Joyce thrust away the torch and she and Kits drew back behind a mighty spur of rock and coal. Anyone standing at the juncture of the galleries would see this one they had been traversing seemingly empty.

They dared not peep out and see what was happening, though they guessed some one was searching the cat's prison.

From the gabble of talk it seemed as if no more than two of the gipsies had come to their hiding place, but even two would be enough to capture two girls—and a cat!

A long gleam of light fell along the black floor in front of their niche. Again a man's voice began snarling and jabbering in the gipsy tongue. If the searcher, or searchers, came forward three yards nearer the pit they must see the crouching girls.

But they did not come. The lantern beams had shown them the gap, though they possibly knew of it before, and, satisfied that neither cat nor rescuer had come this way, they turned to retreat.

Kits peered *very* cautiously round the spur of rock. Even if the men had turned they could not see her now, but she could see them—and was able to satisfy herself that they were only a couple of gipsy lads, barely grown to man's estate. They were talking excitedly—and hurrying, too. Kits bent and began whispering the tidings to Joyce.

"They are only lads who have been sent to fetch the cat or else just to feed it," she said "they will most likely go straight back to the Hollow. Then men will come. Those horrid men who might half murder us. We must get away first. Don't you agree? We must do just what we did before—follow that lantern glimmer. We know there is no hidden danger back along the gallery. When the gipsies have struck out across the moors we will take the upper road to the Hermitage and tell Old John. He can do what he likes about telling the police. I'd much rather we didn't have to have anything to do with that part."

Joyce nodded.

"You've got Nicholas?" she asked. "Then come along."

There were no Twins to be panic-stricken, and no Pickles to tease this time, but I am sure Kits for one was far more frightened than when she and

her chums had crouched back along the ledge hiding from those other gypsies. She knew better now the sort of foe threatening them.

The gipsy lads were in a great hurry and the girls had to run now and again to keep the light in view. Once they had a scare when the elder youth, fancying he heard footsteps behind them swung round, holding up his lantern. But thanks to Joyce's caution the girls were keeping close to the wall and the light did not reach them.

It was certainly past six o'clock when Kits and Joyce emerged from the mine, their faces, hands and clothes were grimed, but their hearts were singing.

Joyce beamed at Kits and Kits beamed at Joyce, whilst Nicholas became restless again, trying by piteous mewes to tell a tale of hunger and homesickness. The gypsies were out of sight, and there was no longer any need for creeping or stooping. Joyce offered to carry Nicholas, but the latter would not leave his first friend. Captivity had made him distrustful.

Two very foot-sore, breathless but eager girls reached those padlocked gates at the Hermitage.

"No standing on ceremony," laughed Kits, as she dived through the hole in the hedge. Joyce came more carefully—with respect for her clothes. She was still disentangling her hair from a thorn twig when steps approached down the shrubbery, and a weird figure came into sight. It was Long Dick hugging the most antediluvian fowling piece. Old John was keeping armed guard now over his pets! But Kits had no fear of the silent servant. Holding up Nicholas she gave a joyful shout.

"Nicholas! A rescue!" she sang, "is—er—the . . . I mean Old John . . . at home? We *must* bring him his cat and tell him all about it."

Long Dick fairly gaped in wonder and perplexity. Very gingerly he placed his gun against a side of a tree, before he came forward.

"Wal!" he exclaimed. "Wal! I never!"

"Miaow!" mewed Nicholas.

"The master——" began Long Dick, limply flapping his arms.

But Kits was not going to be deprived of her bit of drama. Still holding Nicholas, she marched past the "sentry," with chin up and eyes simply dancing with fun. Joyce followed. She didn't like the look of the *gun* at all, but fortunately Long Dick himself appeared very harmless. The poor fellow followed them, minus his weapon, trying to find words to explain that they could not be allowed to invade his master's privacy. But Kits and Joyce took no heed, and as the front door was locked marched right round on to the terrace.

Old John was standing by an open French casement, reading a telegram he had just had from the police, saying they hoped to have found a clue which might lead to the rescue of his cat from the hands of thieves. Old John was not showing any gratitude for this faint hope . . . instead, I am afraid he was using very bad language and calling the police. . . . But never mind what he called the police, since at that moment a tall girl with brown curls uncovered, blue eyes alight with laughter, and chin erect came swinging round the corner of the house with Nicholas in her arms.

I think the word Nicholas ought to be written in very large characters to give Old John's feelings a better description.

He didn't think twice of Kits or Joyce or Long Dick, he just rushed forward, whilst Nicholas, being freed from one friend's embrace, darted over the gravel and in a flash was up on his master's shoulder, purring like half-a-dozen tea kettles on the boil.

"I am sure," said Kits, with conviction, after Old John had got over his first excitement, "that Nicholas is terribly hungry. And . . . before we go we must tell you about finding him. The thieves are looking for him still, and they might catch him if you don't catch *them!*"

Old John stared at the speaker from under bushy brows, then he stared at Joyce.

"I don't understand anything but that you've brought Nicholas back," he said, almost as though he still believed they had taken him away!

But I am glad to say even Old John was not quite so foolish and obstinate as to hold to his mistaken theory. Kits—with Joyce's help—told a most straight-forward and convincing story, so that their listener's suspicions—thrown to the winds—became the most heartfelt gratitude. The girls ought to have become quite conceited over their victory, but they didn't. They would have found it easier to cry, for Old John was so pathetic. He wrung the hands of Nicholas's rescuers at parting, for Kits explained that they must go at once. Long Dick was ordered to accompany them across the moors in case they met gipsies, whilst his master hurried indoors to 'phone to the police and give his darling cat a really good meal.

"To-morrow," was Old John's parting word, "I shall come to your school, my dears, and tell your mistress how splendidly you have behaved. You are heroines . . . heroines. Your parents ought to be proud of you. I would never have believed two girls would have acted as you have done, pouring coals of fire on my head."

It would have been too long a story to explain that Joyce was no longer at Clynton Court, so the girls said good-bye, adding that they were sure they

had *almost* been as pleased as the Hermit himself that Nicholas was safe.

It was very kind of them, of course, but—I am afraid when Old John was left alone with his favourite he smiled ironically. Just as if . . . those bits of girls could understand what a friend a wise, silent cat can be to a lonely man!

CHAPTER XVIII

“FOR sheer sauciness and impudence, my good Kits,” quoth Crystal, solemnly, “you are unequalled. As our friend Trixie here would put it you take—the currant bun! If any one else had gone cat-snatching into deserted mines and bearded gloomy gipsies in their dismal dens they would either have been murdered in the attempt or expelled on their return. How do you do it?”

“Don’t know,” grinned Kits, “but it’s ripping that poor Old John has his Nicholas back again.”

“It was all the more ripping of you to want to get the cat back after the way our friend the Hermit roared,” retorted Crystal, warmly, “I’d like to pat you on the back only you might say it was patronizing. Also, I want to wend my solitary way in search of Teresa. She will be awfully interested to hear that Joyce is appearing as a heroine and that I am getting special permission to interview her to-morrow afternoon. I *hope* I shall wangle it before Old John’s coming. I have it in my bones that our only Joyce will come out top dog after all. I’d eat my own cookery book if she were proved guilty of feloniously stealing my papers because she wanted Gwenda to win the Parraton. Well, au revoir, heroines all, I’m going to enjoy myself somehow. It’s what I’m out for.”

Kits looked thoughtfully after that small, elf-like figure.

“I believe,” she remarked, “any one might guess Crystal was a genius—she’s so awfully unlike an ordinary clever person who thinks herself clever.”

Crystal did not find Teresa an easy discovery, but with the persistence peculiar to her she tracked her down to where Teresa was practising her beloved singing in the “top-garret” music-room where the girls went most rebelliously to music practise when no other piano was available.

“Did you know Kits has been discovered?” asked Crystal gaily. “She turned up in the best of spirits, and the halo of heroism round her sweet young brow. Don’t you want to hear the thrill, Teresa? It concerns a cat, a hermit, Kits—and Joyce, who, by the way, comes out in rosy colours.”

And Crystal smiled, her green eyes looking positively sea-green in her enjoyment of a small drama of her own.

Teresa flushed up to the eyes, and looked both shocked and reproachful.

“I know Kits is your friend, Crystal,” she retorted, with seeming frankness, “but she has no right to talk or go about with Joyce. Miss Carwell would be furious if she knew. I can’t think how Kits can do it when she makes such a parade about being straight.”

The green eyes twinkled furiously.

“I never knew Kits paraded anything,” said Crystal sweetly. “And up to the moment of speaking Miss C. has not poured any vials of wrath on her head, though she has heard the story of my two plucky chums going down into the workings of an old mine in search of an enemy’s cat. It’s—er—quite an epic and—mark my words, Teresa! take heed to my prophecy! I believe Joyce Wayde is going to be proved innocent after all.”

Teresa’s dark face looked quite pinched, and her tones were remarkably sour as she made retort.

“That seems fairly ridiculous, doesn’t it?” she asked. “No one actually accused Joyce of stealing your papers . . she confessed quite voluntarily.”

“Exactly,” agreed Crystal sweetly, “but you must have read in your time about saints and martyrs, Teresa? Well, I think Joyce is worthy to rank with them. I am not able to give you the whole story to-night, but I’m on the trail. To-morrow, I shall be blowing the trumpet for our Joyce . . . and all will be merry as a marriage bell.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” whispered Teresa, “but if you’re so awfully keen on winning the Parraton wouldn’t it—er—be better to mind your own business? Joyce is just one of those girls to tell you she never wanted your help.”

“*That’s* the milk in the cocoanut,” said Crystal. “And that is why I have Miss Carwell’s leave to go and see Joyce to-morrow. I’ve not told any of the govs. *yet* that I am clearing up the mystery. I prefer to give them the finished article. *Proof* of innocence.”

“You can’t,” burst out Teresa, “Joyce is guilty.”

“And when I see Joyce,” continued Crystal, taking no heed of the interruption, “I am going to ask her if she knew, guessed, or had heard it hinted, that her ideal heroine—Gwenda Handow—is a sleep-walker!”

Every vestige of colour drained from Teresa’s cheeks. She looked at Crystal as though she saw a ghost. Crystal’s bantering tones had vanished. She spoke those last words very gravely and deliberately, nor did she add one syllable to them. Teresa had told her all she wanted to know—but she did not thank her! She simply walked away, because she dared not trust herself to remain in the same room with a girl who she was now convinced had deliberately plotted an innocent and unsuspecting rival’s ruin.

Teresa had wanted Joyce to leave Clynton Court in disgrace—and succeeded.

In tracing the secret to its source, Crystal had grown disgusted with her task. She was ashamed to think Teresa belonged to her own well-loved school.

Teresa had left the music-room in disorder. The rout was complete. But Crystal had no time or wish to glory.

It may sound priggish or unnatural, but the fact remains that Crystal was far sorer for Teresa than for herself or her chums. Teresa must have felt rotten before she began her tricks! And the secret riddle which linked in all this mystery and explained what *part* Teresa had played, and why Joyce had taken another's guilt on her shoulders was yet to be solved.

Had Gwenda destroyed those papers in her sleep?

It was wildly improbable!

At any rate Teresa would have had a very bad night. And Crystal could pity her as well as condemn.

Meantime, Miss Carwell had had a short talk with Kits about *her* adventure.

For once, the head-mistress had been at a loss what to say. Kits had made such frank confession.

"I broke my word when I went into the mine," she said, looking her governess straight in the face, "but I didn't think you would blame me if you knew exactly how it was. Aren't you glad I went?"

"I am glad the cat has been recovered," replied poor Miss Carwell, sighing, "but I should not under any circumstances have allowed you to do what you did if I had known. It was brave and generous, Kits, but it was disobedient and foolhardy too. Now, you are very tired, and I am not going to lecture you further, only—you must see for yourself what a risk you ran and how unfair it was to me. I am not going to bind you to promises again, Kits, but I *am* going to trust you to try and *think* longer and more fairly before you break a rule."

Kits took Miss Carwell's hand and kissed it.

"You're a dear," she said, impulsively. "And that trust will make me think harder than any punishment. If you'd rather stop me playing in the pastoral though for . . . for an example, I shall quite understand."

Miss Carwell smiled. But she was glad to see Kits' honest spirit in this suggestion.

“I want you to play in the pastoral, Kits,” she said. “And I want you to learn obedience, too. You know, I had told you how very vexed I should be if you spoke to Joyce Wayde.”

Kits flushed.

“Yes,” she admitted, “you did say so. I . . . I remember. Only . . . oh, Miss Carwell, don’t talk about Joyce till after to-morrow, because I think you are going to have a surprise about her.”

Miss Carwell had already experienced several surprises—and shocks—that evening, but being a very wise woman in the study of girls and their ways, she said no more and dismissed Kits to her room.

Teresa—to Kits’ amaze—was *already* in bed—and asleep.

“And the prayer bell won’t be going for half-an-hour,” thought Kits. “Now I wonder what that means? I suppose Crystal has been walking into her affections. Little cat!”

I am afraid Kits was *not* prepared to think very generously where Teresa was concerned. She was also longing to find out what Teresa had said to Crystal. It was aggravating of Teresa to go to sleep on the single occasion when Kits wished her to be awake. But Teresa was a contrary person!

And next day . . . Crystal went to find Joyce.

Miss Carwell had a great, if secret, respect for her clever though mischievous pupil. She knew Crystal could be trusted absolutely in anything really serious. And the head-mistress was broad minded enough to love a pickle—and doubt a prig!

Joyce was gardening in the Grange vegetable garden, when, to her surprise, Crystal walked down the path and stood regarding her quizzically.

“You came out to plant cabbages and kales, my dear,” said Crystal, pensively, “but you are going to talk to me instead. You needn’t look aghast, *mon enfant*. It’s not the riddle of the Sphinx I am here to propound. Also, I have Miss Carwell’s leave to come and addle your brain. Whew! isn’t it hot? Is that a summer house I see near at hand?”

Joyce left her fork deep in soft brown earth, and came across to her school-fellow.

“How’s Kits?” she asked.

Crystal chuckled.

“Blooming,” she replied, “as a green bay tree. She is quite a girl of parts and seems able to do anything from cat-snatching to shepherding. You’ll have to be back in time for the pastoral, Joyce. Kits as Aucassin is a dream.”

The colour rose in Joyce’s pale cheeks.

“Be *back*?” she echoed, as she led her companion towards the summer house.

The other nodded.

“I always knew you never walked off with those wretched notes of mine,” she said, cheerily, “even though you tried to bowl your friends over by saying you had done so. Now, Joyce, look me in the face and tell me this—did you know that Gwenda walked in her sleep?”

Joyce went suddenly white.

“Gwenda . . . walked in her sleep?” she echoed—and then back came the truant colour to her face. “Gwenda . . . walked in her sleep,” she repeated.

Crystal’s green eyes twinkled.

“Oh, aye,” she replied, “here you are. The story in a nutshell.” And she gave a vivid account of the puppy and its pranks bringing the tale to a dramatic conclusion. She gave Joyce time to recover herself—and no more. Then she put another question—or rather stated a fact.

“You thought Gwenda took my notes,” she said quietly. “And because you are her friend you took the blame. Out with it, Joyce?”

But Joyce was not so impulsive as Kits.

“I want to think,” she whispered, “I want to think.”

Then she flung her arms round Crystal.

“And you’ve been taking all this trouble for a girl who you ought to have hated,” she cried.

Crystal chuckled, refusing to become sentimental over it all.

“I knew you didn’t do it, so where should the hatred come in?” she asked. “And I wanted to prove my theories. Now, I’m longing to map out the whole show. Tell me, Joy, what had Teresa to do with it all? It is not one bit of use for you to say ‘nothing at all.’ Teresa is somehow at the bottom of it. She suggested you had taken the notes from the very first. She did everything to prove it. She never lost a chance of rubbing it in that you were an undesirable. Of course, we all knew she was jealous of you. She was always hopelessly Teresa-ish about your singing. But it’s a vague sort of tangle which you are going to smoothe out before you come to your own again!”

Joyce was not looking into those magnetic green eyes now, but out of the window to where roses barely hid a view of sunny gardens and pleasant woods.

“*Please*, Crystal,” she said, in an undertone, “will you let me think first? There . . . there’s such a lot to be thought of. It’s true about Gwenda and the

sleep-walking. Wouldn't that be enough to say? I did see Gwenda in the schoolroom on the night the last lot of papers were taken, but . . . I can understand now why she looked so strange—and unseeing. She *was* walking in her sleep. Won't that be enough?"

"No," said Crystal, positively, "it won't. You've got to explain why you yourself went down to the schoolroom that night. Don't you see? Now, Joyce, you're not going to carry the martyr stunt too far. You owe it to all of us to tell the whole story."

Joyce smiled . . . a shaky little smile.

"I'm *not* a martyr," she replied, "I'm only a snail. I think so slowly. I want to see just exactly what to do . . . what I ought to do. I want to ask mother to help me, too. It's all so—surprising. To-morrow, Crystal, I . . . I'll either come up to the school . . . or write, and . . . anyhow I can never tell you how grateful I am for *your* goodness in believing in me."

Crystal's frown faded.

"You're a goose, and a saint and a first class duffer, Joyce," she retorted, "but—you're a ripper, too. Kits and the Crew will agree with me when they hear. And if you don't come up to-morrow and tell the tale, I'm not sure that I shan't appeal to Miss Carwell."

And off ran Crystal, singing and laughing, though disappointment strove with admiration in her heart.

For somehow she was convinced that Joyce would stand aside, silent and uncleared, simply because she thought it right to return good for evil to a girl who had wronged her.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HERMIT had arrived. Trixie had seen him coming up the drive and had flown off to the schoolroom to tell the tale.

How interested all those girls were. The tale of Nicholas, the gipsies, and a great rescue had been dragged from Kits first by the Crew and then related by the latter to the rest.

“*I consider,*” said Pickles, heedless of the gloomy eye of Mademoiselle, “that Old John ought to ask for a whole holiday for the school and entertain us royally at the Hermitage. Then, whenever one of his cats, or parrots, or pets got lost again, he could depend on Clynton Court to retrieve them.”

Mademoiselle’s bell rang sharply.

“*Taisez-vous,* Pamela,” she commanded. “Always you talk. Alwa-ays! But nevaire do you speak of ze sense.”

Pickles subsided, though she raised her bobbed head a second later.

“Anyhow, I prophesied Kits would be a winner,” she murmured, “even though she arrived in ze cart of ze grocaire.”

And it fell to the fate of the giggling Twins to lose a mark apiece!

It was distinctly a frost when Kits alone was sent for to the drawing-room.

The Crew bemoaned so feeble a fizzle-out of the drama in loud whispers.

“Never mind,” said Crystal, raising her voice so that the girls around could hear. “Wait for to-morrow and then you shall *all* have a hand in the game—when Joyce Wayde comes back to school with a laurel crown.”

“*What’s that,* Crystal?” asked Trixie, but Crystal only chuckled as she watched out of the corner of her eye the effect her words had had on *one* of her listeners.

The return of Kits turned the attention of all towards the door. Even Mademoiselle shewed a slight and dignified interest in the newcomer, whose face was a-beam with smiles and who was so carefully carrying a small velvet case.

Kits knew how to make sure of her audience, and went straight to Mademoiselle’s table.

“Isn’t it lovely, Mademoiselle?” she asked, holding out the open case, “the Hermit has given me one and Joyce one. They belonged to his mother. Aren’t they gorgeous?”

On the faded velvet of the case blazed a round emerald and diamond brooch, evidently at one time an ear-ring.

Loud exclamations of admiration followed as girls and governesses gathered round.

“He *was* such a darling,” went on Kits, “I can’t think how he ever came to be a hermit, for he can be such a dear. He chose emeralds because the cat’s eyes were green. And we are to be allowed to go in batches to tea at the Hermitage. I believe we’ve almost cured him of wanting to be a Hermit any more! And—isn’t it all *ripping*?”

Even Mademoiselle smiled and applauded. Kits was so radiant—and yet so modest about what she had done. It was of the Hermit she talked—not of the compliments he had paid her. And, whilst her special chums crowded round to applaud, no one noticed how quietly Teresa Tenerlee had slipped out of the room.

It was not very late in the afternoon, but one of those white fogs had come creeping over the moors, bringing a very premature darkness—which was not exactly so much darkness as gloom. Even in the height of summer these fogs would gather after rain—and during the night there had been a heavy down-pour.

Teresa stood peering out from the staircase window. Her dark little face looked pinched and drawn. Crystal had looked so hard at her when she spoke of Joyce returning to school to-morrow crowned with laurels.

Teresa felt she knew what that meant. Crystal had been to see Joyce—and Joyce had told her the whole story of the stolen papers—the papers Teresa herself had taken—not so that Crystal might lose the Parraton, but that Joyce might leave Clynton Court in disgrace.

Teresa had gloated over the cleverness of her plot. She had gloried in its success. Now, she was overwhelmed by dismay. She was a girl who hungered for popularity, success, and adulation of all kinds. Her mother had been a famous singer and had gloried in the storm of applause she was always assured of. Her daughter possessed the same hunger for the footlights, the shouts of praise, the admiration. It had been a bitter disappointment, quite out of all proportion, to Teresa that after all she had not sung at York. She had been delighted after Joyce’s going to receive more undivided attention from her master. She had improved rapidly under his praises.

Now—Nemesis was upon her—and Teresa was afraid to face it.

To-morrow, she would be sent away from Clynton Court in disgrace. To-morrow, her father would be sent for and told his daughter was a liar, a thief, a treacherous plotter against her fellows.

“I can’t bear it,” moaned Teresa, “I can’t and I *won’t* bear it! I’ll run away. I’ll . . . I’ll disguise myself . . . and go to London. I’ll get money and go back to Italy. Dad won’t want me for a daughter any more. I’ll go to Italy and find my mother’s people. I’ll be a singer like she was. I . . . I . . .”

She put her hand to her throat in a paroxysm of despair. She could *never* face the reproaches of the father she adored. The father who was so proud of her. She would rather never see him again, or else . . . far off hope . . . not till she had won fame as her mother had done.

Poor, foolish Teresa painted in the picture with quick, extravagant strokes. She knew nothing of the world and the terrible dangers to which she might be exposing herself. She was vain and self-confident enough to believe she held a fortune in her voice, . . . and that money would flow in without any difficulty.

“I’ll go *now*,” she thought, “it’s not a bad fog, but it will help me. I’ll reach the station and go to London. No one will find me there. I’ll never, never wait to see Joyce come back. Oh, I should die of chagrin. I will go. I will go now.”

She slipped away to her room. Kits would be busy telling her tale of fame and reward, she would not be coming to No. 8 till long after her unwelcome room fellow had gone.

Teresa dressed quickly, tumbled a few things into a bag, took her money and slipped it into her pocket, then opened the door. No one was about. She would go . . . without being seen . . . and, once outside, this obliging mist would swallow her up.

Teresa had *almost* persuaded herself she was a heroine by the time she reached the moors. Then a sudden chill began to creep over her. She could not find the path, . . . the road . . . leading to the station. Ah, here it was! She would only have to walk on . . . till she reached the top of the hill leading to the village. The fog did not matter at all!

Yet Teresa shivered. The mist struck chill to her bones and she loved warmth and sunshine. She must run to keep warm. If she were quick she would catch the 4.50 train and be on her way to London before the bell had finished ringing.

Again Teresa thrilled. She, too, loved drama . . . and excitement. She did not love school, especially now that Olna had left. Yes, Olna was not

returning and neither would Teresa. She had done with school and its world of girls, of rules, of dull duties. She would go to Italy where the sun always shone and she would always be able to sing . . . sing . . . sing.

Teresa did not feel very much like singing at present. The mist got down her throat and choked her. She hated the damp and chill. Would she ever be warm again? It was not even any use to run, for she only stumbled! And what a long way it was to the top of the hill. Teresa halted. *Was* this the road to the village? Why, it was not a road at all! It was a track . . . a path over the moors. She had missed her way and must return. How far was the road? The frightened girl began to run hither and thither. The mists drew closer so that she could hardly see her hand before her. Under foot she was trampling the wet roots of heather. The truth came swiftly upon her. She had lost her way.

“I will find it though . . . I must find it,” she whispered to herself, “the road is close. Oh, I do hate the cold mist. I . . . I . . . but, yes, I am glad I came. I *won't* go back to school. I couldn't bear it. Oh, I am miserable and unhappy. It is all Crystal's fault. I hate her. I hate her. I hate every one. Ah!”

She had tripped on a piece of root and fallen heavily to the ground. Shaken, cold, wet, and frightened, the poor girl was losing all self-control. What should she do? Was this a punishment for her wrong-doing? Again she set off in search of the lost road. Once, something big and shapeless loomed up close to her in the fog. She heard the snorting of an animal—and fled blindly, believing this was one of the bulls which were the terror of the moors.

She had completely lost her bearings and walked on with hopelessness creeping round her like the fog. She was lost, quite lost. Perhaps she would be out here all night wandering about.

Hark! Was that a whistle? A shout? Perhaps some of those gipsies were about. Gipsies who might murder her. Teresa began to run again, she had fancied she saw a figure advancing like a blurred ghost towards her out of the mist. She tripped and screamed, and this time surely a voice shouted some indistinguishable question or threat?

She was being pursued. Without doubt it was by a gipsy. The panic added strength to her limbs. She ran on . . . and away from the mysterious pursuer. Once she halted and again heard the hoarse cry . . . more distant . . . yet nearing as she waited. She must go on . . . she . . .

The figure was looming close . . . a man . . . or a boy . . . was it a boy? . . . Ah!

With a wild scream Teresa was plunging downwards. Unseen . . . before her lay the river. . . Unheard by her the waters hurried by. Down . . . down

. . . clutching at the grasses of the bank which broke away under her fingers. Down . . . down . . . whilst her voice rose in a shriek of terror. "Help! Help! Help!" And then, as the icy waters closed about her, she felt a strong hand clutch her arm.

Someone was crouching on the bank, someone, who was using all his strength to drag her back. Teresa was trying, too. All fear of the mysterious pursuer now turned rescuer had gone. They were fighting together to save her from the awful river which would sweep her away to death. And—oh, thank Heaven! they were the winners in the fight. Dripping, shivering, only half conscious, Teresa lay panting on the bank, whilst the boy who had saved her tried his best to drag her up on to the bank.

"You jes . . . coom along," cried a treble voice in Teresa's ear. "You jes coom along. Our house is close by. You coom home to Mother."

Teresa knew she must obey this urgent appeal. It would have been so much easier to slip away into unconsciousness, but, if she did, might not those cruel waters engulf her again? With a really gallant effort the shivering girl managed to crawl on to the path, then rise unsteadily to her feet. The boy—it was Walter Wane—was scarcely tall enough to reach her shoulder, but he was the sturdiest of youngsters, and managed to help that swaying, stumbling, shivering lassie towards the cottage which stood just outside the poultry yard of Benwell farm.

Mrs. Wane opened the door, as her son clattered at it, and gave an exclamation of surprise at sight of Walter's companion.

"A young lady," she cried. "Why, it will be one of the young ladies from the Court, I'm thinking—and wet through, too! poor lassie."

And, having proved all this, kind Martha Wane forbore to ask any questions at all, but carried half-fainting Teresa off at once to the tiniest and cleanest of bedrooms where those dripping garments could be removed.

Teresa's teeth were chattering like castanets, her skin was burning. Mrs. Wane shook her head as she insisted on the girl getting into bed, and, whilst she filled a hot-water bottle, she sent Walter off to the farm.

"They've got one of them telephones there," said she wisely. "And you'd better ask Mrs. Perkins to kindly ring up Clynton Court and tell Miss Carwell one of her young ladies is here. That's all to do with us, though . . . I'm afraid the child had no business near the river on such a foggy afternoon, and if she's not on the brink of an illness, my name's not Martha Wane. Poor lassie!—and such a handsome face. One of our Miss Joyce's school-fellows, too . . . and for that alone she's welcome to all the best we can give."

And Mrs. Wane, wiping away a tear with the corner of her apron, returned to that cupboard-like bedroom to tell Teresa that *any* Clynton Court young lady was an honoured guest in her humble cottage for the sake of—Joyce Wayde, the good angel in that home.

CHAPTER XX

“**I** MUST TELL. I must tell,” moaned Teresa, flinging her arms wide as she tossed in bed. “I know I am going to die . . . and the boy saved me . . . because of Joyce . . . he wouldn’t have done it if he’d known. And I must tell before I die.”

That was the sort of talk which had been going on all through the night. Teresa had been brought back to school in the doctor’s car, bundled in all sorts of rugs, and a trained nurse had been ’phoned for to help Miss Sesson. For—there could be no doubt Teresa was very ill indeed.

“The child has something on her mind. We must help to get rid of that trouble first before we can hope to fight the fever,” said the kind old doctor, and when Crystal and Kits heard the verdict they went at once to Miss Carwell.

Kits was spokeswoman, and she told her story in her fearless straightforward fashion.

“Joyce Wayde is the only one who knows exactly how Teresa was mixed up in it,” she added, “And Joyce—well! Joyce wouldn’t tell you yesterday, Crystal, would she?”

“No,” said Crystal, “Joyce is a saint—she really is. She took the blame of what she never did to save Gwenda from imaginary crime—and now she’s in two minds whether she ought not to do the same for her enemy, for that’s what Teresa is. I don’t suppose Teresa can help it. She’s not English.”

“I will go and see Joyce,” was all Miss Carwell replied, “it will be her duty for poor Teresa’s own sake to tell all the story now.”

Crystal and Kits did not feel *very* like going back to lessons after all that excitement, but Crystal for one could not afford to miss her classes. In three days’ time . . . the dreaded examination for the Scholarship would take place.

“I wish ye ancient cookery book gave a recipe for keeping cool when you’re just about boiling over,” she sighed to Kits. “I want to think of Joyce and how we had better welcome her back, and instead, I have to wallow in algebra.”

“There’s only one way of welcoming Joyce that she would *like*,” laughed Kits. “And that is by taking no notice of her at all. Poor old Joyce is as shy as a kitten. She would loathe to be stuck on a pedestal.”

And Kits was right. There was quite a crowd of watchers, though, at the schoolroom windows to see Joyce returning to Clynton Court with Miss Carwell. Yes, there she was, looking rather pale and very grave—not a bit like a triumphant heroine. It was disappointing to the Crew at least, when presently the door opened, and Miss Carwell came in alone.

The head-mistress walked up to where Mademoiselle sat correcting papers, and after a few words of conversation the bell was rung and the girls were told to go to their places. There was a hush of expectancy as Miss Carwell paused, looking down the double row of eager faces—then she began to speak.

It was the tale of Crystal's lost papers which she told—the tale of one girl's bitter jealousy, of another girl's brave self-sacrifice and loyal generosity, which brought a queer lump to many a listener's throat, and reduced the Twins' at least to tears—of admiration.

“Joyce was very reluctant to tell the story,” concluded Miss Carwell, “And only did so when I told her it was necessary for Teresa's own sake. She—Joyce—had now gone up to the sick room to tell the girl who so deliberately and cruelly wronged her of her full forgiveness. I can only add, girls, that I am sure you must be proud of your school-fellow as I am. Joyce Wayde has proved her courage and her loyalty to the highest meaning of friendship in a noble way. I leave it to you to shew your appreciation, though I hope you will respect Joyce's own wish too—that no notice may be taken of the past. She wants to slip back into her old place without any praise or fuss being made of what she has done.”

A long sigh went up from the listeners, who heartily echoed Kits' impulsive exclamation.

“Oh, Miss Carwell!” gasped Kits, “if only Teresa were not so ill . . . we would love to give Joyce *one* cheer.”

But Teresa was far too ill to permit of any such demonstration. Too ill for any one of her youthful judges to wish to shew harshness in condemnation. Her father had been sent for and it would be many days before the doctors could say whether she would live or die. Her school-fellows crept softly past the sick girl's door with hushed steps, pianos were not played within earshot of the sick room. The shadow of death for a time lay on Clynton Court and restrained merry laughter and careless jest.

Joyce spent much of her time beside Teresa's bedside. Curiously enough it was the girl she had hated and wronged to whom Teresa clung now, and Joyce responded in the quiet unassuming way which belonged to her.

“It makes me ashamed every time I look at you,” declared Kits to her friend one day, “to think I could have believed you were guilty!”

Joyce smiled in her placid manner.

“I don’t see how you could have thought anything else,” was her only reply, “but please, . . . if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about it.”

And luckily there was plenty else to talk of.

The day that Teresa was pronounced out of danger was the one before the pastoral play, and *how* busy the Clynton Court girls were, to be sure. How tremendously self-important too. Ordinary lessons were suspended—as far as pastoral players were concerned and to the young actresses’ delight they were invited to stay to luncheon at the Manor.

“I love acting,” said Kits beamingly, as Lady Marigold passed her a generous helping of salmon mayonnaise. “And do you know the Hermit says he thinks if he can screw up his courage he will come himself to see the acting. He was awfully funny about it, and says he shan’t talk to any one and only wants just to look at the play and then go home to think about it.”

Lady Marigold smiled into the bright face.

“I think, Kits,” she replied, “you must be a little bit of a wonder worker, and I am *so* glad. We all want to know your hermit and be very nice to him.”

“He’s really nice himself when you get to know him,” said Kits. “And he told me he was awfully glad we caught Kiwi when he was flying away and came to make friends.”

The day of the play itself was all that a July day should be—and so seldom is. The sun was shining brilliantly, and the lovely gardens were thronged with people who had come to see the Clynton Court girls’ performance.

Of course, there was the usual panic—and the usual stage fright. “Nicolette” was actually glad of her Aucassin’s encouragement! What a touch of irony! Just fancy if those Prims could have foreseen that before the close of term the girl who had arrived in the grocer’s cart would be telling one of them to cheer up and not think of being herself at all!

“You’re Nicolette the persecuted shepherdess,” laughed Kits, “think of it. Think of the Saracens and slavery, and your tower prison and the—er—jolliest—I mean most romantic lover in the world is coming to free you. Of course, you simply mustn’t remember I’m Kits. If you do you can’t make love properly. You’ll *stick!*”

And Pearl, for all her demureness, had to laugh.

Kits was not the only enthusiast. All the girls were as keen as could be to win their laurels before their first public, but when the play actually came off it was Kits whose acting won its lion's share of applause. She was just the gayest, most romantic of knights and lovers, and Pearl ought to have found it quite easy to forget that this was merely a school-fellow, who looked so gallant in silken doublet and plumed hat.

Long and loud were the shouts of applause, and the encores would have become quite a bore to any but those radiant lassies, who loved to be called to the fore again and again to make their bows.

"I've loved every minute of it," said Trixie, when at long last the Clynton Court girls returned home to the special supper Miss Carwell had provided in honour of the occasion. "It really has made me feel quite sad that I was not born in the Middle Ages. Don't you feel like that, Kits?"

But Kits only laughed.

"Not a bit," she retorted, with hideous matter-of-fact levity, "I'd much rather be eating sausage rolls and trifle in the twentieth." A heresy which induced Trixie and Pickles to chase the speaker downstairs, along the corridors and into the gymnasium, where Kits took refuge at the top of the rope ladder, where she stood poised mocking her revilers till the sound of a cheerful-toned bell told of supper being ready.

"Wait for me, you villains," cried Kits, in mock indignation as she swarmed down that ladder. "You greedy creatures—there you go . . . when a moment before . . . you were talking as if sausage rolls were . . . dirt."

"Who is that who talks?" answered the thin tones of Mademoiselle's voice. "Ah, of course, I should have known it could be only one. Kits, *mon enfant*, but you are one superb Aucassin, my heart you did win this afternoon, but, *ma foi!* you return to ze Court as Kits the incorrigible. What shall I say then?"

But even Mademoiselle was smiling. It was the most famous of all Kits' victories. And to the blank amaze of the Crew it was she—Kits the incorrigible—who entered the dining room hand in hand with Mademoiselle herself.

* * * * *

And now . . . it is time to say farewell to Clynton Court . . . and its world of girls, for the girls themselves have reached that most eagerly anticipated day of days—the last of term.

Poor Miss Sesson. She was by far the most to be pitied on that busy day when every one of those excited young women required her services instantly and at once.

But luckily Miss Sesson was one of those matter-of-fact people who refuse to be thrown into a “whirl”. She took each petitioner as she came, and without hurry or bustle listened to the request so breathlessly given. And gradually—very gradually—law and order reasserted themselves out of the general bustle.

Teresa was leaving the day before her schoolmates. Her father was taking her to Italy to get strong—though it was feared by the doctors that it would be a *very* long time before the girl was quite well. At any rate she would not be returning to Clynton Court.

“Kits, my dear. Miss Kerwayne.” It was Miss Sesson calling—and Kits—hot, untidy, worried with the problem of packing—rose from her knees to answer the matron who appeared in the doorway. “Teresa wants you to go and say good-bye,” explained Miss Sesson, in a whisper, “Joyce is with her now. I’m sure, my dear, you won’t say anything to upset——”

“As if I should be *quite* such a pig,” gasped Kits,—and followed half shyly . . . half resentfully to make her farewell. She would much rather Teresa had not sent for her—but she would be quite—nice—to her, of course.

And Teresa claimed pity. It was just a ghost of the dark-eyed, handsome girl Kits had first known, who turned from the window of the sick room and came forward so timidly to greet the newcomer.

“Joyce said she was sure you wouldn’t mind saying good-bye,” faltered Teresa. “And . . . will you say it for me to all the others? I wanted you to give them a message from me. I couldn’t ask Joyce, because she would have refused. But I want you, Kits, to tell them how wonderful Joyce has been, and how I owe everything to her. It was she who helped my father to think less hardly of me. It was she who gave me love for hate. She’s . . . she’s the most wonderful girl in the world—and I love her. Will you tell the girls?”

And for answer Kits put her arms round the thin, little form and kissed Teresa’s tears away with eager lips.

And so Teresa Tenerlee went from Clynton Court . . . not in disgrace, but a girl forgiven and repentant, resolved to live more nobly, more unselfishly and more faithfully, because of the example set her by simple Joyce Wayde—who was neither brilliant nor clever, but one of those patient plodders, who so often come into their own without ever having dreamed they deserved any honour at all.

I think that last day of term was the happiest of all for Joyce, and how she laughed as she stood, ready dressed and waiting for the cart which was coming to drive her home, whilst she watched the loading of the last “bus” full of merry schoolmates.

The Crew were there in force, for, of course, at the last minute they had found their possessions in danger of being left behind—owing to untidiness.

“Hurry up, Twins,” sang Pickles, from a snug corner, “don’t dream any more or we shall lose the train. Here you are at last, Crystal. Now, don’t forget. Chesham 4212, is our ’phone number, and you’re going to ring me up as soon as you hear you’ve won the Parraton. Hurrah! Hurrah! Now, Kits—sluggard . . . if you don’t bustle——.”

For Kits was giving Joyce a final hug before she took her final leap into the bus.

Even then she was leaning out a second later to shout her last message to the girl who stood in the school porch.

“I’ll let you have a wire about Crystal and the Parraton, Joyce,” she called. “And don’t forget you’re coming to spend the last fortnight of the hols . . . with us. Yes, Crystal’s not going to Switzerland after all. She’s coming to us, too, when you are there . . . and Pickles and Trixie . . . and——”

“*What a Crew,*” sang Trixie.

Then—the bus had started, the heavy vehicle swung round the corner . . . and Joyce was left alone there waiting for her own turn to come. How she was smiling, too.

“I think,” murmured Joyce to herself, “it was the happiest day of my life when Kits came to Clynton Court.”

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Kits at Clynton Court School* by Mabel Winifred Knowles (pseudonym May Wynne)]