

# NANCY TO THE RESCUE



DORITA FAIRLIE BRUCE

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*Title:* Nancy to the Rescue

*Date of first publication:* 1935

*Author:* Dorita Fairlie Bruce (1865-1970)

*Date first posted:* January 8, 2025

*Date last updated:* January 8, 2025

Faded Page eBook #20250109

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



# NANCY TO THE RESCUE

*By*  
DORITA FAIRLIE BRUCE



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON : HUMPHREY MILFORD

*To*  
PAMELA BARBARA  
ROSEMARY ELSPETH  
& DIANA

REPRINTED 1935 IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD, BY JOHN JOHNSON

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# Nancy to the Rescue

## CHAPTER THE FIRST

### MOVED UP

The autumn term had not actually begun at Maudsley Grammar School—it would not do so until Monday morning, and this was Friday—but the forms had assembled in hall, as was customary before the opening of the school year, to hear the lists read, and to make various preliminary arrangements.

“I think it’s a very good plan myself,” said Nancy Caird comfortably. “Let’s know just where we are, and what we’ve got to expect—more or less.”

“I’m not entirely certain,” said her chum, Desdemona Blackett, “that we shall enjoy being in the Upper Fifth. Certainly V(b) had its drawbacks, but when you’ve spent a year in any form you become accustomed to it. I hate changes.”

“We could hardly expect to stay there for the rest of our natural lives,” said Nancy. “At least we’re being moved up together, and Jerry and Brenda with us. It’s all for the best.”

“I feel sorry to leave Barbara behind.”

“Well, you needn’t. For all her braininess, Babs would be a trifle out of place in V(a) at the age of fourteen. Besides, what else could she hope for, after coming such a cropper in the Scholarship Exam. last term?”

“Everybody knows that was only nerves—but I don’t think she did hope for anything else; it was only I who felt she might as well have been moved up with the rest of us, seeing she’s one of ourselves. Anyhow, I’m glad the



twins have gone into the Sixth. It wouldn't have seemed a bit natural to overtake them."

"That would scarcely have been surprising, though, after you'd managed to win the scholarship. Still, I don't know," said Nancy meditatively, "that I'd care to be in the same form with my elder sisters, if I had any."

"It wouldn't seem suitable, somehow," said Desda, "though I quite like the twins. They've just escaped the same situation themselves, you know, through Olivia having left to take up fruit-farming. I wonder who'll be head-girl in her place."

"Not much doubt about that," said Geraldine (otherwise Jerry) Judkins, turning round to join in the conversation. "It will be Phyllis, of course, and a jolly good head-girl she'll make. Hush—here comes Miss Hale! Now for the form-lists, which most of us know already."

The contents of the form-lists were, as Jerry had hinted, a foregone conclusion, and she proved a true prophet again in the matter of the headship. Phyllis Bainbridge was appointed to succeed Olivia Blackett, and the burst of cheering that rose to the old oak rafters of the hall showed the school's whole-hearted approval of this choice. Then each form dispersed to its own classroom, there to discuss the politics and affairs of Maudsley.

The little knot of girls who had just had their remove into V(a) entered their new form-room rather diffidently, and stood in the background in an unobtrusive quartette, finding it hard to realize at once that they were now on equal terms with those girls who had been their seniors only a short time before.

"Come in!" said Constance Reid, the V(a) games-captain, abruptly. "Don't hang about the door looking such rank outsiders! You're not, you know. You're Upper Fifth now, and you'll have to put your shoulders to the wheel with the rest of us."

"Which wheel do you mean exactly?" asked Nancy, recovering herself, and moving into the central group, while the others followed.

"Why, our wheel, of course!" answered Constance. "The Upper Fifth's. That's just what we were going to discuss when you came sneaking in like a lot of condemned criminals."

"After all," said Helen Hislop gloomily, "it isn't such frightfully bad luck to be moved up into our form."

“Everyone has to go through V(a) in the course of nature,” added Enid Ford, “so you’d better make up your minds to face it as cheerfully as possible.”

“Be philosophical about it, in fact,” finished Constance.

The four newcomers stared in frank bewilderment, from which Nancy, as usual, was the first to recover herself.

“We haven’t got the foggiest idea what you’re talking about,” she said bluntly. “Why should it be any particular hardship to be moved into V(a)?”

“Personally, I’ve been rather looking forward to it,” declared Jerry Judkins airily. “Is there a skeleton in the cupboard?”

“Or a crumple in the rose-leaf?” asked Desda, with a twinkle of amusement in her grey eyes. The solemnity of the Upper Fifth—a solemnity tinged with some bitterness—struck her as funny.

Constance turned to her at once.

“Oh, there’s a crumple all right!” she said. “Or a skeleton, if you prefer the metaphor. Do you mean to tell me you never heard it discussed by Rosalind or Celia at home?”

Desda shook her head.

“The twins never talked much about their form affairs,” she answered, “not before the rest of us, at least.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” said Helen. “None of us do, much.”

Nancy, leaning back negligently against the nearest desk, came to the point, as was her wont.

“Look here!” she said. “Since we *are* Upper Fifth now, hadn’t we better know the worst at once? Then we can put our shoulders to any wheel you like. At present we don’t quite know where you’d like us to apply them.”

Constance looked uncertainly round at the twenty original members of her form, but it was Eileen Crane who replied with sudden decision:

“My dears, you’ve come into the rottenest form in the whole school, if you want the truth! Only, of course, we keep the fact to ourselves as much as possible.”

“And most successfully, too!” exclaimed Jerry, voicing the astonishment of the rest. “I’m quite sure no one else in Maudsley suspects it. What’s wrong with the form?”

Constance leaned back in the high chair on the dais which she was occupying, and gave herself up to undisguised pessimism.

“What’s wrong with it is mostly negative. We’re no good at games, very neutral at work, and we’ve got no real position of any sort in the school. That, at any rate, you must have noticed. V(a) is of no account.”

Nancy considered the matter.

“N-no, I suppose it isn’t,” she admitted. “But then it isn’t asked to be. The prefects are all in the Sixth, and the villains in the lower forms. All V(a) has got to do is to jog along and preserve the balance.”

“Be dull and respectable, in fact,” said Helen Hislop resentfully. “Well, those days are ended now—we’ve quite made up our minds to break out in some direction this term.”

“In as many directions as possible,” said Constance with decision. “That’s where you four come in. You’ve been moved up from a form where there’s always plenty of life and stir, so you must know something about it. You’ve got to help us to make our mark somehow, and to leave off being humdrum.”

Nancy groaned.

“I seem to be always thrust into living a strenuous life!” she protested plaintively. “I’ve worked like a nigger in the Lower Fifth, first—well—for reasons of my own, and then to please Charity Sheringham. I did look forward to a little peace when I got up here.”

“You can’t have it, then,” said Helen sharply. “We’ve quite decided that the Upper Fifth is to be a home of rest no longer. We’re going to wake up, and do things, and startle Maudsley. Only, we haven’t exactly decided how, yet.”

Constance Reid, from her exalted position in the teacher’s seat, rapped on the desk with a pencil.

“Ideas, please!” she cried peremptorily. “Anybody who has got one, however weak and small, is begged to produce it at once and allow us to judge of its possibilities. Yes, Eileen?”

“Couldn’t we make good at games?” suggested Eileen hopefully, her mind turning for inspiration to her own chief interest. “We ought to do better this term, for Jerry and Brenda aren’t bad, and Nancy is hot stuff.”

“Not at hockey or net-ball. I’m good at cricket,” Nancy admitted modestly. “But that isn’t the question at present.”

Jerry chuckled.

“If you expect V(a) to rise to any heights on my hockey, you’ll get a bad jar,” she observed. “We’re supposed to be steady, Brenda and I, but we’re very far from brilliant.”

“That doesn’t sound well for your scheme, Eileen,” said Constance. “Remember, too, that we’ve lost the Blacketts. Not much chance of making good at games, this term, I fear.”

“Still, we may not do so badly,” urged Eileen. “If we practise hard we ought to keep our end up against the other forms.”

The captain shook her head.

“Mediocre again. That’s not what we want. Certainly we’ll try to keep our end up, and probably we’ll do it, too; but you don’t seem to grasp that we’ve got to *distinguish* ourselves. Next, please.”

“What about class work?” asked Enid Ford diffidently.

“I thought of that,” said Helen, “but there’s nothing doing there—not for our form. None of the Maudsley scholarships are open to the Upper Fifth. I don’t know why. I suppose we’re meant to plod quietly along, so as to rest our brains before plunging into the giddy vortex of excitement that awaits us in the Sixth.”

“Where we can enter for schols. to Cambridge or the Scottish Universities,” said Constance, “not to mention various art and music bursaries. Oh, yes! we’ll plod along quietly—we’re none of us slackers, thank goodness!—but, as I keep on mentioning, we’ve got to do more than that if we’re to make a position for V(a) in the school. At present it hasn’t got one.”

“No—we’re a nondescript lot,” sighed Helen. “In our young days, when Phyl and Charity and Lois—all that lot—were in this form, it had a certain amount of standing, but with us in it— —”

Nancy Caird had been listening to the discussion in silence, but with growing interest. Any sort of forlorn hope appealed to her sympathies at once, and the depression which evidently prevailed in her new form had (owing to her spirit of contrariness) an exhilarating effect upon her. Here was a situation that required tackling, and yet appeared to be without a tackler. The state of affairs acted as a trumpet-call to Nancy.

“Look here!” she broke out suddenly. “You say that we’re to take our place among you, and help, so you won’t think us frightfully cheeky if we speak up, will you?”

“Haven’t I asked you to?” replied Constance briefly.

“All right, then. First of all, for goodness’ sake, cheer up! We’ve come from V(b), where there’s one dismal Desmond in the shape of Elma Cuthbert, and from time to time it’s been hard work to keep her cheery. In V(a), however, you seem to be all pessimists together, and something will have to be done about it. How are you ever going to get anywhere in such an atmosphere of gloom? It’s enough to damp the loftiest ambitions.”

Then Desda, who had contributed nothing to the discussion so far, quoted suddenly with comic intonation:

“‘Happy Starkey! No miserable Starkey! *Happy* Starkey!’”

There was a general burst of laughter, and Constance said, when she had recovered herself again:

“I suppose we did sound as bad as that, and if so, there’s something in what Nancy says. The atmosphere will be a trifle damp if we give way to that sort of thing, and we shan’t get much further. I say! it’s time to disperse now, if that clock’s right—and nobody’s had an idea! We must all think hard before school starts properly on Monday, and then we’ll have another form-meeting during rec. and hear the result. I hope there will be one.”

“I expect somebody will have an inspiration before then,” said Nancy. “In fact, I feel the beginnings of one coming on now. No! it’s no good saying anything till I’ve thought it out further. It’s got to simmer in my brain-pan till Monday.”

## CHAPTER THE SECOND

### OUT OF SCHOOL

Summer seemed loth to go that year, and on the afternoon that followed the reading of the school lists, Nancy, and her special chum, Desda Blackett, were basking on the rough grass underneath the larches in Mrs. Hawthorn's garden.

Mrs. Hawthorn was Nancy's grandmother, with whom she had been left for educational purposes during her parents' absence abroad; and the grounds of Fernglade, where she lived, were separated by a sandy, pine-fringed lane from Redgables, which belonged to Mrs. Hawthorn's son-in-law, Major Stephen. He was a widower with one girl when he married Elizabeth Hawthorn, and Barbara attended the Grammar School with Nancy and Desda (though she had remained behind them, this term, in the Lower Fifth). His niece, Angela, who lived with them, had been sent to Larkiston House, the big private school in Maudsley town. Desda's home, the Yellow Farm, adjoined the ground of Redgables, so the four girls were near neighbours as well as being close friends, and spent most of their spare time together. On this particular afternoon, however, the cousins had gone through the forest on some errand of their own, and Desda was spending the last afternoon of the holidays at Fernglade.

"Heigho!" she exclaimed, lying back at full length on the dry fir-needles, with her hands behind her head. "I don't like to think this is our last afternoon of freedom—for, to-morrow being Sunday, we can hardly count that."

Nancy chuckled with amusement.

"I don't see why we shouldn't count it, since it's the quietest, free-est day of all."

"One doesn't do things on Sunday, though."

"For all we are doing to-day it might as well be Sunday. Not that it's my choice. I wanted to go for a bike ride, but you're such a lazy old beggar. I couldn't get you to stir."

"I should think not! We'll get quite enough of our bikes after to-morrow, cycling to school every day. Nance! do you think we shall like being in V(a)?"

“I can’t answer for you,” said Nancy briskly, “but speaking for myself, I believe it’s going to be rather sport. They’re such a funny set! Fancy appealing to us, who have just been moved up into their form, to try and ginger them up! I can’t help seeing the funny side of it.”

It was Desda’s turn to chuckle over yesterday’s recollections.

“They were certainly droll, and they’re all so depressed, poor dears! If Elma Cuthbert had been moved up with us she would have found herself in her element.”

“I was so sorry for them,” said Nancy kindly. “I felt like drying their eyes all round, and being a mother to them. Have you thought of any ideas yet, to brighten their sad lives?”

“Not I,” answered Desda placidly. “You appeared to be teeming with them, so I saw no need to bother. By the by, what was the inspiration you felt coming on you just before the meeting ended?”

“I don’t think I shall tell you just yet,” replied Nancy, with an air of mystery, and a teasing twinkle in her eye.

Desda, however, disregarded both.

“All right,” she said. “I can wait till you do. I don’t suppose it will be long.”

Nancy raised herself on her elbow, and propping herself on her hand, she flung a small cone with such accuracy that it hit Desda’s slightly tip-tilted nose.

“Don’t be annoying! I can never get a rise out of you,” she declared plaintively. “Now, if I’d said that to Angela, she would have set to work, at once, to get it out of me.”

Desda smiled enigmatically and held her peace. There was silence for a few minutes; then the twinkle reappeared in Nancy’s blue eyes.

“Very well, then,” she said magnanimously. “Since you don’t want to know, I’ll tell you. What about starting an Amateur Musical and Dramatic Society in the Upper Fifth?”

At this momentous suggestion, Desda’s languor fell suddenly from her, and she sat up to consider the question from every point of view.

“Certainly none of the other forms have got anything like that,” she admitted, “but could we? And if we did start it, what would it do?”

“Everything that societies of that sort generally do,” replied Nancy vaguely. “Have meetings, and practise, and give concerts and theatricals.”

The last word acted as a clarion call on Desdemona. Every remnant of her laziness vanished, and, clasping her arms about her knees, she promptly took the lead in the conversation.

“Why, of course we could—I hadn’t thought of that!” she exclaimed. “The Upper Fifth’s classroom is exactly right for it. Miss Winter’s dais comes at the end, quite close to the door; it would be easy to rig a curtain across them both. Certainly it’s rather small for a stage, but we could build on an extension with packing-cases. There are heaps stored in the garret at home that I could borrow. Daddy uses them for sending his fruit up to market in summer, but they’re lying idle now. We could do Shakespeare, and — —”

“No, we couldn’t,” interrupted Nancy cruelly. “Shakespeare’s too ambitious, and we’re none of us good enough, except, perhaps, you. Remember, we haven’t all got disused actors for our fathers to train us in real classical stuff. I meant to wake you up, Des, but now you’ve got the bit between your teeth and you’re off! Come down to earth again, and discuss the thing from a practical standpoint.”

“That’s a mixed metaphor,” murmured Desda reprovingly. “Still, never mind. Carry on being practical, if you like, but I see exactly how we can manage it.”

“We’ll manage it, first of all,” said Nancy firmly, “by discovering just how much amateur-musical-and-dramatic talent there is in V(a). What’s the use of having packing-cases and a curtain, if no one but you can do anything on them—I mean, behind them—well, you know what I mean! Have you ever heard of anyone in the form who could do anything special?”

Desda shook her curly brown head.

“I’ve told you the twins never talked much about the Upper Fifth when they were in it. We’re all rather inclined to keep the affairs of our respective forms to ourselves at home. But they’ve said a little more since they knew I was being moved up, and I gather that all the people who were much use in V(a) have gone up with them into the Sixth. Those who are left are rather a spineless lot, except Constance Reid and Helen.”

“I thought as much,” remarked Nancy, “when they started consulting us about their affairs before we were well inside the classroom door. If you



think my idea's a good one, though, we might offer it to them on Monday and see what they've got to say. Personally, I feel it has possibilities."

"Heaps!" agreed Desda, warming up again. "You could see to the musical side of it, and we might have an orchestra. I know Enid Ford plays the violin."

"You don't know how she plays it," Nancy pointed out. "We can't take money for a performance, unless it's going to be more or less worth paying for."

"Oh!" said Desda. "Are we going to take money? What will it go to?"

Nancy laughed.

"We seem to be galloping ahead at a fair pace in our minds, don't we? It might be a good plan to consult the other and original members of the form, but *if* we have a performance, and *if* we take money, I know what I should like to give it to."

"The Guildry, of course," returned Desda. "I'd like the money to go there, too, but none of the others are in the Guildry, so I don't suppose they'd consent."

"Anyhow, we've got to make the money before we distribute it," observed Nancy, with some reason, "so that argument needn't come up just yet. You know, it would do those V(a) people a power of good to join the G.G., if we could get them to see it."

"Do you suppose it would be much good trying to recruit Constance Reid, or Enid, or any of that lot?" replied Desda. "You know, Miss Knevitt thinks No. 1 Maudsley Company is quite big enough already."

"Yes," said Nancy, with the impressive manner of one who is superiorly informed, and dying to part with her information. "I know that—but what about No. 2 Maudsley?"

Desda's eyes grew round with surprise.

"There isn't one — —" she began. "Oh, I say, Nancy! do you really mean that? Are we starting another company? Who told you?"

"The wonderful part," said Nancy, heaving an immense sigh of relief, "is that I've managed not to tell you for a whole fortnight! But I got permission this morning. You see, I went into Aldershot with Auntie Beth last Saturday week, and we met Miss Knevitt there, and brought her out with us in the car, and they were talking about this. That's how I heard it, but they made me

promise not to tell, because nothing could be settled then. However, Auntie Beth told me this morning that a new company is to be started and attached to St. Ninian's Church."

"And who's to be the Guardian?" asked Desda, a trifle breathlessly; things seemed to have been moving at such surprising speed.

"Auntie Beth herself!" cried Nancy gleefully. "Because they belong to St. Ninian's, and the Guardian ought to belong to the same church as her company. The President of the London Centre told them that when they asked her advice last summer. You remember—when she came to give the prizes at our company's display."

"Rather!" said Desda. "We were all wishing then that we could start more companies, and have a Centre and President of our own. So that's where new recruits are going to!"

"I don't know. I expect some of our company will be drafted into the second to help it to start. Probably recruits will be mixed up a bit. But Constance Reid and the Lawsons go to St. Ninian's, so I thought there would be no harm in trying to get those two, anyhow, to join."

"I only hope," said Desda, "none of us will be drafted—at least, my feelings vary. I'd love to have Mrs. Stephen for my Guardian, but I like Miss Knevitt awfully, and, besides, we're all so much at home now in our own company."

"Oh, I think you'll be all right," replied Nancy. "They'll leave you where you are, but — —"

She stopped abruptly, and bit her lips.

"But what?" asked Desda, her curiosity roused, this time, when Nancy had no desire to rouse it.

"Nothing. I'm not quite sure if I ought to say what I was going to say, that's all."

"They're not going to put you into the new company, are they?" asked Desda, in alarm. "Because we couldn't possibly be separated, you know."

Nancy sprang up, and began to dust the fir-needles off her brown school skirt.

"No, of course not!" she said hurriedly. "How can I leave our company, silly, when I'm in charge of Squad Six? That's been my special job for the last six months, and I couldn't give it up now. Don't talk such rot!"

Desda said no more, but she was not entirely satisfied. Something in Nancy's manner made her suspicious that all was not well. She had joined the Girls' Guildry originally on her friend's account, and though her own interest was now thoroughly engaged, she could not imagine herself in the 1st Maudsley without Nancy. Changes were evidently in the air. "And when that happens," thought Desda wisely, "one never knows." Still, Nancy had been quite emphatic over the fact that she would be left where she was, and certainly Squad Six seemed an unanswerable argument, for Nancy had done wonders with its turbulent Juniors since she had been created their Maid-of-Merit. Desda lulled her fears to rest with the conviction that nothing could part Nancy from Squad Six. Their Guardian, Miss Knevitt, would never consent to it. She had found Nancy's influence with those Juniors too valuable to dispense with it lightly. But it was assuredly a wonderful piece of news that a second company was to be started, at last, in Maudsley.

## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### THE “AM”

The first Monday morning of a new term was always somewhat breathless at the Grammar School. New girls, and those who had got removes, had to find their feet, and everybody was trying to shake down in the place likely to be hers for the ensuing term. Everywhere was bustle and a sort of orderly unrest, rules were being read out, and books distributed. People were hurrying through the passages at hours when these were generally deserted. Nobody knew where to find anybody, and no one was settled or tranquil, except the headmistress, working steadily and quietly in her study, where she might be found by all who sought her, the one really abiding person in this upheaval of newness.

That was what it looked like, but in reality it was all held firmly together by a system of rule and method which was slowly shaking the kaleidoscope into its ordained pattern.

Nancy Caird, a trifle nervous and bewildered, but desperately anxious to justify her remove, gave her mind for the time being to lessons, and nothing else. She had been at the top of V(b) throughout the three terms she had spent there, and was determined to rise as soon as possible to the same altitude in V(a); but, having less confidence in herself than most people gave her credit for, she believed that only extra hard work could get her there.

“You needn’t worry,” declared Jerry Judkins with a grin, when Nancy confided some of this to her during milk-and-biscuits. “Of course the work’s harder, and those people are accustomed to it—which we aren’t, yet—but we haven’t got to compete with Celia and Rosalind Blackett, or Eleanor Styles, or any of that lot who have just gone up to the Sixth. These girls are only the second-best, the left-overs, and you’ll soon soar above them when you get used to the work.”

“I can’t think,” said placid Desda, “why you should worry so frightfully about getting to the top of the form. What’s the good? unless you are working for a scholarship, as I was last term—and there are none of those in V(a). Can’t you be content to do your best without always trying to do more than your best?”

“No,” said Nancy. “I can’t sit down contentedly on the summit of any hill if there’s a higher one beyond me.”

“I’ve got a sort of feeling,” said Brenda shrewdly, “that it’s something more than the climb with you. You enjoy that as well, but what you want is the exalted position on the peak.”

Nancy’s face, naturally pale, grew suddenly pink as the shaft went home; but there was no sting in it, for she knew Brenda too well to suspect her of unkindness.

“I do like being first,” she admitted, “but I love the thrill of climbing, too.”

“Of course you do,” said Brenda good-naturedly. “And you like being first because you’re a born leader. The proof of that is that everybody enjoys being led by you. You’ll have V(a) on a string very shortly, even though you’re younger than most of them.”

Brenda’s prophecy recurred to their minds later on, when Constance, in the dinner-hour, assembled the form together to ask for further ideas on the subject of making good. One or two girls had suggestions to offer, but Constance promptly turned them down as feeble or commonplace. Though devoid of originality herself, she had the courage of her convictions, and a gift of plain speech.

“All that,” she remarked finally, “is piffle, and won’t get us anywhere. We want to do something that is done by no other form in the school. I keep on telling you that we’ve got to strike out.”

Nancy had waited till the older members of the Upper Fifth had said their say, but now her hand went up.

“I have thought of something, Constance,” she announced. “It isn’t original in itself, but it hasn’t been tried at Maudsley, so far as I know—at least there’s nothing of the sort going on now.”

“Let’s have it,” said Constance briefly, leaning back in her chair; and Nancy expounded her notion of the Amateur Musical and Dramatic Society rather more elaborately than she had done to Desda under the larches.

V(a) heard her to the end, then offered their only criticism through the mouth of Helen Hislop.

“We can’t call it that, of course,” she said. “What about the ‘Am’?”

“Yes, that’ll do,” said Constance. “The question is, how it’s to be worked up. Anybody know how to run a thing of that sort?”

Somebody thought there ought to be a committee.

“All right—but it mustn’t be too big,” Constance said, “because if it is, everyone will talk too much, and we shall do nothing. Nancy must be on it, because it’s her idea, and she’s more musical than most; and Desda will be useful for the dramatic part. As for the rest of us—Helen recites, so I suppose she can act, and Enid’s got a fiddle. That’s quite enough committee, counting myself.”

“You don’t recite,” objected one of the others, “and you’re not musical. What are you going to do on the committee?”

“Take the chair,” replied Constance. “Someone’s got to do that, and it’s generally the person who’s least useful in other ways. Besides, you know perfectly well, Muriel, that none of you would have thought of trying to boost up V(a), if it hadn’t been for me. You never have bothered, and you would simply have gone on not bothering.”

There was so much undeniable truth in this statement that no further dispute arose over Constance’s place on the committee, and she and her nominees were elected unanimously.

“And now,” inquired Helen, “what happens next?”

“Why, the committee’s got to meet,” said Enid, “and settle what we’d better do first. We’ve only got to arrange when and where.”

“Couldn’t we get on a little further, here and now?” suggested Nancy practically. “It’s a pouring wet day, so we aren’t allowed on the playing-fields, and we may never have such a chance again—at least, not for days. What about finding out which of us is musical and which dramatic?”

“Sound scheme,” said Constance, producing a sheet of paper torn from her rough note-book. “Can I have that pencil, Eileen? Thanks. Now, the quickest way will be if everyone who thinks she’s musical will kindly hold up her hand. I shall take their names first of all, and then go on to the drama. We can begin with Nancy Caird.”

“Hold on a moment, though!” exclaimed Jerry Judkins, laughing. “What do you mean by musical?”

“Anybody who can play or sing anything, of course,” returned Constance impatiently. “I should have thought that was obvious enough!”

“All right,” said Jerry meekly. “I only wanted to know. I can play a mouth-organ passing well—shall I put up my hand?”

“Certainly not!” retorted Constance. “I wish you wouldn’t fool, Jerry Judkins! It’s rather bad luck when one’s absolutely in earnest to find that no one else will take the matter seriously.”

“But I do,” broke in Nancy, rallying to her aid. “And, as a matter of fact, Constance, there may be something in Jerry’s mouth-organ, though it isn’t a very highbrow instrument. What about a toy symphony for those who can’t play anything better? Mouth-organs, combs, penny whistles—they would all make a joyful noise if we had a piano accompaniment, and someone to conduct.”

Constance made a hurried note on her sheet of paper.

“Now we really are getting on!” she cried. “No one, however unskilful, need be left out if we have a toy symphony. Even I can play a comb. Names, please!”

One after another about a dozen girls gave in their names as willing to sing, or play some kind of instrument; and the list was handed over for Nancy to deal with. She immediately fixed upon an evening when they should meet every week to practise.

“I shall have to see Miss Hale about it,” she said, “because it will mean having tea with those of the Sixth who are working late that day, and permission to use one of the music-rooms, for the sake of having a piano.”

The others looked doubtful.

“That won’t be easy,” said Enid Ford. “We can always get our own form-room for the dramatic lot, but Miss Hale doesn’t like the piano used, except by responsible people.”

“And what are we, pray?” demanded Constance with some heat. “A Senior form, and most of us over sixteen. Besides, there’s Nancy—responsible enough for any piano, surely, after passing that exam. last spring!”

“I think Miss Hale will let us,” said Nancy, “if I promise we shan’t hurt the piano. I’ll ask her for Tuesday evening, if that suits everyone best, but you must all practise at other times as well. I know the symphony’s mostly a joke, to supply the comic element when we give concerts, but if Enid, and Eileen, and Brenda are going to play trios, they will have to get together out of school hours to practise, and so will the six who want to sing glees.”

“And now for the dramatic side of it,” said the chairman, producing another piece of paper. “Oh, well! I suppose I needn’t put down any names for that, since everybody will be in it. Desda Blackett can be actress-manager, and just pick out the people she wants for different parts, and fix them up. I suppose you know heaps of plays we could learn, Desda?”

“Heaps—but you’re not going to!” replied Desda readily. “I did speak of Shakespeare when I talked it over with Nancy, first, but she seemed to think it was a mistake to be too ambitious, and I’ve come round to her way of thinking. Besides, this is a busy term, and nobody wants a lot of extra stuff to learn. I’ll ask Daddy to recommend us some books from which we could take readings—like *Cranford*, only not so well known.”

“Why not?” asked Muriel Evans, in her gruff voice.

“Because then the audience won’t be so apt to notice how badly you do it,” explained Desda unkindly. “Don’t forget that the ‘Am’ is being planned to shed lustre on the Upper Fifth, not to make a fool of it— Oh, I say, sorry! I keep on forgetting I’ve only just been moved up.”

“I was noticing that!” said Nancy sarcastically, “though I can’t say I’m much better myself. Look here, Constance and Helen, and all of you! Do squash us when we’re too cheeky. We don’t really mean it, but you’re—you’re—”

“Making us so much at home,” supplied Jerry. “You can’t blame us if we get our heads up and kick. It’s largely your own doing.”

“My dear kids!” exclaimed Constance, “we’re so thankful to have anyone come in among us with ideas, and enough energy to carry them out, that we’re ready to stand any amount of cheek. If you feel at home straightaway, so much the better!”

“After all, you’re not new girls,” added Helen Hislop. “We’ve met before, and even attended some classes together! The faster you settle in and feel you belong to V(a), the more likely you are to do your bit for the form.”

“It strikes me we’ve begun already,” said Nancy making a face which was half-rueful, half-comic.

“And we’re only too glad. According to Consie (who ought to know, being games-captain), we haven’t the foggiest chance of the Inter-Form Sports Cup, and there are no scholarships open to us, so we’ve got to win a few laurels otherwise. Desda has an inherited gift for theatricals, and you’re supposed to be the best pianist in the school, therefore we want to take advantage of your talents *pro bono publico*, see?”



Nancy turned an expansive grin upon them.

“That’s all rot, of course,” she said. “But we’re going to have some fun in this form. I’m jolly glad we were moved up.”

## CHAPTER THE FOURTH

### GUILDRY AFFAIRS

The Girls' Guildry, to which Nancy Caird and most of her friends belonged, was an organization which aimed at promoting the well-being, spiritual and physical, of all the girls who joined it. To this end, it taught them a judicious mixture of all manner of drill, domestic science and health-lore, not to mention any and every conceivable subject which seemed likely to further the ends of the Guildry and benefit the girls in its charge. There were Centres all over the country, but so far, Maudsley had not got beyond one company, though that had grown in numbers to such an extent during the past year, that Miss Knevitt, the Guardian, found it unwieldy and hard to handle.

Phyllis Bainbridge, head-girl at the Grammar School, was Miss Knevitt's senior Maid-of-Honour (the other being Vivian Best, a Larkiston House girl), and Nancy was one of the Maids-of-Merit. The personnel of the company was drawn freely from both Maudsley and Larkiston, though there were, certainly, a number of girls who belonged to neither school. Rumours regarding the founding of a new company were already in the air when Phyllis met Nancy outside her classroom door one morning towards the close of their first week at school.

"Hullo!" said the head-girl, pausing with a pile of books in her hands. "How do you like being in V(a)?"

"Oh, I love it!" returned Nancy. "It's more peaceful than the Lower Fifth, but I think it's going to be much more interesting. We are starting a Musical and Dramatic Society, and when once that's set a-going the school's going to hear of it!"

"Really?" Phyllis looked at her, and laughed. "Then it will be the first time V(a) has justified its existence for a very long time. Whose idea was it?"



“HULLO!” SAID THE HEAD-GIRL

“More or less mine,” said Nancy modestly. “I mean, I thought of that particular plan, but the others were all keen to do something thrilling. Oh, Phyl! Will Guildry start next week?”

“Yes,” answered Phyllis, giving her a peculiar look. “I’m just going to post a notice on the school board to Guildry members, letting them know that we shall meet again, as usual, next Friday. Vivian is doing the same at Larkiston, and Miss Knevitt is telling the rest herself. What concerns us chiefly, however, is that there’s to be a Maid-of-Honour and Maid-of-Merit meeting at the Knevitts’ this Saturday afternoon.”

“All right. I’ll come over on my bike,” responded Nancy. “Anything about the new company?”

But Phyllis was already moving off in the direction of the library, used from time immemorial as a prefects’ study, in which they did their preparation.

“Oh, heaps!” she answered laconically. “I can’t wait to talk about that just now. You’ll know soon enough on Saturday.”

They parted, and Nancy went off to her practising with an uneasy feeling that the Maid-of-Honour’s last words had held something rather like a warning.

“If they want me to go to the new company, I just shan’t!” she thought vehemently. “Miss Knevitt hinted that I might be expected to, because we attend St. Ninian’s, but I don’t see why I should, just for that. I don’t want to leave my own company, and my own squad—and Desda—even if Angela and Babs are to be in the new lot. Besides, it may be rather awkward for Aunt Elizabeth to have too many of us among her girls; she won’t want it to become a family affair.”

Nancy’s school-work and music kept her mind well occupied for the rest of the week with little time to spare for Guildry problems, but Saturday afternoon found her with tyres pumped hard and an air of preoccupation, ready to start early for Knevitt Chase.

“Are you having tea there?” asked Angela Stephen, who had come across with Barbara to watch her set out.

Nancy nodded.

“Miss Knevitt always feeds us first when she has these meetings at the Chase. What are you two doing?”

“Going to the forest with Desda,” answered Angela. “We can’t expect this weather to last for ever, and when the rain begins it will be good-bye to the pine-woods for weeks. Come to supper at Redgables when you get back, and tell us all the news. You’ll be bursting with it by that time.”

Nancy wheeled her bicycle out into the sandy lane, and set her foot on the pedal.

“Then I shall just have to burst!” she retorted. “You don’t suppose I am going to babble all I hear at a Maid-of-Merit meeting? Not very likely!”

“She won’t either!” said Angela sadly, as they watched her spin off into the high-road. “I know I oughtn’t to expect it of her, but I’m simply dying to know what’s going to happen about the new company. Be thankful curiosity isn’t your besetting sin, Barbara, for it’s a very painful one!”

Nancy had a long ride before her, for the Knevitts lived some distance out on the other side of Maudsley, through which she had to pass to reach the Chase. In a by-lane outside the town she fell in with Charity Sheringham, one of the Grammar School prefects, who also belonged to the Guildry.

“Hullo!” said Nancy, in surprise, “are you going to the Chase, too? I thought— —”

She hesitated, but Charity completed the sentence for her, in the cool, nonchalant tones which were characteristic of her.

“You thought right,” she said. “It is a meeting for Maids-of-Honour and Merit only, but, you see, I’ve just been promoted. Don’t look so astonished. I know this is very sudden, but the Guardian had to promote someone to fill Mabel Rossiter’s place, and her choice fell on me, as being quiet and respectable, though perhaps not so experienced as she might have wished.”

“But Mabel hasn’t left, has she?”

“Rather not! She also has had a step—into Phyllis’s shoes.”

“Phyllis’s!” Nancy stared at her, as they rode on together, more hopelessly bewildered than before.

Charity grinned.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, my child, but it will all come out at the meeting—along with several other things, which even I don’t know yet! This much I can tell you—Phyl is going over to No. 2 Maudsley as Maid-in-Waiting.”

“Oh!” said Nancy, and pedalled along in silence for a few yards. Then she observed tentatively: “Rather sickening for you, Charity, when she’s your pal, and you joined chiefly on her account.”

“But I didn’t,” said Charity. “I joined because the Guildry was beginning to interest me, and I thought I’d like to see its inner workings. I admit it was Phyllis who first roused my interest by nearly boring me to death over it, but I didn’t join only on her account.”

“Anyhow,” said Nancy, “I suppose you’d rather serve in the same company?”

“Naturally—but it seems to be for the greater good of the greater number that Phyl should move on, while I stay where I am.”

“Doesn’t Phyl mind?”

“She wasn’t very keen about it,” Charity confessed. “Chiefly, I fancy, because she felt as though she might be leaving me in the lurch. She said as much, when we talked it over.”

“And what did you say?”

Charity’s sleepy grey eyes twinkled.

“I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more,” she drawled; then resuming her natural voice, she said: “Joking apart, Nancy, we’ve got to consider, as Guildry members, what’s best for the Guildry, and everything points to Phyllis going. Miss Knevitt finds it difficult enough to work without an Assistant Guardian, but it will be extra hard for Mrs. Stephen, who has never tackled this kind of thing before. With Phyllis to help her, as Maid-in-Waiting, she can afford to wait till someone comes forward to take on the Assistant’s job; and then Phyl will be free to come back to us as Assistant. You know an M.W. has to serve two years in another company before she can be made Assistant in her own.”

“Yes,” said Nancy slowly. “I can see it’s best all round for Phyllis to go; but why don’t you go with her?”

“Because,” said Charity, swerving a little on her wheel as they turned into the drive at Knevitt Chase, “our Guardian seems to have a mistaken impression that I may be of some use to her where I am. It remains to be seen whether future events will confirm her impression. Probably not—but it’s up to me to try.”

Nancy was unusually silent throughout the merry tea-party that followed. It appeared that the same choice had come to Phyllis and Charity as was now about to confront her and her chum, Desda, and she was not altogether prepared to follow in the footsteps of the two older girls. For her it meant giving up her squad as well as leaving her chum, and Squad Six

meant a lot to its Maid-of-Merit. Phyllis, in her higher rank, had no special squad of her own, but Nancy was forced in honesty to remind herself that the whole company was dear to the girl who had come up through it from its earliest days. So much had she identified herself with it, that No. 1 Maudsley was known to the Grammar School girls as the "Philistines," in good-natured mockery of Phyllis's enthusiasm.

"It can't be easy for her to leave it all," thought Nancy, watching the fine clear-cut features of the Maid-of-Honour as she sat at Miss Knevitt's right hand. "I suppose she'd say we're not in the Guildry to think only of what pleases ourselves."

"Now, girls," began their Guardian briskly, as they took their places round the table in the morning-room to which she had removed them after tea, "this is going to be rather an important meeting, as most of you know already, for we have to discuss not only the business of our own company during the coming session, but how best to help the new one which is starting at St. Ninian's next week."

A little murmur of astonishment ran round the seven girls.

"Next week? As soon as that?"

"Yes—why not? The sooner the better. I have had about eight or nine new recruits wishing to join the Guildry, and, as you know, it's pretty well impossible for us to take in any more. So I am passing them over to Mrs. Stephen, who has kindly undertaken to run No. 2 Company, and they—with six girls from St. Ninian's congregation—will form a nucleus."

She paused, and looked round the table.

"That brings me to where the new venture is going to affect us personally. We have got to make some sacrifices to help the new company. I have talked it over with Phyllis Bainbridge, for example, and she has agreed to go to them as Maid-in-Waiting."

This was news to two of the girls present, who groaned dismally.

"I know," said Miss Knevitt smiling. "I feel rather like that myself; and I'm quite sure I shall miss her more than any of you, for she has been my right hand for two-and-a-half years. Still, Mrs. Stephen has asked for her, and we feel it's the right thing to do. I shall have Vivian Best, anyhow, and I am promoting Mabel Rossiter to fill the vacant place."

"As if I possibly could!" muttered Mabel, but their Guardian went on, unheeding:

“That, of course, leaves me short of an M.M., and explains why Charity Sheringham is here to-day, for I propose to turn over Mabel’s squad to her. She has not been so long in the company as some of the other girls, but she has got plenty of experience as a Grammar School prefect, and I feel she’s made of the stuff we want. What do you say, Phyl?”

“She’ll do all right,” replied Phyllis briefly, with an affectionate grin at her friend on the other side of the table. “But didn’t you say something, Miss Knevitt, about letting me take some of our girls with me to stiffen up the new lot? They would get on much better if we had even half a dozen who knew what they were doing, from the start.”

“Yes,” said Miss Knevitt slowly, “but it won’t be easy to make the choice. I am doubtful whether to ask for volunteers, or simply to say that all girls belonging to St. Ninian’s Church must be drafted to St. Ninian’s company.”

“Don’t you think it would be rather a pity,” said Nancy speaking for the first time, “if Angela, Barbara and I were all in our aunt’s company—at least, I mean—she’s Barbara’s step-mother, but it’s much the same thing.”

“Oh, exactly!” murmured Charity, *sotto voce*, but Miss Knevitt answered, laughing:

“Yes, I know what you mean, and I don’t want to add to Mrs. Stephen’s difficulties at the outset. I might keep either Barbara or Angela back for that reason, but the other St. Ninian’s girls could go, and—I think—you, Nancy.”

“Oh, Miss Knevitt! Why me?” broke from Nancy, finding herself face to face at last with the problem she had feared.

“Because, my dear, unwilling as I am to lose you, I feel that one of our Maids-of-Merit ought to go, and everything seems pointing to you.”

“But why me?” reiterated Nancy. “Why not Jess or Gwendoline? Truly, Miss Knevitt, I’m most unsuitable.”



## CHAPTER THE FIFTH

### A STREET PLAYER

Nancy's protest let loose a flood of discussion from the other members of the meeting, to which their Guardian listened in silence. She had expressed her views, but neither desired nor intended to coerce Nancy; having asked for a sacrifice, she realized that the sacrifice would be useless unless given willingly.

"We ought to send an M.M.," declared Vivian Best, "and it's hard for us to spare any of them, but I do think it would be hardest of all to let Nancy go. Our Juniors are rather difficult, and she's got the knack of handling them better than any of us."

"That's true," agreed one of the others; but Charity Sheringham looked across the table at Nancy with a whimsical smile.

"She ought to go because Miss Knevitt thinks she'll be the most useful. After all, we're out to help the new company, and set it on its feet to the best of our ability. If Nancy can help, we oughtn't to hold her back out of selfishness."

"But you're not holding me back," blurted out Nancy, with the honesty which was characteristic of her. "If I wanted to go I wouldn't stop for any of you—but I don't."

"Do you mean—we couldn't stop you if you thought it right to go?" queried Jess Henniker doubtfully.

"No, I don't. I expect it is right for me to go, if Miss Knevitt says so, but I should simply hate it!"

This curt statement of facts silenced her companions for the moment. Everyone knew that the choice rested with Nancy alone, and that Miss Knevitt would not urge it further. The Guardian herself realized that Nancy's very force of character made her hard to guide. In big affairs or small, she would always work out her own salvation, but her good-heartedness and strength of principle could usually be trusted to bring her out on the right side.

"Take time to think it over, Nancy," she said, "and you can let me know your decision later on. Now, about those first-aid lectures, Vivian— —"

And they plunged forthwith into plans for the coming session's company work, while Nancy listened in an odd detached way, as though already the 1st Maudsley's affairs were none of hers. Then, realizing suddenly what this portended, she joined in more eagerly than any, telling herself that she had no intention of giving way. Anyhow, both Vivian and Jess thought she ought to remain where she was; and there could be no parallel between her case and that of Phyllis Bainbridge. Phyl was an important person, who could give valuable help to the new company, and her own looked forward to having her back again as Assistant Guardian, when she had served the necessary time as Maid-in-Waiting to No. 2 Maudsley. With regard to herself, Nancy chose to be firmly convinced that she was only useful in her present position, with the squad which she had succeeded in taming into a semblance of good conduct. There was no sense in her going over with the other St. Ninian's girls.

In this frame of mind she said good night to the Guardian when the meeting was over, and they all trooped out on to the broad gravel sweep before the porch.

"Dear me! it's beginning to grow dark already," exclaimed Miss Knevitt. "I hope I haven't kept you too long. Till next Friday evening, then, girls. Good-bye, and don't dawdle on the way home."

Nancy had farthest to go, and soon rode rapidly ahead of the others. Phyllis and Charity—the only two who were going in the same direction—saw that one of her solitary moods was upon her, and that she would prefer to think things out undisturbed by their society and advice; so they made no attempt to detain her, and she soon outdistanced them altogether.

Riding through the outskirts of Maudsley she was startled out of her troubled thoughts by the notes of a flute, high and sweet, played with a skill and depth of feeling which at once awakened a responsive chord in her musical soul. The strains floated out from a small side street, and, as she reached it, Nancy dismounted and paused for a moment, peering into the windy dusk in search of the player.

"It sounds just like Althea Stoddart, only a great deal better than Althea, even at her best," she thought. "Yet she was considered an infant prodigy on her flute when I was at St. Bride's. I wish I could see this performer, whoever it is. If he would only start playing again—"

As if in answer to her wish the music began once more, a few yards up the road, and Nancy promptly wheeled her bicycle in that direction. Presently the musician took shape out of the shadows, and Nancy, to her

astonishment, recognized a girl of her own age and height, shabbily dressed and woefully thin, but evidently, from her appearance, a lady. The Grammar School girl moved near enough to see her face, as a ray of light fell on it from one of the infrequent street lamps, and started forward with an exclamation.



“WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING IN MAUDSLEY?”

“Althea, good gracious! I thought it sounded like you, only heaps better. What on earth are you doing in Maudsley? And why are you playing in the

street? Is it,” remembering an escapade of her own, shared the previous Christmas with Desda and Angela, “some sort of feeble joke?”

The musician, even more startled than Nancy, lowered her instrument, leaving the tune unfinished, and leaned against a convenient gate-post.

“Nancy Caird!” she exclaimed. “Do you live here?” Then, rallying herself to answer her old schoolfellow’s question—“A very feeble sort of joke, indeed! If you want to know, I’m playing in the street for my bread-and-butter, and I’ve earned precious little of either this evening!”

Nancy stared, still incredulous, suspecting some subtle sarcasm, though Althea had not been given to sarcasm two years before when they had slept in the same dormitory at St. Bride’s. But even her inexperience could read the genuine hunger in Althea’s white face, unnaturally sharp and worn for a girl of sixteen, and altogether changed from what it had been during their days at the island school.

Nancy seized her by the arm, and (still guiding her cycle with one hand) she dragged her back to the High Street.

“I can’t stand that!” she said firmly. “I must hear what’s happened; but first of all, we’re going to have a large tea at the Corner Shop. Althea, you look as though you were capable of fainting at my feet any minute!”

“I’m not far off it, I’m afraid,” confessed Althea, with a poor attempt at a smile. “But—but, Nancy—I can’t let you give me tea— —”

“You can have a jolly good try, anyhow!” retorted Nancy grimly, still pulling her on. “Look here, Althea! we used to be rather good pals before I got myself sacked from St. Bride’s, and if you refuse to eat with me now I shall think it’s because you’re ashamed to be seen with me after what happened then.”

Althea gave a shaky laugh.

“More like it if you were ashamed to be seen with me! My clothes aren’t specially smart, as you can see even in this half-light. I never go out playing until the gloaming, because I—I don’t care to be looked at too closely.”

“Shut up!” ordered Nancy in her fiercest voice. “Here we are, and if you don’t mind we’ll make it supper instead of tea. I’ve had that already at Knevitt Chase, but I foresee I may be late for my evening meal at home. Luckily, Grannie’s away for the week-end, and Esther—the maid—won’t agitate for another two hours or so. She’ll think I’ve stayed on at the Chase.”

“And my mother,” said Althea sadly, “won’t expect me to get home for quite that time, so we can sit here and talk—if they’ll let us. Oh, it is a joy to be warm!”

She sank wearily into the chair which Nancy pulled out for her at one of the small tables, and watched, with a shamed attempt to hide her eagerness, while her young hostess ordered a first course of boiled eggs, to be followed by sausages and mash, and the most substantial pudding she could find on the list.

“It’s only supposed to be a baker’s, you see, not a restaurant,” she said apologetically, “so there isn’t much to be had in the way of a decent square meal. Don’t bother to talk, old thing, till you’ve eaten that egg.”

Althea obeyed thankfully, and a little colour stole into her face as she drank the hot milk which Nancy had added to the menu. Then her eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she said brokenly:

“I feel such a greedy beast when I think of poor Mother sitting in that cold dreary room with only bread-and-milk for her supper, and saving half of that for me. I wish— —”

She choked over the last mouthful of egg, and looked almost guiltily at the plate of sausage and potatoes which Nancy pushed towards her.

Nancy’s own eyes were suspiciously wet.

“I say,” she began tentatively, afraid of hurting the other girl’s pride, “would you mind awfully if I lent you five shillings! Then you could take her back some things from here. They’ve got quite decent meat pies, and stuff like that.”

A rapid calculation had shown her that she would still have enough pocket-money left to pay for their present meal if Althea accepted her proffered loan, though it would leave her practically penniless till the end of the month.

There was no lack of colour in Althea’s face now, as she said hurriedly:

“I—I can’t, Nancy, because I couldn’t be sure of ever paying it back; but I earned two sixpences before I met you, to-night, so I can take in something for her. She said that whatever I made must go towards the rent of our rooms, but—I can’t eat a meal like this and— —”

She choked again, but Nancy said quickly:

“I know! I’m sorry about the five bob, but—I understand. Althea, I don’t want to ask questions if you’d rather not talk about it, but perhaps if you told me a little about yourself I might be able to think of some way of helping.”

“It won’t take long to tell,” answered Althea, staring straight in front of her. “We were never well-off, but two years ago Father died, and every penny he left was swallowed up in debts. I had to leave St. Bride’s, and Mother got work in a shop in London; but she wasn’t used to the long hours of standing, and she had an illness from which she hasn’t really recovered yet. We came to these rooms in Maudsley because we thought it would be cheaper and healthier than London, but nothing is cheap or healthy when you haven’t got a sou to live on. If Mother was well I’d try to get a job as housemaid somewhere, but I can’t leave her like this—and anyhow it’ll be the workhouse for both of us by the end of the month.”

“Nonsense!” cried Nancy. “It can’t possibly be allowed to get as bad as that. I know lots of people who would help to find work for you, so that you needn’t leave your mother. All you really need is friends, and I can find them for you. Why, I’ve thought of something within the last second! I shan’t tell you what it is in case it doesn’t come off, but even if that fails there are other ways. Keep up your courage, my dear, and you’ll see things will begin to come right from this very moment.”

Althea smiled across at her wistfully.

“It’s much easier to keep up one’s courage when one has had something to eat,” she said simply. “I can’t thank you, Nancy—I don’t know how, it’s beyond thanks—not only for the meal, but for being so comforting.”

“Oh, that’s all rot!” replied Nancy, relapsing into her ordinary brusque self. “Wait till I’ve really done something before you start thanking me. Look here, if you’re sure you can’t eat any more pudding, I think I’d better be off. I want to begin doing something for you to-night, if I can, and time’s getting on. Just let me have your address, and then I’ll leave you to get what you want for your mother.”

Althea gave the address, adding abruptly:

“But we mayn’t be there many more days, because we can’t pay the rent.”

“If my scheme comes off,” said Nancy, nodding mysteriously, “you certainly won’t be there much longer.”

## CHAPTER THE SIXTH

### NANCY'S IDEA

Having parted from Althea, Nancy rode rapidly homewards, her kind heart full to bursting with a sort of inarticulate pity, and fierce determination to play Providence in the affairs of the Stoddarts. It was very evident that someone was needed for the *rôle*, and needed urgently, but nobody else seemed forthcoming.

“I may be too young to be of much use myself,” she thought, “but I believe I can set other people going if I try—and anyhow I’m quite sure the best plan is to find Lord Woodridge.”

Accordingly she turned her wheel off the highway a mile short of Fernglade, and rode up a long drive between high banks of laurels till she reached a long white rambling house backed with three enormous cedars, which loomed large against the starry twilight behind them.

Nancy left her bicycle among the laurels and rang the bell.

Lord Woodridge was in, the butler informed her, and alone. He would be delighted to see Miss Nancy, if she would just step this way to the library; and Nancy followed him down the carpeted passage with the assured step of one who knew her way and was entirely at home.

Lord Woodridge, puffing a disreputable-looking pipe, was poring over the illustrations in a well-known nature periodical, with some fine coloured plates of rare wildflowers spread out on the polished table before him.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed, looking up at his guest through the large disfiguring glasses, which seemed only to magnify the kindness beaming behind them. “And to what do I owe the honour of this late visit?”

“You don’t owe it to ‘what’ at all,” replied Nancy. “It’s a ‘whom’—at least, it’s a girl. I found her in great trouble, so I came to you about her.”

Lord Woodridge pushed away his magazine with a groan.

“You would!” he said. “Ever since I became mixed up in Guildry circles this sort of thing has gone on at intervals. I’m always being called upon to succour some damsel in distress, and generally by you. Sit down, Nancy, and let’s have it—as briefly as possible.”

“All right,” assented Nancy, perching herself on the edge of the table, while he sank into the chair nearest to her. “But it’s real trouble, this time, Lord Woodridge—it’s—it’s starvation!”

His lordship caught a glimpse of tears in her blue eyes, which was even more convincing than the earnest ring of her voice.

“You don’t say so!” he exclaimed. “That’s bad! Where did you find her, Nancy? I’d no idea there was anyone on this estate as far gone as all that. It must be looked into at once.”

“They’re not your tenants,” said Nancy. “Not yet, at least, though I hope they soon will be—that’s why I’ve come to you.”

And she told Althea’s story, as far as she knew it, while her host listened with growing concern.

“Piping in the streets for food—gentle-people, too—and nothing to pay the rent!” He looked about him vaguely, and ran his hands through his untidy hair. “But, I say! you know. This sort of thing won’t do! How about having them here? I could send the car in for them at once. I suppose the mother isn’t too ill to be moved?”

Nancy’s wet eyes, which were rapidly drying now, shone approval on him, though her practical mind saw the flaws in his plan.

“Oh, no! I should think her illness is mostly worry and lack of food. But you couldn’t have them here, Lord Woodridge—not straightaway like that when they haven’t even met you. They’d feel pauperized at once, don’t you see?”





**“I’M ALWAYS BEING CALLED UPON TO SUCCOUR  
SOME DAMSEL IN DISTRESS”**

“No, I don’t see. Seems to me the natural thing to do—but I dare say you’re right, Nancy, for you’re a sensible sort of girl. What do you want me

to do, though? You must have had some kind of plan in your head when you came here.”

“Yes, I have,” said Nancy, regarding him rather doubtfully, “but I don’t quite know what you’ll say to it, because I’m afraid it may be rather a new idea for you. It’s that natural history museum you’re opening in Maudsley next week.”

This museum, housing his own wonderful collection, was the darling project of Lord Woodridge’s heart, and his goggles lit up eagerly at the mention of it.

“Yes, what about that?”

“Well,” said Nancy, running her fingers along the bevelled edge of the mahogany table, and keeping her eyes fixed on their progress, “you’ll—you’ll want a caretaker for it, and I wondered—couldn’t you give the job to Althea’s mother? I thought of it directly, because her father used to be a naturalist, so Mrs. Stoddart’s sure to know a lot about it.”

Lord Woodridge stared at her in silence for a moment, and Nancy slipped nervously off her seat.

“Oh, do say yes!” she pleaded coaxingly. “They could have that dear little flat above the museum, and move into it directly, and they would have the caretaker’s salary— —”

“Curator, my dear child, curator!” protested Lord Woodridge hastily. “You don’t talk about the caretaker of a museum, especially if she’s a lady. Sounds like a rusty black bonnet over one ear, and a pint of gin-and-bitters in a broken-nosed jug!”

“But is she going to be a lady?” asked Nancy anxiously. “I mean is she going to be Mrs. Stoddart?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” replied Lord Woodridge in a hurry. “Remember I had nothing of the sort in my head when the builder designed that flat. It’s only three rooms and a kitchen. You could hardly ask anyone to live in it who was—er—used to better quarters.”

“You could, if she was starving,” said Nancy, her voice breaking again, as a vision rose before her of Althea, and their meal in the Corner Shop. She had never before seen real starvation with her own eyes, and being tender-hearted it was hard to forget it.

Lord Woodridge began tugging at his hair again.

“I don’t know what to do!” he exclaimed distractedly. “They can’t starve, of course, and the flat is ready for anyone to move into, to-morrow for that matter; but I can’t feel it’s suitable. It would be so much better if they came and stayed here for a bit.”

“I don’t believe it would,” declared Nancy, with conviction. “That would be charity, but the flat and the museum would be business.”

Again Lord Woodridge sat silent for the space of a few minutes; then, springing up abruptly, he proceeded to smooth his hair down with both hands.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he said. “I’ll take you home now, and on the way I’ll look in at Redgables, and consult your aunt. She and Stephen are sure to know what’s the best thing to do. Did you say her father was a naturalist?”

“Not Auntie Beth’s,” replied Nancy, skipping gleefully round the table, “but Althea’s was.”

“Don’t be pert, miss!” said Lord Woodridge severely. “And for goodness’ sake, get out of this pernicious habit of regarding me as a kind of amateur knight-errant! See the trouble you’ve landed me in, this time!”

“I haven’t,” said Nancy imperturbably. “It was your own kind-heartedness. I knew I was doing the wisest thing possible when I came to you.”

Having found his own bicycle, and lit her lamp for her, Lord Woodridge escorted his guest as far as the gate of Fernglade, then crossing the drive he slipped through a convenient gap in the hedge into the grounds of Redgables.

“Tell them I’m just coming,” Nancy called after him, “when I’ve put up my bike. They did ask me to supper there, but I forgot all about it till this very minute. I shall have to come and apologize.”

She followed him through the rhododendron hedge, a few moments later, to be met on the doorstep by Angela.

“What have you been doing?” she exclaimed. “Babs is in the schoolroom with Desda—she came to supper, though you didn’t! By the by, have you had any? Did you get it at Knevitt Chase?”

“No—I had it in the Corner Shop at Maudsley,” said Nancy, who loved to tease her step-cousin by rousing her ever-ready curiosity.

Angela's eyes grew round at once.

"Why on earth didn't you come straight back?" she demanded, leading the way to the large shabby room at the back of the house, which was their special sanctum. "Did you think we should have finished? And what happened at the meeting to make it so long?"

"It wasn't long," replied Nancy. "I could have been here in plenty of time if I'd liked."

Angela came to a standstill in the doorway, barring her path.

"Nancy!" she cried despairingly. "You don't know how badly I long to shake you sometimes!"

Barbara came forward, a dainty little figure in the primrose frock which she had put on for supper. Barbara's garments were now as simple as they had once been elaborate (before her step-mother took her wardrobe in hand), yet she always looked fresh and smart. Desda, behind her, in picturesque untidiness, presented a strong contrast, for Desda had an artistic temperament, and all the messiness thereof.

"What have you been doing, Nance?" Barbara asked, in her turn. "Lucky for you Grannie isn't at home, or she would have had fits!"

"Yes, isn't it a mercy!" Nancy agreed. "I couldn't have done it very well if she hadn't been away—not without 'phoning home first, at any rate."

"You might have 'phoned here, in any case," said Desda. "We were beginning to think you must have been carried off."

"Couldn't have done *what*?" broke in Angela's agonized tones. "I must know what you've been up to!"

Nancy's blue eyes began to twinkle.

"I suppose it will be only kind to put you out of your misery," she remarked, throwing herself into one of the low comfortable chairs which had somehow drifted into the schoolroom. "As a matter of fact, I've had the most amazing adventure since I left the Chase. Make yourselves quite at home, girls, and listen."

After which she told Althea's story for the second time, adding, as the sequel, an account of her visit to Lord Woodridge.

"He's in the drawing-room at present, getting advice from Auntie Beth and Uncle Ted," she finished; "but I feel pretty sure what that's likely to be. I expect Aunt Elizabeth remembers Althea, for she was a tiny little new girl in

Auntie's last term at St. Bride's—before I was quite old enough to go there, you know. Althea's a year older than I am."

"You think he's sure to let them have the museum job?" asked Barbara; and Nancy nodded.

"I saw every sign of it before I got him here at all. You know what a kind old thing he is, and he can't bear to think of anyone being in such difficulties. Just fancy, Angel! she was actually hungry, and yet she could hardly eat for the thought of her mother at home without food!"

"Don't!" exclaimed Desda quickly. "It's making me miserable. What a blessing you heard her playing, Nance!"

"Does she play very well?" inquired Angela.

"Rippingly. I just wish we could have her at school for the 'Am,' Desda."

"Stranger things have happened," said Desda oracularly. "I suppose if they get fixed up at the museum she'll have to go to school somewhere, and I know Lord Woodridge has a nomination for Maudsley. He might give it to her. I expect he'll think of it himself."

"If not," said Nancy, "we might get Auntie Beth to put it into his head, I can't help thinking I've done enough in that line at present! I felt rather cheeky and interfering—at least, I do now. I hadn't time, when I did it, to think of anything but how to help the Stoddarts."

Later on, as she and Desda strolled down the drive together on their way home to bed, Desda asked anxiously:

"What about the new company at St. Ninian's, Nancy? I don't want to ask questions you can't answer, but I should like to know if anything was settled about you to-night. It will be hateful if you have to leave the 1st Maudsley."

"Oh, I haven't got to!" replied Nancy hastily, disengaging her arm, as they reached her own gate. "I don't mean to go, and Miss Knevitt won't make me do anything against my will. Good night, Des! I daren't stay out any longer or Esther will be coming to look for me. See you on Monday morning, if not before."

## CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

### ALTHEA AT THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Everything fell out exactly as Nancy had hoped and planned with regard to the Stoddarts. Lord Woodridge (taking Mrs. Stephen with him to protect his shyness) called on Mrs. Stoddart the following morning, immediately after church, giving as his excuse the fact that he had only just learnt she was living in the neighbourhood and that she was the widow of Professor Andrew Stoddart the naturalist.

“You see, it’s like this,” went on Lord Woodridge, fidgeting nervously with his tie; “I’m just about to open a museum of sorts in the town—quite a small affair—but I want a curator, and I thought,” warming to his task, “I’d like to find an educated person, if I could, who’d take on the job. It seemed to me, if I could get a lady with—er—some knowledge of natural history, or, at least—er—naturalist associations, that would be the ideal scheme—what?”

He paused and glanced appealingly at Elizabeth Stephen, who dashed into the breach with great presence of mind, seeing that all these aspirations of his lordship’s were new to her. Only two days before she had heard him discussing with her husband the advisability of putting in a discharged Tommy, with or without a wife.

“I told Lord Woodridge that I thought you would be the very person, if we could persuade you to take it. My niece had just met Althea, and I remembered her quite well as one of the kiddies at St. Bride’s during my last term there. I remembered, too, hearing that she was Professor Stoddart’s daughter. We got your address from Nancy, and I said I’d come too, because — —”

She stammered at this juncture, and the other conspirator took up the tale again, having had a short respite in which to draw further on his imagination.

“My idea was to find somebody who could supervise all the dusting operations, and that sort of thing, with the minimum of risk to the specimens. Personally, I don’t hold with dusting at all, but other people seem to fancy it’s advisable from time to time, and if there has to be a charwoman, then there must be someone with experience and authority to keep an eye on

her, what? The only trouble is the flat—and the screw. You see, they are both small—you may not think it worth while— —”

His voice died out in turn, and this time Elizabeth was not prepared to step in, but Mrs. Stoddart looked from one to the other with grateful tears in her pretty faded eyes.

“I can’t help suspecting some kind plot behind all this,” she said brokenly, “unless there has been a special intervention of Providence—perhaps both. Anyhow, I believe I am still capable of doing what you require, so I can only accept your offer and your goodness, with more gratitude than I can express. Thank you a thousand times!”

“But here—hold hard!” exclaimed Lord Woodridge, shocked at such unbusinesslike impetuosity. “I can’t let you accept till you hear what it is you’re accepting. Only two hundred a year, and free lodgings, you know.”

Elizabeth, who knew that the discharged soldier was to have had half that sum, heard him without the flutter of an eyelash, only giving thanks inwardly that Lord Woodridge’s income ran into five (not inconsiderable) figures.

“I don’t think,” said Mrs. Stoddart, smiling tremulously, “that you need be surprised at my acceptance when I tell you that we have reached the last three pounds—Althea and I—that we possess in the world.”

Elizabeth went home to tell the girls that everything was satisfactorily arranged, that Lord Woodridge was having some of his own superfluous furniture moved in, to-morrow, to the flat above the museum, and that the Stoddarts, though still poor, were no longer starving.

“It’s a tremendous weight off my mind,” sighed Nancy, who was dining at Redgables, to make up for the supper she had cut the previous evening.

“Lord Woodridge says it was your plan from beginning to end,” observed her aunt, “and really, I think it does you credit. You have certainly made two people very happy.”

Nancy coloured at the unexpected praise, but promptly disclaimed it.

“The machinery was all there, waiting to be started,” she said. “I was only the cog which was slipped in to connect it up, and make it work—at least—is that the sort of thing cogs do, Uncle Ted?”

“For heaven’s sake don’t ask me questions about machinery!” protested Major Stephen. “I know nothing about it, and what I do know, I dislike.

Translate it into wireless, now, and I'll give you my opinion—call yourself a connecting switch.”

“All right,” responded Nancy, helping herself to salad. “But cog’s shorter. Anyhow, you know what I mean.”

It was the end of the following week, and the Stoddarts had been established for some days in their new quarters before Desda’s prophecy came true. Whether it was owing to any suggestion of Mrs. Stephen’s or not, Lord Woodridge had exercised his right to nominate a free scholar to the Grammar School, and Althea appeared in hall one Monday morning.

Her entrance came as something of a surprise to Nancy, who had seen nothing of her for a few days, and had no idea that things were being fixed up so rapidly.

“Althea!” she exclaimed, crossing over to greet the newcomer. “I’m awfully glad to see you, but this is so sudden! When did you do the entrance exam.?”

“On Saturday,” answered Althea, whose dark eyes looked a trifle scared at this plunge into a new life. “Lord Woodridge fixed it up with Miss Hale because he thought it would be easier for me to begin straightaway rather than lose any more weeks by waiting for half-term. Mother thought he was right, and anyhow he has been so frightfully kind to us, that it was for him to decide.”

“I’m very glad you didn’t wait for half-term, anyhow,” said Nancy warmly. “It’s awfully jolly to be at school together again, even if Maudsley is rather different from St. Bride’s. You’ll get to love it all the better for that very reason. If I’d gone to another boarding-school I should have hankered dreadfully after St. Bride’s, but you can’t draw comparisons here, and this is a ripping place.”

“I’m sure it is—when one gets to know it,” agreed Althea, “but it’s rather big and frightening at first.”

“Not with us to look after you,” said Nancy encouragingly. “Here’s Desda Blackett, my chum. You know, I told you about her, but she couldn’t come to tea the day I asked you, because she had to go to the dentist. You only saw Babs and Angela.”

Desda and Althea took stock of each other, and instantly liked what they saw; though, later on, when she and Nancy were alone together for a few minutes during recreation, Desda said soberly:



“School won’t be very easy for that girl, Nance—not in our form, at any rate.”

“Why not?” asked Nancy, looking up in astonishment from the lacing of her hockey boots.

“Because,” said Desda slowly, “it’s bound to leak out that she’s a free scholar, and that won’t be appreciated in the Upper Fifth.”

“What on earth do you mean?” Nancy exclaimed.

Desda, struggling into her brown overcoat, did not answer for a moment. It was difficult to explain the state of affairs to a girl like Nancy, who was so far removed from pettiness that she did not always recognize it when she saw it.

“I mean that there are people in V(a) who could be very snobby, if they liked, and they probably won’t judge Althea on her own merits. The fact that she’s a good sort won’t weigh anything with them against the drawback of her being a free scholar.”

Nancy gave a violent tug to her last knot, and stood up, turning an unusually red face on her friend.

“I suppose there have been free scholars at Maudsley before!” she said with force.

“Plenty! but never in the Upper School. Such a thing is quite a phenomenon among the Seniors.”

“Anyway, I refuse to believe they’d be such small-minded idiots!” said Nancy loftily. “You shouldn’t let your imagination run away with you, Desda.”

Desda shrugged her shoulders as she followed her out of the cloak-room.

“It’s just possible that they may never discover how Althea got here,” she said, not very hopefully.

“There’s no reason on earth why they shouldn’t!” snapped Nancy, and hurried out to join the hockeyward stream.

Constance Reid and her lieutenant, Enid Ford, were pleased to find in the new girl a promising forward, swift and light of foot, though of no great staying-power.

“That will improve as she gets stronger,” declared Nancy. “She could stick out anything when she was at St. Bride’s.”

“Has she been ill?” asked Enid, glancing across the field to where Althea stood, at the moment her thin face flushed with the colour which had come into it with healthy exercise. “She looks rather delicate.”

“Oh, no,” said Nancy hastily. “She’s—she’s had a bad time lately—lost her father, and her mother’s been ill.”

And she felt herself reddening, in her turn, at the feeling of having involuntarily concealed something. Which was ridiculous, of course; she was not called upon to confide to Enid or Constance that the newcomer’s physique had been lowered by months of hardship and under-feeding, such as it would take many more months to rectify.

“It’s Desda’s fault for putting her idiotic ideas into my head,” she thought resentfully; yet the day was to come when she wondered if it would not have been wiser to have told those two girls something of Althea’s pitiful story, and enlisted their sympathies while they were still open to enlistment.

“I expect she’ll shape all right in the end,” said the games-captain, turning back to her team. “Ready, you people? Right! Just get back to your places, and we’ll do a little passing.”

At dinner-time she asked Nancy casually:

“Will Althea Stoddart be any use to the ‘Am’?”

Nancy beamed with the pleasure of one who has only good news to impart.

“My dear, she’ll be a treasure! Not for Desda’s side of it—I should think she’s much too shy to do any acting—but she’s awfully musical, and she plays a thing which nobody else here has ever touched—the flute.”

“What? Solos? Or do you mean she’ll fit into the toy symphony?”

Nancy threw back her head and laughed.

“Toy symphony! Wait till you’ve heard Althea’s flute! She’ll play solos for you that will make our ‘Am’ the talk of the school. The rest will think far more of a flute, you know, than of a piano or fiddle, which most of them can play, more or less, themselves.”

“There’s a lot of truth in that,” admitted Constance, and went into the dining-hall thoroughly satisfied that Althea Stoddart was likely to prove an acquisition to V(a).

And Althea, as the days went on, found that her successful launching into the stream of life at this big public day-school was carrying her forward on the tide of popularity. It was all very pleasant and utterly unexpected, as she felt, when looking back on the dark days which had preceded her chance encounter with Nancy.

## CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

### A COMMITTEE MEETING

The committee of the Upper Fifth's Amateur Musical and Dramatic Society had met in a corner of that form's cloak-room, it being the dinner-hour and too wet for games.

"This may not be a very comfortable spot for a committee meeting," admitted the chairman, whose choice it was (and who had brought her own chair with her from upstairs), "but you can't have everything, and at least it's private."

"Oh, it's private, right enough!" agreed Helen Hislop. "But where we ought to be at present, by rights, is in hall, and if we're found down here by anyone in authority, there may be a slight unpleasantness."

Constance looked pained at this cavilling.

"I'd like to know how we could have a committee in hall," she observed sardonically, "with the piano going, and half the Upper School dancing."

"It might have been safer," retorted Helen, "to have got permission, and held the meeting somewhere upstairs. However, I don't suppose it matters much, so let's all sit down on the shoe-cupboards, or somewhere, and begin."

"There ought to be minutes of the last meeting, or something, to begin with," said Constance, "but we forgot about having a secretary, so there aren't any."

"That's rather a pity," said Nancy regretfully. "Minutes are such a help in getting things started. Once you've read the minutes, and argued about them, it seems easier, somehow, to slide into the rest of the agenda."

"But we haven't got an agenda either," confessed Constance, with an uneasy feeling that she had been, in some way, very remiss; and it was a certain satisfaction to her when Enid Ford frankly admitted her ignorance by inquiring:

"What is an agenda?"

"Only a list of things we want to talk about," explained Nancy, drawing upon Guildry experience. "The secretary writes them down so that the

chairman doesn't forget anything."

"But how can the secretary—supposing you've got one—know beforehand what everyone wants to talk about?" demanded the critical Helen.

"She can only guess," Nancy answered, "and whatever she leaves out, comes in at the end, and is called 'Any other business.' You always see that at the foot of an agenda."

"It strikes me," said the chairman, recovering her usual briskness, "that the first thing we've got to do is to make somebody into a secretary, or we shan't have any minutes at our next meeting either, and I know they are important."

The remaining four members of committee glanced at each other, and said nothing, till Nancy announced firmly:

"Anyhow it can't be either Desda or me, because we've each got our job already."

"I wasn't thinking of either of you," returned Constance crushingly. "I was wondering if it hadn't better be Helen."

"Why?" asked Desda, not from any intentional rudeness, but merely from an entirely detached interest in Constance's reasons.

"Because then she can arrange everything to suit her own ideas, and there won't be any valuable time wasted in grousing over her choice of a committee-room. It's sure to be all right if Helen chooses it!"

"I dare say it'll be better than this effort of yours," rejoined Helen imperturbably. "I'll be secretary, if you like, but I shall have to take the minutes in my head, this time, because, not foreseeing my appointment, I haven't got a note-book."

"That won't do," declared Nancy at once. "One's head is no place to take minutes, because if there are many mistakes in them everyone else makes such a fuss. If you'll dash off for a pencil and some paper we'll try to get an agenda ready before you come back. Of course that will have to be in our heads, for once, but it can't be helped."

The newly appointed secretary hurried off, but when she returned the agenda apparently consisted of two items only, and the committee had agreed to dispose of the shortest first.

“I beg to propose the name of Althea Stoddart as a new member of the ‘Am,’” said Nancy.

“And I’ll second her,” cried Desda, bobbing up from her seat. “Now, you have all got to hold up your hands—that’s right—and Helen sticks down in the minutes that she has been elected unanimously.”

“That didn’t take long, anyhow,” said Enid with satisfaction.

“I don’t know much about committee meetings,” said the chairman severely, “but I’m perfectly certain I ought to do most of the talking—not Desda and Enid. That Althea business is done now, so we’ll go on to the next thing, which is this—are we to wait till the end of the term before we have a performance, or shall we do something soon?”

The committee considered this problem in silence for a moment; then Helen said:

“The end of the term is the proper time for shows, of course. People always have them then.”

“Yes; but if we do nothing till then,” pointed out Constance, “how’s the school to know that the Upper Fifth are—have—”

“Are going to break out and distinguish themselves?” suggested Nancy. “Bless you! they’ve only got to listen outside the door when the toy symphony is practising!”

“There’s no one at school to listen,” said Constance in all seriousness. “I vote we do something at once—next week, anyhow.”

Nancy collapsed.

“Not the symphony, please! They may be ready next term—with luck—but not before.”

“We can do without ’em, then. They’ll be something new for next term, if they don’t come on before. Would it be possible to give some sort of show next Saturday?”

“If ‘some sort of show’ will do,” retorted Nancy. “But why not wait a bit, and make a decent effort?”

The majority of the meeting, however, were averse to waiting, even Desda—though it presently transpired that her reason was different from that of the others.

“I’ll do all I can to help—on one condition,” she announced, “and that is that the proceeds are given to our new Guildry company.”

Nancy jumped in her seat.

“What a splendid idea!” she exclaimed. “I second that—rather!”

“But we weren’t going to have any proceeds,” objected Constance. “At least, I never thought of it.”

“Well, we are now,” said Desda firmly. “I’ve thought of it.”

“It’s quite a scheme,” agreed Helen, who was of a practical turn. “People always value things more if they pay for them.”

“But if we’re going to bring money into this,” said the chairman distractedly, “we shall have to have a treasurer next, and who’s going to do that? It will have to be Enid, because she’s the only one of us who hasn’t got a job already, though everybody knows that Enid can’t tell how many pence make twelve.”

“I can’t, and I won’t!” declared Enid with iron determination. “Nothing will make me take charge of anybody’s money, nor keep accounts—so there!”

“We can’t even begin to make money until we’ve got a treasurer,” said Constance. “I don’t know much about the running of societies, but I’m quite clear about that.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Helen breezily. “What is there to make such a fuss about? I don’t suppose our takings will amount to many thousands, and I can be treasurer as well as secretary. But I don’t see why we should give what we make to the Guildry, when only two out of the whole form belong to it.”

“Neither do I,” said Enid.

But Desda, ordinarily good-natured and happy-go-lucky, could be obstinate when her mind was made up.

“It will have to go to some charity, anyhow,” she said. “I don’t suppose you want to keep it and spend it on a form feast, do you? Very well, then! Why not the Guildry? You may not belong to it, but you couldn’t possibly have anything against it, and Nance and I spoke for it first.”

“But you’re only two out of twenty-five,” persisted Enid.

“You and Helen are only two on the other side, and Constance hasn’t uttered a word so far— —”

(“I haven’t had a chance, though I *am* in the chair!” protested Constance.)

“— —and for all you know the other twenty may be delighted.”

“Then why not ask them first?” proposed Helen, not unreasonably.

Desda gave her a glance of scorn.

“What’s a committee for, if not to decide things? How far do you suppose we’ll get if you want to consult the whole society before you pass a resolution? Anyhow, Miss Chairman, I beg to propose that we charge 3d. for entrance, and give it to the 2nd Maudsley Company to help them with their equipment. Nancy’s seconded it already, so you’ve only got to pass it.”

“I’m not going to!” cried Constance, getting her chance at last. “If for no other reason than because you’re a great deal too bossy, Desda Blackett!”

Desda dropped back into nonchalance once more.

“All right, then—don’t!” she said. “But I shall go on strike, and very probably Nancy will, too.”

She glanced questioningly at her chum, for it was not Nancy’s way to let anyone else decide for her.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” she answered now, “but most likely I shall.”

The other three members of committee sat back limply, and regarded them with silent dismay. If one went on strike without the other it might still be possible to get up some sort of entertainment, but with both out of it nothing could be done. It was not even as though the rest of the form had already practised sufficiently to be independent of their help. In the programme which Constance had been drawing up before her mind’s eye, Desda’s recitations and Nancy’s brilliant piano solos figured as *pièces de résistance*. Enid’s violin, and Helen’s careful selections from the Oxford Book of Verse, however well spoken, would leave the audience unmoved by comparison. The Upper Fifth would show themselves as mediocre as hitherto unless Nancy and Desda took part in their “show.”

Not for the first time in history, a weak majority capitulated to a strong minority.



“All right, then,” said Constance, half-sulkily. “Give the money to your old Guildry—that is, if we ever get any. And now—what about the programme?”

Desda and Nancy came whole-heartedly into the construction of it, while the new secretary-cum-treasurer jotted down the various ideas in her notebook.

“If I don’t I shan’t have any minutes at all,” she explained. “Nothing to speak of, anyhow—and a secretary’s not much use without minutes.”

“Enid had better play that ‘Berceuse’ thing,” said Nancy, “because she does it better than anything else, and I happen to know the accompaniment. As for the others—”

“Are any of them fit to do anything yet?” asked Constance anxiously.

Nancy meditated.

“I don’t know about the trio,” she said, at last. “Enid’s in it. What do you think, Enid?”

“Rotten!” replied the violinist briefly. “We might just get through ‘The Merry Peasant’ with six mistakes apiece, but I shouldn’t recommend it.”

“I should think the best plan,” said Nancy, “would be for the committee to come to the practice to-morrow afternoon—I mean, as a committee, not just as yourselves—and we can try one or two of the brighter specimens to let you judge. Brenda Lawson sings not badly; she might go down for something.”

“And what about Desda’s crowd?” asked the chairman.

Desda groaned.

“Dramatic talent is not the outstanding feature of V(a),” she said frankly. “But we’ll see what can be done. There’s one bright particular star, though, in Nancy’s hemisphere, of whom she’s said nothing, and that’s our new member, Althea Stoddart.”

Nancy looked mysterious, as she was fond of doing from time to time.

“I said nothing, but I hadn’t forgotten her,” she replied. “You leave Althea to me, and you’ll get the surprise of your lives, next Saturday afternoon. For once V(a) is going to make a sensation!”

“Quite sure?” asked Constance eagerly. “Is her flute as good as all that?”

The Maudleians had a great respect for Nancy's judgment in things musical, since she had distinguished herself considerably in her own line during the last year. It was perhaps not the best thing for the girl herself, but so far her head had remained unturned by her various successes in school or out of it. She took her music more or less as a matter of course, and was always ready to use it in the service of others.

"Absolutely certain," she said now, with emphasis. "We'll knock some sort of programme together, Consie, and stick up a bill on the big notice-board in hall. I can't vouch for anybody else, this time, but I can promise you that Althea Stoddart will cover the Upper Fifth with glory!"

## CHAPTER THE NINTH

### ANTICIPATIONS

The affairs of the new Guildry company at Maudsley were making progress. Several of Miss Knevitt's girls had been transferred to the fresh fold, among them Barbara Stephen, though her cousin, Angela, was still with No. 1.

"It's rather fun," Barbara told the other Woodridge girls as they cycled into school on the morning after the first meeting of the St. Ninian's company. "I like this feeling of starting from the very beginning, and it's ripping to have Elizabeth for Guardian—though it does seem quaint to address one's own step-mother as Mrs. Stephen."

"Not at all," said Desda. "It was always done in old-fashioned tales by kids who didn't fancy their step-mothers—the only difference being that you're absolutely gone on yours! I'm glad you like it, Babs, since they've moved you into it, but I'd rather stay where I am."

"I don't know," said Angela meditatively. "I think I'd like to see what it's like, and find out what you do, and all that."

"But not to go over to them altogether," protested Desda. "That's just another form of your curiosity, Angel."

Angela opened her violet eyes in dismay.

"Surely not! Oh, dear! it's dreadful to have a besetting sin which comes slinking in under all sorts of disguises. I really did think I was only taking a natural interest in the 2nd Maudsley."

Desda laughed, and Barbara said soothingly:

"So you were, old thing—she's only teasing you. Come down with me some evening, and look on. You can easily do that, seeing we don't meet on the same night as the Philistines."

"We aren't the Philistines any longer, though," Desda pointed out. "You forget that you've got Phyl now."

"No, I didn't!" retorted Barbara. "Not likely! She's the backbone of the whole show, just now, and I can't think what we should do if we hadn't got her. She helps Elizabeth no end."

Nancy rode a few yards ahead, taking no part in the conversation, and apparently absorbed in her own thoughts; but she heard every word of it, and those same thoughts were not altogether pleasant. Nancy was no shirker, and in her own mind lurked an uneasy suspicion that her behaviour with regard to the new company was uncommonly like shirking. Miss Knevitt had said no more about transferring her, and everything was going on happily in the 1st Maudsley. They missed Phyllis badly, as was inevitable, but the two remaining Maids-of-Honour were very much in earnest, and Charity Sheringham, newly promoted to be Maid-of-Merit, was justifying her promotion.

Squad Six—Nancy’s own special concern—were behaving like model infants out of a Sunday School story-book. Remembering their past record, their Maid-of-Merit could not help feeling (as she confided to Desda) that such a state of affairs was “too bright and beautiful to last.”

“They never quarrel now, and they never lose marks at inspection.”

“Little prigs!” said Desda with disgust. “I only wish I didn’t, but something untoward always happens to my hat or tie. If my sash is straight in front it always manages to take on a twist behind where I can’t see it—just before Miss Knevitt comes round, too! Charity gets so fed up with me!”

“You were just as great a trial to Mabel, last session,” Nancy reminded her unkindly.

“Well, you needn’t give yourself airs,” returned Desda with spirit, “because your tidiness is no credit to you. You’re physically incapable of being anything else. I hope you’re not going to become as priggish as your precious squad!”

Nancy laughed.

“After my past experience of them, nothing will ever make me believe they could turn into prigs! There must be some explanation of this unnatural piety, and I shall feel nervous till I find out what it is.”

“I believe it’s all right,” said Desda thoughtfully. “They’re frightfully taken up with something, and that’s what is keeping them out of mischief, though I can’t imagine what it is. Miranda spends all her spare time with Doris Frost and the others. Every Saturday afternoon they fetch her, and go off for walks in the forest together. What they do there, nobody knows, but this fine dry weather can’t be expected to continue much longer, and then they’ll have to find somewhere else to play.”

“I shall ask Grannie if I may have them all to tea on Saturday week,” observed Nancy. “The Saturday after V(a)’s show, I mean. I can’t quite get rid of the idea that they’re on the verge of breaking out in some surprising fashion. You never know, with those kids!”

“They’re bound to be particularly bad when they do break out, after such a spell of goodness,” said Desda laughing. “What a mercy you haven’t been removed to the 2nd Maudsley with Babs and the others!”

Nancy was thinking of this conversation now, as she free-wheeled down a long hill in front of her companions. Clearly there was mischief brewing in Squad Six, and, if so, Desda was right. Undoubtedly it was better that she should be at hand to deal with them when it came to a head—perhaps even, with a little vigilance, to prevent its getting so far. Then her sense of humour came to the surface, and a little smile played round the corners of her determined mouth.

“To hear me think,” she told herself, “anyone would imagine there was no one to run No. 1 but me! If I did go over to the other company I suppose Miss Knevitt, or even Vivian or Mabel, could keep those kids in order! No use pretending it’s for the good of my squad that I’m holding back—not to myself, anyhow! I simply don’t want to leave the 1st Maudsley because Desda’s in it, and I know I’m popular, and I’d rather belong to a company with some traditions behind it than go to one that’s starting from the very beginning, as Barbara says. She seems to like that sort of newness, but I should hate it.”

“In fact,” remarked her conscience, which could be disagreeably plain-spoken at times, “you’re thinking about yourself, and not what’s best for the Guildry.”

Nancy circled round abruptly, and rode back to the others. She had had enough of her own society, for the time being.

Angela branched off down a side lane, which formed a short cut to that part of the town where her own school was situated, and the three Maudsley girls, abandoning talk of outside affairs, plunged at once into Grammar School gossip.

“Everybody’s longing for the Upper Fifth’s show to come off,” Barbara told the others. “V(b) says they’ve never before been known to do anything so enterprising, and it’s all put down to you two.”

“They’d be nearer the mark,” said Nancy, “if they put it down to Consie Reid. She and Helen Hislop are determined to make a splash over it.”

“But I thought you and Desda — —”

“Oh! we’re only in it because we both do things. Still the ‘Am’ is rather fun, especially our practices. When you get moved up, Babs, we’ll put you in the toy symphony as second comb, or third penny whistle. In fact, if there’s any sign of your remove coming on, you’d better start practising one of these classic instruments at once.”

“No such luck!” sighed Barbara. “I wish you’d let people join from other forms. I’d buy a mandoline and learn it. Is it true, by the by, that Althea Stoddart is going to play?”

“I don’t know how it got out,” said Nancy, looking annoyed. “Althea’s flute will be the *pièce de résistance*, and I wanted to spring it on everyone as a great surprise.”

“It hasn’t got out,” said Desda reassuringly; “at least not far enough to matter; if Barbara holds her tongue, it needn’t go any further. She only heard about it from me last night.”

“Then keep it to yourself, Barbara,” said Nancy. “Don’t spoil my sensation beforehand.”

“All right. I’ll be careful,” Barbara promised, adding dreamily, “I’d like to hear Althea play, and I’d like to know her better. A girl who could be so plucky as to play in the streets, as she did, must have a lot in her. I don’t believe I could have done it, not if we hadn’t a crust in the cupboard.”

“I couldn’t do it for myself,” agreed Nancy, “but I’d have to if anyone I cared about was starving, and I expect that’s how Althea felt. She has got plenty of pluck, certainly.”

“Babs is adopting her for her latest heroine,” remarked Desda in a lower tone, as the younger girl drew ahead in the traffic of the narrow street into which they had turned. “She’s always got somebody up on a pedestal.”

“It won’t do her any harm to admire Althea,” responded Nancy carelessly, “and Barbara isn’t silly about her enthusiasms now. Do you remember her crush on you when she first came to school, and how jealous she used to be if I came near you or spoke to you?”

“Thank goodness that phase is over!” exclaimed Desda. “I’m not cut out for a heroine—at least, only a stage one, and that won’t be for years yet. But mark my words, Nance! I mean to play Shakespeare’s Beatrice before I die.”

“Yes, do!” said Nancy cordially. “She’s so much more sensible than Juliet, over whom all you budding actresses seem to go crazy. You wouldn’t

have caught Beatrice messing things up like that, and dying in a tomb.”

“Juliet was only a kid, after all,” said Desda tolerantly. “It might be fun to do Lady Macbeth, though.”

Nancy grunted, as they turned in at the school gates.

“You’ve got queer ideas about fun!” she said. “Hullo! there’s Althea! I want to fix up a practice with her, after dinner. We can have it this afternoon if we bag one of the music cubicles. I’m playing her accompaniment for the ‘Träumerei’ on Saturday. Althea! Did you remember to bring your flute?”

The new girl nodded, and joined Nancy as she wheeled her machine into the cycle-shed.

“I’m rather dreading this concert of yours,” she observed. “Funny, isn’t it? I never used to funk playing at St. Bride’s for the big end-of-term functions, and this is only a little Fifth Form affair.”

“It’s probably because you don’t know many people here, yet,” said Nancy. “You’ve scarcely spoken to anyone outside V(a), have you? But you’ve no need to dread it. Anyone who can — —”

“Play in the public streets, you were going to say,” prompted Althea, with a touch of bitterness, as her friend bent down to adjust her bicycle pump more securely.

Nancy turned a reddened face on her.

“I wasn’t going to say anything of the kind!” she retorted brusquely. “And if you’d waited to let me finish my own sentence you’d have known that. Anyone who can play as you do, has no need to be nervous. But of course I know it’s very easy to talk like that. As a matter of fact, I can’t imagine anyone playing decently unless they were nervous.”

“That’s just it,” assented Althea. “If one were calm and stolid one wouldn’t feel so much, certainly, but that would leave less to go into the music. If that theory’s right, I ought to play jolly well on Saturday week, for I know I shall be scared stiff.”

“I don’t mind that,” said Nancy unsympathetically, “so long as you make a sensation. I’ve set my heart on a sensation at that show, and so has Constance Reid.”

“I only hope you’re not doomed to disappointment then!” laughed Althea, and they walked arm in arm across the old flagged court towards the stone steps leading down to the basement cloak-rooms.

As they passed the big wrought-iron gates, which opened on the quiet tree-lined street outside, Nancy said idly:

“I wonder who that ugly little Jap is, who was staring through the gate, just now. I saw him in the High Street the other day, and there is something about him I don’t much like.”

Althea glanced back over her shoulder in time to see him moving away from the gates.

“Nor I,” she agreed. “I know who you mean. He lodged in the same house as we did, when we first came here, and was frightfully keen to buy a little dwarf cedar tree of ours. We might have been glad enough to sell it, too, only you see— —”

The great bell clanged out from the clock tower overhead, and both girls took to their heels.

“That comes of gossiping in the cycle-shed,” panted Nancy, as they ran down the steps. “But tell me about the Jap later, and why you couldn’t sell the tree. It sounds as though it might be interesting.”



## CHAPTER THE TENTH

### V(A)'S SHOW

Nancy got her sensation, certainly, but it was not quite the kind she had expected or desired, and it came about in this wise.

The night of the Upper Fifth's concert arrived, and brought with it a large audience drawn from every section of the school; for curiosity is a powerful factor, and V(a) had never before shown so much enterprise. Moreover, there had been mysterious rumours (spread chiefly by Barbara Stephen) that Nancy Caird, who was responsible for the musical side of the programme, had something up her sleeve. So, not only the school, but the staff turned out in goodly numbers, and Barbara wriggled in her seat with joy as she watched the hall filling up.

"They'll make pounds for our company!" she thought exultantly. "We may not be able to get Indian clubs, but I should think we could run to wands after this. What a pity they aren't selling programmes!"

For the committee of the 'Am' had decided that to provide programmes for any but the staff would be quite impossible at such short notice, since they would have, of necessity, to be done by hand, and had contented themselves by writing up their items on the largest blackboard they could find, which they had erected at one side of the dais in full view of the audience. Eileen Crane, being of a decorative turn, had draped it with garish paper festoons saved from former Christmas orgies, though V(a) were not all agreed about the result.

"Nothing you can do to it," said Nancy, "will make it look other than it is. If we're obliged to use a blackboard, let it be a blackboard, and not a— a Christmas tree!"

"No; let her hang her gaudy garlands round it," protested Jerry Judkins. "At least, they strike a note of colour."

"And it shows we've tried," added Brenda Lawson.

Enid Ford was to open the proceedings with a violin solo. Fortunately she was not nervous, and took her place composedly before the music-stand, with Brenda (not quite so composed) to play her accompaniment. Althea and Nancy, watching her from the platform exit, smiled at each other as Enid's confident notes rang out.

“That’s the exception to our rule,” Nancy whispered. “She’s not a scrap nervous, and yet she can play.”

“Yes,” murmured Althea, “and rippingly, too! but there’s something missing, all the same. She plays—but she doesn’t make music, as you do.”

“Or you!” returned Nancy. “But it isn’t fair to compare such different instruments.”

“Oh, yes!” said Althea. “Because all instruments do the same thing in their separate ways. Are you going on next, Nancy?”

“Yes. Then Helen is to recite, and the trio will stumble through something somehow. I got Consie to put you on somewhere near the end—on the principle of keeping the best wine till the last, you know!”

“What rot!” said Althea. “I wish you hadn’t. I’d much rather play soon, and get it over.”

Nancy left her, to succeed Enid on the platform, and was received with an outburst of clapping, for the school knew what they might expect, and moreover she was popular. She played a thing in imitation of an old-fashioned musical box, and the light tinkling melody fell like raindrops from her long flexible fingers. Once at the piano, her nervousness went, or else was absorbed into the quality of her music, giving it that something which Enid’s had lacked. Maudsley enjoyed itself, and made its enjoyment plain in the usual fashion. Helen was also encored, but much less enthusiastically, and the poor trio had only a lukewarm reception.

Althea’s flute was the next item on the blackboard, and Nancy followed her on to the platform to play her accompaniment, inwardly excited over “the surprise.” Only her own form had known of Althea’s unusual accomplishment, for Nancy had insisted on guarding the secret most jealously from the moment that the “Am” had decided upon giving their concert. The school had only a vague idea that this new girl was “awfully musical—nearly as good as Nancy herself,” but what form her talent took was not revealed to them till they saw her going on to the platform with her instrument in her hand.

“I give you my word,” Miss Smith, the first music-mistress was assuring the Head, “that I only knew she was down for the ‘Träumerei,’ but what she intended to play it on only the Upper Fifth knew, and they were careful to keep it dark.”

Althea gave a queer, shy little bow, which had, notwithstanding, something graceful in it, and Nancy played the opening bars of the

introduction. Then the sweet, thin fairy notes piped through the big hall, soaring up to the age-blackened beams of the roof which had looked down on so many, many generations of schoolgirls, since the first “diligente maydens” of Elizabeth’s time had gathered there in ruff and farthingale. And the “maydens” of the present day, “diligente” or otherwise, listened entranced.

A storm of applause greeted her at the end, and none joined in more boisterously than a row of very small juniors, who sat just below the platform. Althea, who was fond of children, smiled her thanks to them, as she curtsied to the rest of her audience, and turned quickly to go behind. At that instant, during a momentary lull in the clapping, rose a small shrill voice from the front ranks, wafted forward to the performers, and backward to all who were listening.

“I remember now—I knew I had seen her before—she was playing in Castle Street when I was coming home from Una Borden’s birthday party. I saw her under a lamp-post— —”

It was Barbara who managed, by dint of her own energetic noise, to start the applause again before those who had heard the child’s announcement were able to grasp its full import. She, of course, as well as Desda, had been told the new girl’s story by Nancy, and realized in a flash what this tactless statement might mean to Althea. But though, for the time being, the awkward moment was tided over, and the school settled down at once to hear Desda recite Tennyson’s “Revenge,” yet the mischief was done, and graver mischief than either Nancy or Barbara foresaw at the moment. Only Desda, telling them in tones of awe how

“. . . the sun went down, and the stars came out far over the summer sea,  
But never a moment ceased the fight of the one and the fifty-three,”

realized, underneath everything, the extent of the blow which had been dealt to Althea. For Desda had been longer at the Grammar School than either of the others, long enough to know that schoolgirls—even nice schoolgirls—can be extraordinarily snobbish, and are apt in such matters to follow one another like sheep.

The concert came to an end, and was voted by all concerned to have been a complete success. There was no doubt that the Upper Fifth, for once, had entirely justified their existence, and their Amateur Musical and Dramatic Society was now an established and respected fact in the school. Down in their cloak-room all was bustle and rush, as those who had instruments to pack, packed them, or rolled up their music, while the rest

hurried into evening cloaks and hoods, loudly congratulating themselves and each other on the result of the performance.

The school janitor was waiting to lock up the basement directly the last cloak-room should have emptied itself, and the knowledge of this effectually prevented the most confirmed gossipers from lingering to discuss the evening's happenings. Althea Stoddart's reputation, for good or ill, would have to rest where it was till Monday morning; though Althea herself had fled, without waiting for speech with anyone, having run downstairs to put on her things before anyone else had left the hall.

Nancy and Desda were disappointed and uneasy. Their protégée had covered herself with glory by her performance, but there were those (according to Desda) who would promptly forget her genius in view of what the small Junior had betrayed regarding her social position.

"Unless we can bluff it off somehow," said Desda. "After all, you and I sang carols in the streets for a lark, last Christmas."

"But this isn't Christmas," Nancy pointed out. "And Althea isn't the sort to let us bluff it off—I wouldn't, myself, you know. It's best to be quite honest and above-board; then you needn't be afraid of things getting found out."

Desda said nothing, knowing that her chum was thinking of her own early experiences at the Grammar School, when she had been bound against her will to keep a secret, and her silence had led to suspicion and unhappiness.

"All the same," concluded Nancy, "I shall go and see Althea after church to-morrow, because I'm afraid she's feeling down. Otherwise she would never have run off like that."

"Why don't you get her to join the Guildry?" suggested Desda. "I expect she'd love it."

"Miss Knevitt won't have any more recruits, this session. Didn't you hear her say so?"

"Yes—they're all to join No. 2 Company. That would be all right for Althea. She knows Barbara, anyhow."

"Not very well, though," said Nancy, "and you know she's shy. She will be worse than ever, too, now that this story has got out."

Some trifling hitch in her Sunday's programme kept Nancy from visiting Althea in the little flat above the museum, and they only met at school the

following morning just as the bell was ringing for prayers, and there was no time to do more than run upstairs and take their places in hall. Nancy, sensitive on her friend's behalf, noticed several curious glances sent in Althea's direction as she entered, and it was evident, by her change of colour, that Althea had seen them, too. Morning school, however, passed off as usual, and V(a)'s manner to the new girl was friendly enough, though puzzled.

Net-ball effectually filled every minute between school and dinner; but as they walked up from the field Constance Reid said to Nancy in a low voice:

"Come to the cloak-room after dinner. We want to speak to you about something—Helen and Enid and I."

"Not another committee meeting already?" asked Nancy, knowing perfectly well that it was nothing of the kind.

Constance shook her head.

"I can't talk about it here," she said, "but it's rather important, so don't fail."

"That can only mean one thing," said Nancy to Desda, having told her of the summons, "so you'd better come along, too. I'm not going to face up to this alone—and besides you foresaw it when I wouldn't believe you."

"It may not be that, after all," said Desda comfortingly, but Nancy replied:

"Oh, it's that, right enough! If I were Brenda Lawson I should say I have a 'sort of feeling' that it is."

Brenda Lawson and her friend Jerry were among the little crowd that had collected in the Upper Fifth's cloak-room when Nancy and Desda reached it. It was a fairly representative gathering, and the newcomers noted that Constance looked worried.

"Well, what's up, then?" demanded Nancy curtly as she faced the assembly, with her hands in the pockets of her blazer and her fair head thrown back.

"It's about what happened on Saturday night," began Constance. "At the concert, you know—when that kid called out something about having seen Althea Stoddart playing under a lamp-post in Castle Street."

"What about it?" asked Nancy, more brusquely still.

“That’s what we want to hear,” said Enid Ford. “She’s a friend of yours, isn’t she? At least, you knew her before she came to Maudsley, so we wondered if you could explain.”

“I thought it was that!” Nancy cried. “Or rather, Desda expected something of the sort, and I wouldn’t believe her. It didn’t seem possible — —”

“What are you working yourself up about?” asked Helen coolly. “We’re only asking you if Althea really did play in the streets, and if so, why she did it. She doesn’t look like the sort of girl who’d do it for a joke, so what did she do it for?”

Nancy’s lips parted in preparation for a stinging rejoinder, and all eyes were turned on her in anticipation of it, when the answer they awaited came quietly and unexpectedly from behind.

“Bread and butter and the rent, if you really want to know. Though I fail to see what it has got to do with Nancy Caird. Why didn’t you come straight to me to satisfy your curiosity?”

Startled and dismayed, with all the guilt of conspirators caught redhanded, the Upper Fifth turned to face Althea herself, standing in the doorway.

“Now!” said Nancy. “I hope you’re pleased with what you’ve done!”

## CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

### A SOCIAL QUESTION

There was a moment of intensely awkward silence, then Helen Hislop said gravely:

“I am very sorry—I am sure we all are—that you should have happened to come in just at that moment, Althea. Of course, we never meant— —”

She broke off uncomfortably, but Althea replied at once with steady dignity:

“I know you didn’t. It was neither your fault nor mine—only an unfortunate happening. I came down to fetch my pen-knife which I had left in my coat pocket, but, needless to say, I had no idea you were having a meeting here. Perhaps, though, it isn’t so unfortunate, for I can tell you all you want to know at once, and then you won’t need to bother Nancy, who probably hates it.”

“Not at all!” returned Nancy, in a tone which was intended to freeze the rest of her form. “I was just about to say, when you butted in, that I entirely fail to see what it has to do with the Upper Fifth, even if you choose to sweep a crossing in your spare time.”

Althea’s stony expression relaxed into a swift smile for her champion, then stiffened again immediately.

“I did the next thing to it, didn’t I? And in any case, Nancy, I don’t agree with you. It does affect the Upper Fifth if one of their number does something which—which they feel will let them down.”

“Perhaps,” said Nancy, her chin still thrust out aggressively. “But have you? And if so, when?”

“Before I came to Maudsley Grammar School, certainly,” answered Althea a little sadly. “It is perfectly true,” she added, addressing the other girls, “that I did play in the street more than once this autumn, though always after dark, and I did it, not for a joke or a wager or anything like that—but just because I required the money, and there was no other way to make it.”

“Oh!” cried Jerry Judkins impulsively. “Then I call it a jolly fine thing to do, for you couldn’t possibly have liked it! I don’t know what we’re all

making such a fuss about, and I'm much inclined to agree with Nancy that it's no business of ours."

"So am I," echoed Brenda, and one or two of the others, while Desda Blackett walked over and thrust her arm through Althea's.

"Of course," she said calmly, "there's only one way to look at it, and that is that we're proud to have you in our form. The others misunderstood, at first, and Nancy lost her temper; so it's really as well you turned up in time to explain. You see, for one of the Upper School to have done such a thing for a lark, would have been—a bit undignified—and the others thought it might have been that."

"The others" had the grace to keep silence (and indeed there were many of them—such as Constance and Helen—to whom Desda's explanation did actually apply), but Althea was not to be deceived, and turned away with a pathetic little gesture.

"You're a dear, Desda," she said gratefully, "but I fancy that wasn't what all of them thought. I mustn't interrupt you any longer though."

And she went out of the cloak-room, her footfall dragging a little, as they heard her go along the stone passage which led to the stairs.

There was a moment's pause, then Nancy also turned to the door.

"Since Althea has told you all you wanted to hear from me," she said drily, "perhaps you'll excuse my going after her."

But Desda caught her skirt.

"No, Nancy, I'll go. You'd better stay and talk the matter out. After all, you were at school with her before, at St. Bride's, and can tell them who her father was, and the sort of things," in tones of contempt, "which they will certainly want to know before they can accept her."

She also vanished through the door, and Nancy faced about again.

"Oh, yes! I can tell you all that," she said promptly. "Althea's father was Professor Andrew Stoddart, a well-known naturalist, as anyone can tell you who knows anything about the subject. You might consult Lord Woodridge, in fact; he's rather an authority, and he thinks such a lot of Professor Stoddart's reputation, that he has put his widow in charge of the new museum, and sent Althea to the Grammar School."

Poor Nancy! She had meant to be very convincing, even demeaning herself (as she felt) to use Lord Woodridge and his title as a weapon before



which some of the enemy were sure to go down. But the end of her oration held two very damaging admissions, and her adversaries swooped on these at once.

“In charge of the new museum?” echoed Eileen Crane. “Do you mean they live in that flat above it? Then Althea’s mother is only the caretaker! I know all about it. My father designed the building, you know, and that’s just an ordinary common little flat for a caretaker person to live in. Nobody who was anybody’s widow would be put into that!”

“And there’s no knowledge of natural history needed, as far as I can tell,” added Muriel Evans, “to keep a public building dusted and tidy. Mrs. Stoddart is evidently just an ordinary custodian.”

“And I suppose Althea is a free scholar,” added someone else, “put in on Lord Woodridge’s nomination. Or do you mean he pays her fees out of respect to her father’s memory?”

Nancy was mute, dismayed by the result of her blunders, and almost afraid to take up the gage again.

“Is she a free scholar?” demanded Constance. “If you know so much about it, Nancy, you can tell us that. Not that it would be anything against her, for one moment, but we’ve never had one in the Upper Fifth before.”

“I didn’t know it was possible,” said Enid, in surprise. “I thought the kids who get into the Lower School as free scholars couldn’t rise above V(b) without a scholarship. Of course, some of the girls in our form have done that, and jolly hard they’ve worked—but then they’ve come up through the school, and are part of it. I never heard of a new girl getting into the Upper School as a free scholar.”

“Nancy should be able to tell us,” reiterated Constance, and all eyes were directed to Nancy once more.

She had found her tongue by now, and answered boldly:

“Yes; Althea’s a free scholar. I happen to know (because I heard my aunt talking about it) that Lord Woodridge wanted to pay her fees, but Mrs. Stoddart was too proud to allow it; his nomination was all she would consent to take. And Mrs. Stoddart certainly is custodian at the museum, though I fail to see why Muriel and her friends should consider that such a disgraceful job. It’s people who matter, not the things they do. Can’t you see for yourselves what Althea is?”

“Althea may be all right herself,” admitted Eileen cautiously, “but people’s jobs do matter, Nancy, notwithstanding what you say, and we’ve never before had a girl in our form who was a free scholar—not to mention playing the flute in the streets.”

“No,” said Nancy sarcastically, “you don’t often come across a girl who’s so plucky that she’ll do a thing like that just because her mother’s ill and starving!”

One or two people looked uncomfortable, while those who had ranged themselves on Nancy’s side, grinned at each other in silent appreciation, for some of them knew the quality of her tongue, when she chose to give it full scope. At the moment, Jerry and Brenda were recalling with relish past skirmishes in the Lower Fifth, when Nancy had assuredly not come off second-best.

“Well,” said Constance, at last, speaking rather brusquely, “it’s awkward, of course, but I don’t see that it need be anything else, if everybody will only look at it from a proper point of view.”

“What do you call a proper point of view?” asked Muriel Evans growlingly, in her deep voice. “A good deal depends on that.”

Constance considered her answer for a moment or two before she made it, while the others waited, knowing that a good deal also depended on their leader’s attitude; for Constance was leader in the Upper Fifth by virtue of her position as games-captain, and also by something more, which can only be defined vaguely as the quality of leadership. She was neither particularly pretty, witty, nor wise, but she had that in her which made her companions willing to follow her. Nancy Caird had the same gift in a more marked degree, as Constance herself was the first to recognize.

“I think,” she said at last, “Jerry and Brenda are about right, to my mind, in the way they have taken it. Jerry says there’s nothing to make a fuss about—neither there is—one way or the other. I can’t see any need for Nancy and Desda to go into heroics, nor for Eileen and Muriel to sneer. Some of you may think it’s rather a let-down to have a free scholar in V(a)—that’s a matter of opinion—but, since it has happened, you’re jolly lucky to get off with Althea Stoddart, who is a lady, however poor. That’s my point of view, since you’ve asked for it.”

“It’s not very convincing then,” said Eileen impatiently. “Do you expect us to overlook the fact that she played in the streets for money, and that her mother’s a sort of caretaker?”

“There’s nothing disgraceful in either of those accusations, as far as I see!” cried Nancy hotly.

“Nobody said they were disgraceful,” retorted Eileen, “but they’re highly unsuitable to the Upper Fifth at Maudsley Grammar School.”

“Rot!” broke in Helen Hislop unexpectedly, having held her peace until now. “Nancy’s right when she says it’s people themselves who matter. There is nothing unsuitable about Althea, as far as I can see. If she dropped her aitches, or made a noise when she ate, you might have reason for getting alarmed—in case you caught it from her, I mean—though personally it wouldn’t scare me. Is there any sense in prolonging this dull gathering, Consie? We’ve found out what we wanted to know, and I for one would rather do something more interesting in the short time that remains before afternoon school.”

“By all means,” agreed Constance with alacrity, and the meeting broke up, Nancy going off directly she was free in search of Althea and Desda.

She found them in a deserted classroom at the top of the house—one of the attics in the old part of the building, with stout oaken rafters above, and an uneven oak floor which dipped slightly in one corner. An ancient oak locker formed the window-seat and on this Althea sat, leaning back against the shutter, while the winter sunshine sought out gleams in her brown hair. She looked weary and listless again, as she had not done since coming to school, and Nancy groaned inwardly as she noticed it. Desda, perched on a flat-topped desk, was swinging her legs irritably and announcing:

“What they think is not of the slightest importance—just because they do think such things.”

Althea smiled faintly.

“That’s all right in theory, Desda, but it doesn’t make things a bit easier in practice.”

“Of course not!” exclaimed Nancy bluntly. “It’s no good ignoring public opinion in a lofty and highminded way—the thing to do is to grapple with it and put it right.”

It was Desda’s turn to smile as she saw the fire of battle still smouldering in her chum’s blue eyes.

“I suppose that’s what you’ve been doing since we left you?” she observed.

Nancy nodded.

“Most of them are inclined to see sense,” she said. “Jerry and Brenda, of course, and Helen Hislop—Consie, too, though she was trying to be very judicial. V(a) are quite a decent crowd, on the whole, though their conventional ideas had rather a shake-up at first.”

“Very good for them!” remarked Desda.

“Perhaps,” said Althea. “But you can hardly blame them if they dislike having a street-player in their form.”

She spoke without bitterness, as though she were facing an inevitable fact, and was ready to make the best of it; but Nancy blazed again.

“Don’t be so disgustingly patient!” she exclaimed. “Of course I can blame them, and quite easily, too! I’ve never met snobs before, except in books, and I never quite believed in them there. To find them in the Upper Fifth at Maudsley is a bit too thick! I admit, Desda, you know more about people than I do.”

“Oh, then, Desda thought— —” began Althea.

“I knew something about the sort of girl Muriel Evans was, and Eileen Crane,” replied Desda. “But they and their friends are only the minority, and you needn’t mind them, Althea. You won’t, will you?”

Althea’s lips quivered a little.

“I’m afraid I do,” she confessed, “but I know it’s idiotic and I’ll try not to. If you and Nancy stick to me I needn’t have much to do with the rest. You see, Desda, I’m not used to it, and don’t quite understand how to face up to that sort of thing. Nancy knows how different it was at St. Bride’s.”

“I should jolly well think it was!” affirmed Nancy emphatically.

“But then that was before I’d ever played in the streets,” Althea went on, with a shaky little smile. “I expect there were people at St. Bride’s who wouldn’t have cared for that any better than Muriel or Eileen.”

“I expect so,” said Desda wisely. “Probably there are people like that everywhere, but one needn’t mind what they say, nor have much to do with them. If I were you, Althea; I wouldn’t think too much about this business at all. It’s best to forget disagreeable things or people and keep your mind dwelling on nice ones—like Nancy and me!”

## CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

### NANCY DECIDES

Althea tried hard to be brave and philosophical, Desda to be comforting, and Nancy bracing, but in the days that followed all these qualities were put to a stiff test. Not that any overt slight was shown to Althea: indeed the majority of her form went out of their way to be kind and friendly; but the small faction, headed by Muriel and Eileen, possessed the power of making themselves exceedingly unpleasant in a variety of ways, too small and petty to be noticed, but which, nevertheless, stung and rankled.

After one of those small incidents, the scene of which had been laid in the hockey-field, Althea quietly dropped out of the games, to Constance's rage and consternation.

"But why can't you play any more?" demanded the games-captain wrathfully. "You're not crocking up, are you? Very well, then; there's no other possible reason for it. V(a) is weak in forwards this winter, and you're a clear godsend, therefore you must play—play up, too!—for the good of the form."

"I would if I could—really, Constance," Althea protested, "but if I did, it wouldn't be for the good of the form."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Althea was silent, not caring to give a fuller explanation. She imagined Constance must have seen what had happened, or she would have said less than she had already done; but the games-captain's attention had been drawn elsewhere at the moment, and Althea's present attitude was a complete mystery to her.

Nancy gave the necessary enlightenment.

"How can she play when people won't pass to her? She's quite right, Constance. It would wreck any match."

Constance frowned and bit her lips, realizing at last where the trouble lay. The worst of it was that Muriel was one of the best players in the Upper Fifth, and summarily to turn her out for being unsporting (which was Constance's first impulse) would be more damaging than the loss of Althea

to V(a)'s prospects in the playing-field. As always with Constance, the form came first.

“Then it can't be helped,” she said reluctantly, “though it's disgusting, and low-down, and—oh, you must know my opinion of it! I'd like to turn them out neck and crop, but I daren't—not if we're to win any matches at all this season. I say, Althea, I'm most awfully sorry!”

“So am I,” answered Althea regretfully. “I've been loving the games. But you do see now, don't you? that even if I could swallow my pride, and stick it out, every game would be a failure where that was liable to occur.”

“Oh, I see it right enough!” admitted Constance grudgingly. “And it doesn't make me think any the more of the people who are at the bottom of it. By rights they ought to be kicked out of the team, and if you weren't a real sport yourself, you'd demand it.”

“Oh, rot!” said Althea uncomfortably, but Nancy burst out:

“I'm quite aware it's none of my business, Constance, but I'd rather lose with eleven decent girls behind me, than win by the help of two or three bounders!”

“You always go off into heroics!” said Constance impatiently. “I'm quite as furious over this affair as you can be, but I've got to think of the form. Why, I daren't even speak my mind to that set, or they'll become sulky and spoil the game!”

A few days later Althea quietly resigned from the “Am,” and Nancy's dismay was even greater than that of Constance over the hockey. She found a note slipped on to her desk on a day when the orchestral section of V(a) was staying behind for a practice.

Desda had gone home, so had Constance, neither of them being in the orchestra, so the disgusted conductor turned for sympathy to Brenda Lawson, who was among the violins.

“What do you think of that?” she demanded, tossing the note across.

Brenda read it in silence, then said slowly:

“It's pretty sickening, certainly, but I've got a sort of feeling she's right.”

“But why? None of the ‘Am,’ have been beastly to her, have they? At least, I mean—none of the orchestra. Muriel Evans and her lot are in the toy symphony, or among Desda's troupe, but Althea has nothing to do with either of those.”

“It isn’t that,” said Brenda, “not exactly. It’s more — —”

“Oh, I know!” and Nancy flung the crumpled note angrily into the grate. “Her flute is associated with all this snobbery and nonsense! So she feels miserable, playing it among the others. I understand all right, though I don’t want to admit it, because I hate to see Althea giving up the things she enjoys most at school—first games, and now this! Come on, Brenda! They’ll be waiting in the music-room, and we’ve barely got an hour before tea. I shall probably burst, anyhow, if I allow myself to think any more about it!”

And Nancy rushed off tempestuously to the music-room, where she vented her irritation on the orchestra to such an extent that the worms finally turned and reminded her that, after all, she was only one of themselves.

“You may be a shining musical genius, but you needn’t swank about it,” Enid Ford told her plainly. “None of the mistresses would boss and bully us as you’re doing.”

“Heaven help the kids in your squad (or whatever you call it) at Guildry!” added somebody else.

Controlling herself by an effort, Nancy replied with most surprising meekness:

“I’m sorry. I suppose I have been a bad-tempered ass, but would you mind trying that last bit over just once more before we stop? Brenda and Peggy rather messed it up on the second page.”

It chanced that Phyllis Bainbridge was among the elder girls who had stayed on at school that afternoon for tea, having been busy in the library hunting out special references for an essay. She encountered Nancy in the flagged court wheeling her cycle towards the gates, and stopped her.

“Have you time to come round past our place?” she asked. “I’m just going to fetch my bike and ride out to Woodridge, and we might as well go together. Rosalind Blackett has taken my chemistry notes instead of her own, and I must get them copied up this evening, so there’s nothing for it but to fetch them.”

“Righto!” said Nancy, but without her usual alacrity.

The head-girl turned and eyed her keenly.

“What’s up?” she asked, coming straight to the point; for that was the way with Phyllis, and a way which Nancy always appreciated, being bluntly straightforward herself.

She responded to it now.

“It’s only something rather sickening which is going on in our form, at present,” she said. “I shouldn’t mind having the advice of someone older and wiser—which I suppose you are.”

“No supposing about it!” rejoined Phyllis promptly. “But things don’t generally happen in V(a).”

“They’re happening right enough this term,” said Nancy, and told her story of Althea.

Phyllis’s face grew grave as she listened to the finish, which coincided with their arrival at the Bainbridges’.

“I do *hate* that sort of thing!” she exclaimed vehemently, as they paused in front of a green door in a high moss-grown wall. “Wait half a minute till I fetch my machine—or will you come in?”

“No, thanks,” said Nancy. “I daren’t—because if I once start talking I shan’t get home to-night. I’m just in that condition.”

“I shan’t be a minute, then,” said Phyllis, “and we’ll do our talking as we ride. Seems to me you’ll be all the better for getting some of it off your chest.”

It was very evident that Nancy, having found a sympathetic listener, meant to unburden herself to the full, and Phyllis, now in possession of all the facts, heard and advised to the best of her ability as they rode together out of the town.

“It’s such bad luck on the top of the hard times she’s been having,” she said. “But you mustn’t let her brood over it, Nancy—that would be fatal! I haven’t spoken to her, so far, but I’ve noticed her going about, and she’s got a sensitive face—the very kind to suffer most from pin-pricks like this.”

“They’re a jolly sight worse than pin-pricks,” answered Nancy, staring straight ahead of her with a gloomy scowl.

“Oh no, they’re not!” replied Phyllis firmly, “and that’s just what you want to keep before Althea Stoddart if you’re going to be a decent friend to her. These ill-mannered, narrow-minded idiots are only a very small proportion of your form, and their behaviour proves that their opinions are not of the slightest importance. If you and Desda, and Constance and Jerry—all the right-thinking people in V(a)—keep that in mind, and act upon it, you’ll do more to scotch their snobbery than by any other attitude you could



adopt. There's nothing girls of that description loathe more than being laughed at."

"I don't feel much like laughing," returned Nancy.

"So I perceive. But you've got to—and you've got to make Althea look at it in the same light. There's nothing to be gained by treating the affair as a tragedy."

"But it is!" said Nancy. "To Althea, anyway. She has been turned out of the games—has had to turn herself out of the 'Am.' There's nothing left to her but lessons and stodge!"

"And the companionship of you and your set," Phyllis reminded her, "which will do her a world of good if you'll only look at things sanely, and help her to do the same. But I agree it's bad about the games. Of course, if I were Consie Reid, I'd kick the offenders out, bag and baggage. They may be good players, but they don't know the first principles of any game."

"Constance won't, though," said Nancy. "The form is her one idea, this term, and we're none too strong on the hockey-field as it is. Besides, if she did it, we'd get civil war in V(a), and that wouldn't be a good thing."

"That's where you're wrong," rejoined the head-girl. "War is an excellent thing, at times, however unpleasant it may be. Ever heard of 'a craven peace'? That's what you're advocating."

"I'm not," said Nancy belligerently. "Nothing would give me greater satisfaction than to quarrel with the lot of them, to-morrow, if it would do any good! But it wouldn't. It's not in my power to turn them out of the team, you see, and Constance won't risk losing any more matches than is absolutely necessary."

"What disturbs me," observed Phyllis, "is the poor time Althea's going to have in consequence. What about getting her to join the Guildry?"

Nancy's wheel wobbled suddenly and righted itself.

"Desda said something about that the other day, but I expect Althea's pretty fed up with joining things, at present."

"Fiddlesticks!" retorted Phyllis. "She would have nothing of that sort to fear in the Guildry, as you could easily explain to her, and the new company would be only too pleased to welcome her. We aren't overflowing with Seniors at St. Ninian's."

She glanced sidewise at her companion as she spoke, and noted an obstinate set about Nancy's mouth. It was a pretty mouth, its owner's best feature, but at that moment its lines were spoilt, and Phyllis understood the spirit which was spoiling them.

"Look here, Nance!" she said, suddenly bringing her forces to the attack. "It's a free country, of course, and you can make your own choice—you have been doing so, in fact, up till now—but I do think this Althea business makes a difference. We need your help in the 2nd Maudsley. You are a Maid-of-Merit, and we haven't got such a thing, nor anyone fit to be made one—yet. You could play for us, and help in a hundred ways, without touching upon Althea Stoddart at all; but it seems to me the trouble about her ought simply to push you over to us! I may be prejudiced because I'm so keen on the Guildry, but I can't help thinking it would be the best thing in the world for that girl, just now. She wants an outside interest to remove her from the Upper Fifth atmosphere, and give her a little healthy exercise at the same time. But I don't believe she'll take another plunge among a crowd of strangers unless you come, too, and bring her along with you. What about it?"

They were nearing the Yellow Farm, where Phyllis must branch off in quest of Rosalind Blackett and the purloined chemistry notes. Nancy pedalled along in silence for a few moments, but the elder girl saw with satisfaction that her mouth had relaxed into its own sweet curves again, with even the hint of a smile playing about them. Another forlorn hope was calling to Nancy, and though the uprooting would still be hard, she began to see, at last, that her choice was by now no choice at all. Everything pointed to her joining the 2nd Maudsley, and there was nothing for it but to abandon her own way. In her heart of hearts Nancy recognized that it was that, as much as the claims of Squad Six and Desda, which had held her back—and would probably have held her back still, but for Althea's need.

"All right, Phyl!" she said in sudden capitulation. "I'll go in and tell Auntie Beth now to apply to Miss Knevitt for my transfer, and I'll come along on your next company night—bringing Althea with me, I hope. I don't want to leave the old company a scrap, and it will be hateful without Des, and my own squad, but I expect I've got to do it."

"I expect you have," agreed Phyllis, jumping off at the Blacketts' gate. "You're a good sport, Nancy, when it comes to the bit—but occasionally it takes time to get there! Good-bye! and remember what I said about laughing. I took a good look at Althea Stoddart the other day, and she's not a fit subject for tragedy!"

## CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

### THE MYSTERIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF MIRANDA BLACKETT

The news of Nancy's application for a transfer was received variously by various people, but she herself, having made up her mind, held steadfastly to her decision, equally unmoved (to all outward appearance) by Barbara Stephen's glee, or her squad's hearty disapproval.

She broke the news herself to Desda, after her own fashion, on the morning following her talk with Phyllis. They were alone in the classroom together during the mid-morning break, sharpening pencils in preparation for Miss Winter's Roman history lecture, when Nancy said abruptly:

"I'm turning over to the 2nd Maudsley, next week, Des. I saw Aunt Elizabeth about it last night, and she's going to apply for me at once."

Desda paused in her whittling to stare at her incredulously.

"What *do* you mean?" she asked.

"What I say!" snapped Nancy, feeling she might be excused for showing a little irritation. "I'm being transferred to the new company. Oh! don't look so stupid about it. You knew it had been talked about, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I never supposed you'd really go," returned Desda. "Miss Knevitt—and everybody—left you quite free to choose."

"Not everybody," replied Nancy, her momentary cloud of ill-humour dispersing. "Don't you know what it is to think you've got a free choice, and all the time things keep happening which push you in the way you don't want to go. I've felt for some time it was bound to end like this, but I've put off as long as I dared, because I didn't want to change."

"And why should you?" inquired Desda, still completely at a loss.

"Because of Althea," replied Nancy, and told her about her talk with Phyllis the previous evening.

The others came in before she had finished, and left Desda no chance to express her opinion at the moment. She saved it up during Roman history, and the algebra lesson which followed, and by dinner-time it was quite ready to burst forth as she and Nancy walked down together to the playing-field.

“I don’t see any sense in it,” she declared wrathfully. “Isn’t Althea old enough to look after herself? Or if she isn’t, there’s Barbara only too ready and willing to hold her hand. Why should you go?”

“Because if I don’t, Althea won’t join at all—as it is, it won’t be easy to persuade her. And that’s apart from the other reasons, which I’ve been doing my best to forget so far—wherein I’ve been rather a pig.”

“I think it’s piggier to go off and leave me behind, when I only joined on your account.”

Nancy glanced at her curiously, for it was very unlike sweet-natured Desda to be pettish.

“But you’re keen on Guildry for itself now,” she reminded her gently, “and you’ve got heaps of friends both there and at school. Poor Althea’s a bit of an outcast at present.”

Desda said nothing, and reaching the playing-field they separated to their respective places in the practice-game, which Constance was organizing by way of a trial for her form team. Though she had no hope of winning the Sports Cup, she was determined that V(a) should make as good a fight for it as possible; and the loss of Althea’s services as a forward was proving rather grievous, since Desda (who had been substituted for her) came far short both in speed and alertness.

Althea, meanwhile—not choosing to look on at the games in which she could not share—was sitting with a book in a corner of the Upper Fifth’s classroom, when there came a knock at the door, and to her entered Miranda, the youngest of the Blackett sisters, and an ornament of the Fourth Form.

“I say!” began Miranda, glancing cautiously about her, “can I speak to you for a moment? It’s rather important.”

Althea looked up gravely from her page. She was never quite certain, nowadays, when addressed by a stranger, whether the overtures were friendly or otherwise—though the allies of Muriel Evans were few and far between. There seemed to be nothing hostile, anyhow, about this child, and though she had never spoken to her before, Althea recognized her as Desda’s little sister, and thawed accordingly.

“Anything I can do for you?” she asked.

“Rather!” responded Miranda, drawing nearer till she stood in front of the Senior, looking down at her with a pair of grey eyes which were several shades darker than Desda’s. She had her sister’s tip-tilted nose and clear

skin, faintly powdered with freckles, but there the resemblance ceased; for Merry was as wide awake as Desda was dreamy, and her cloud of short fluffy black hair gave her a style of her own.

“At least I think you can,” she amended. “Of course you may not want to, and a good deal depends on whether that thing you play will go by itself.”

Althea looked mystified, as well she might.

“Do you mean my flute?” she asked, shrinking a little at any allusion to that bone of contention. “No, of course it won’t—it isn’t a gramophone, or a pianola!”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that!” replied Miranda, growing more confidential, as she balanced herself adroitly on the back of a chair. “But do you need a piano to play it with, or can you get the same tunes without anything else to help it on?”

In spite of herself Althea burst out laughing.

“You are a quaint kid!” she exclaimed. “An accompaniment is always a help, certainly, but I can do without. I had no piano when I played in the streets, you know,” she added, with a touch of bitterness, and waited to see the effect of her words on the younger girl.

It was not quite what she had looked for. Miranda’s eyes shone with envy and admiration, and it was in tones of genuine regret that she said:

“I’ve *always* wanted to do something like that! Everyone in our form thinks it’s the most sporting thing we’ve ever heard of. If we could play violins and things, we’d have a society like the Upper Fifth, only we wouldn’t give stodgy shows in hall—we’d go round the town, as you did, and make no end of money for—for things we want,” she finished lamely, and cast an anxious glance at Althea, as though fearing she might be questioned about these same wants.

Althea, however was tactful.

“You haven’t yet told me how I can help you,” she said.

Miranda thrust her hands into the belt of her brown tunic.

“It’s rather difficult, you see, because it’s a deadly secret, and I’ll have to explain without letting it out—but we want music for something in a place where there can’t possibly be a piano, and I thought—at least it was Susy Miles’ idea—that perhaps you would come and play your flute.”

“I really think,” said Althea, “I must know a little more about it first. What do you want me to play for and where?”

Miranda sighed.

“I was afraid you’d ask questions—I suppose it’s only natural. But please promise, first of all, that you won’t repeat a word of this to anyone—especially not to Nancy Caird or Desda. I know you’re rather pally with them.”

“Very well, I promise,” assented Althea, thoroughly interested by this time.

“Then, we want you to play tunes that people can drill to, on Saturday afternoons, in the forest. We’ll meet you at the stile by Woodridge Pond, and we should have to blindfold you, and lead you to the place where you have to play, because that’s part of the deadly secret.”

Althea looked thoroughly startled.

“I don’t know that I care about being blindfolded,” she demurred. “Wouldn’t it do if I gave you my word of honour not to tell anyone where I’d been, or what I’d been doing?”

Merry regarded her thoughtfully with her head on one side.

“It might,” she said. “I’d have to consult the others first, though, because we all decided on the blindfolding. It would be rather fun, you know,” she added wistfully.

“I don’t want to spoil sport,” said Althea, “if your hearts are set on doing it that way, but I’d prefer to go open-eyed into whatever may be in store for me.”

“Then you will do it?” asked Miranda eagerly. “Oh, joy! We hardly hoped you would—it seemed too good to be possible—but we’ve been at our wits’ end for music. Will you begin this very Saturday?”

“All right,” promised Althea recklessly.

She was just in the mood to be attracted by the Juniors’ appeal for help, and the mystery attached to it. Moreover, it soothed her sore feelings that the beloved flute which had brought about all her troubles at school should be in demand, after all, among some of her schoolfellows, though only the younger section. Whatever Merry and her madcap companions required of her, Althea determined to do it to the best of her ability. If she had lost her

niche in the “Am” and her form’s games, she would carve herself out another elsewhere, blindfold or otherwise.

Miranda went back to her friends, much cheered by her success, just as the big bell in the clock tower rang to summon the players in from the hockey-field, and warn those indoors that it was time to get ready for dinner.

The mid-day meal at Maudsley was no formal dining-room function. At the back of the old school buildings, running the whole length of them, was a large restaurant with a buffet at one end, from which the girls themselves fetched their meals. These were eaten in parties of six at the regiment of small tables that filled the huge room. As each party of diners finished, they filed upstairs to the recreation-room overhead, leaving their table to the next batch of girls waiting for it.

There were a few tables that only seated two, and Nancy, having purposely hurried up, managed to secure one of these for herself and Althea, whom she had engaged, earlier in the day, as her dinner partner.

“I’ve got something rather important to say to you,” she announced, as Althea arrived, bearing a bowl of soup, which suited her meagre purse better than the meat and vegetables selected by the majority.

Althea looked faintly amused.

“Then you’re the second person to-day,” she remarked, setting down her bowl carefully. “What’s your important matter?”

“What was the other?” asked Nancy.

Althea shook her head.

“That’s a deadly secret—which I can’t divulge, even if I wanted to, seeing I don’t know it yet. But what about you?”

Nancy, who did not suffer from Angela Stephen’s besetting sin of curiosity, was easily switched back to her own line of thought.

“It’s the Guildry,” she said. “You’ve heard us speak of it, so you know what I mean. Phyl Bainbridge and some of the others want me to transfer to the new company at St. Ninian’s Church, because they need a Maid-of-Merit there. I’m not very keen—I’m quite happy in No. 1—but I’ve promised to do it, on one condition—that you join with me.”

Althea flinched visibly.

“Oh, Nancy, why? What do you want me for? I can’t face a lot of new girls, who’d begin to find out about me at once—and—and—you know how

it would be—the same thing over again!”

“It wouldn’t!” cried Nancy vigorously. “That’s just where you make a mistake. There’s nothing of that sort in the Guildry, and never could be. Look here, Althea! if you join, and give it a trial, I can safely pledge my word to you that you’ll meet with no snobbery of any kind there.”

“But why are you so keen for me to join? Why should I?”

Nancy hesitated; then decided to tell the simple truth, as was natural to her.

“Because I think it would be a great pleasure to you, and it would help to make up for the things from which you’re cut off at school, owing to the behaviour of certain unspeakable bounders. Besides, if I’ve got to go over to the 2nd Maudsley, and leave Desda and Angela behind, I want to take *somebody* with me. Won’t you join, Althea? If only to please me.”

Althea laid down her spoon, and met Nancy’s pleading gaze with a long serious look which spoke many things, but in the end she only said:

“That’s an absolutely unanswerable reason, old thing, after all you’ve done for me. Why you’re so keen on saddling yourself with me out of school as well as in it, goodness only knows! And I don’t expect I’ll be much use in the Guildry, but if it’s really to please you, then I’m ready to join pretty nearly anything!”



## CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

### THE NEW COMPANY

Nancy's path of sacrifice was made additionally hard for her by Desda's attitude towards it, for Desda chose to regard the whole thing as ridiculous and unnecessary. Finding that arguments failed to move Nancy, she elected to treat the whole subject of Guildry as a sore one not to be mentioned between them; and Nancy, who would have given much to discuss with her special chum the changes which were coming to her, was thrown back upon herself and the friendship of Althea during school hours.

At home, in the evenings and at the week-ends, the usual quartette foregathered, and Desda became her natural sunny-tempered self again, even when Guildry matters cropped up. Only, when Angela eagerly questioned Nancy and Barbara on the doings of the new company, Desda fell silent and showed little or no interest in the 2nd Maudsley.

"I believe I know what's the matter with Des," said Barbara shrewdly, one evening, when Desda had gone home early to finish her preparation. "She can't bear your joining our company because you're doing it on account of Althea. She wouldn't have felt so—so left behind—if you'd gone over when I did at the very beginning, and for no other reason but to help things on. It's Althea that makes the difference."

Nancy and Angela both looked up in surprise.

"Do you mean Desda's jealous of Althea?" asked Nancy bluntly "What rot! Besides, she's not a bit like that. She has more sense. The thing's out of the question!"

"I'm not so sure," declared Angela. "Desda's awfully fond of you, Nancy, and she's got an artistic temperament, you know—she must have, considering who her father was, and how well she acts."

"And supposing she has?"

"Ah, that's just it! When anyone has got an artistic temperament, you never quite know what's going to happen. True, we haven't been much bothered by Desda's up till now, but it seems to be starting in."

"You don't require an artistic temperament to be jealous," said Barbara.

“Anyhow, I don’t believe all the nonsense you two are talking about Des —why, she’s perfectly friendly with Althea! No. She’s simply fed up with my leaving the 1st Maudsley because she sees no reason for it, and I can’t convince her.”

“Better not try,” recommended Angela, and the subject dropped.

Nancy joined the 2nd Maudsley on the following Wednesday evening, and was put straightway in charge of a squad of Seniors, who were what Charity Sheringham would have called “dull but respectable.” Everything was new to them, and they were desperately anxious to pick up all they could, and qualify for the squad medal presented to the company by Major Stephen. They (literally) fell over one another in their eagerness to obey every order given by Phyllis Bainbridge, when she took the company drill, and at the inspection they had not so much as a button or shoe-tie out of place.

“They’re models!” exclaimed Nancy in disgust. “Perfect examples of all a squad ought to be, or a Maid-of-Merit should desire. And how I long for my naughty, quarrelsome squad of riotous Juniors, nobody but myself can tell!”

Althea, to whom she was speaking, laughed sympathetically.

“They’ll learn to be tiresome soon enough,” she said by way of consolation. “Give them time to shake down a bit and you’ll see! I feel rather like that myself, just now —too strange to let myself go.”

“I couldn’t imagine you ever being wild or dissipated,” returned Nancy. “More likely you’ll be a Maid-of-Merit yourself before you can turn round. Auntie Beth will have to promote some people to that proud position as soon as she decently can, because (as you can see from the shining instance before you) M.M.’s are useful in the running of a company, and I don’t see where she can find anyone more suitable than you.”

“But, my good Nancy! I know absolutely nothing about it yet—I’m split new!”

“So’s the company,” said Nancy sagely. “Oh! I don’t suppose it will happen in quite such a hurry, but anyone of your steady appearance is bound to end up as an M.M. The thing’s obvious.”

Here the Guardian’s whistle blew, and the company fell in for fancy marching; Nancy, who loved marching, went off to the piano to play for them, making a wry face which only Althea saw.

“Poor old Nancy!” she thought. “It isn’t much fun for her. I wonder if my flute would be any help, and whether I’d better offer to bring it. If Mrs. Stephen would allow me, Nancy and I might take it in turns to play for the others; then it wouldn’t fall so heavily on her. And it would be good practice for me when I take on Merry Blackett’s job, whatever that may be! She said she wanted me to play for drill.”

Accordingly, at the end of the evening Althea sought out her Guardian and shyly made her offer, which was received with acclamation.

“Nancy! do you hear?” cried Mrs. Stephen, as her niece came up to them, after closing the piano. “Isn’t it a famous suggestion, and the very thing for the country dancing! Have you got the country dance tunes, by the way?”

“Yes—at home,” replied Nancy. “But they are not arranged for the flute, of course.”

“No arrangement is needed,” said Althea. “You’ve got the tunes, and I can read them. But we should need a little practice, so that flute and piano could go well together.”

“Of course,” said Nancy. “There would be no great hardship in that, if Phyllis would tell us which they are likely to need first. She is teaching us the folk dances. Couldn’t I come to tea with you on Saturday and bring the music? Then you might have two ready for next week.”

“Yes, rather!” began Althea, then broke off. “Oh, I forgot! I’ve promised to do something for Miranda and her friends on Saturday. You couldn’t come back with me after school on Friday afternoon?”

“Yes, thanks, I can—if I ’bus home instead of walking,” said Nancy. “Grannie won’t let me ride after dark, you know. I nearly refused,” she added, with a laugh which was not very mirthful, “because Friday used to be my Guildry night in the old company, and I forgot for the moment that I’m free now on Fridays.”

Her new Guardian gave her a quick understanding look.

“Poor old Nance!” she said kindly. “It’s a big sacrifice, I’m afraid, to come over and help us, but I hope you’ll like it when you’ve become reconciled to the change—and I know we’re glad to have you.”

“I am, anyhow, for I should never have joined without you,” said Althea frankly as they went off to put on their coats.

“And apart from the fun of having you in it, I shall be jolly thankful to have some of the playing taken off my shoulders, so that I can join in the drill,” replied Nancy. “We’ll divide it fairly, though, Althea, and do the music turn about.”

“All right,” assented Althea, sitting down on the floor to change her plimsolls. “Look here, Nancy! there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you for two days, only we haven’t had much chance to talk at school. You remember the Jap man I told you about, a little while ago?”

Nancy nodded, as she slipped into her thick frieze coat.

“The one who lodged in the same house as you did, and wanted to buy your tree? What about him? Has he cropped up again?”

“Yes. He seems to have found out where we live now—I suppose he saw us go in—anyhow, he called at the flat on Sunday afternoon and made Mother another offer.”

“*Did* he? He must be keen to get that tree!”

Althea looked troubled.

“He evidently is, and there’s something about it that I don’t like, Nancy. To begin with, I don’t care for the man himself—I don’t trust him, somehow—and why should he be so dead set on getting that particular dwarf cedar? There must be dozens like it to be had in Japan, or even in this country, if he’s willing to pay such a large sum for it.”

“Perhaps not cedars, though,” suggested Nancy. “Don’t they take a good long time to grow? He may have set his heart on a cedar above everything.”

Althea shook her head doubtfully.

“I don’t believe it’s that. I’ve been wondering—those Eastern people are so queer about the things they worship—do you suppose Daddy could have got hold of some sacred tree or other? Could it have been one of this man’s family gods?”

“But I thought you said Professor Stoddart got it as a present from some man he’d befriended when he was out botanizing in Japan?”

“So he did—but this man might have been a cousin of Daddy’s pal. Oh no, he couldn’t, though! because the man who gave him the tree said he had no relations left alive, or he couldn’t have done so. It *was* a sort of family heirloom, you see.”

“How did he come to part with it at all, then? He must have been very keen on Professor Stoddart.”

“He was. There had been an earthquake, or something, and Daddy had saved his life in a very risky way. It wasn’t much of a life to be grateful for, poor soul! since it turned out that he was far gone in consumption; I should have preferred the earthquake myself, but that didn’t seem to be his idea. He gave Daddy the tree, and made him promise never to part with it, but to keep it in our family always, as it had been in his. It wasn’t easy to keep the promise when we were in such straits and that Jap came along with his offer. I’m glad we did, though.”

“Perhaps it’s lucky,” said Nancy. “As you say, one never knows with those Eastern things. I’m quite looking forward to seeing it on Friday. What a tale it could tell if there were really ‘tongues in trees’!”

“Nancy!” exclaimed Barbara, running up. “Aren’t you nearly ready to come home? Elizabeth is out in the car, and just starting up the engine. She says we can give Althea a lift as far as the museum if she’ll come at once. It’s nearly half-past nine, and everyone else has gone.”

## CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

### STRANGE DOINGS IN THE FOREST

Nancy went to tea with Althea in the little flat over the museum, and saw the tree which had so strange a history. It was a fairy thing, a perfect little miniature cedar, growing in a curious square pot of earthenware embossed with Japanese signs and figures.

“I suppose they mean something,” said Mrs. Stoddart, as the girls hung over it admiringly, “but I have never been able to find out what it is. My husband could not tell us. Anyhow, I value the whole thing very highly, and was thankful that his promise stood between me and the chance to sell it at a time when it would otherwise have seemed only right to do so. There is something companionable about that tree when I am alone here and Althea is at school.”

“I think any living, growing thing can be companionable if it chooses,” declared Althea, “and our cedar is very friendly. Nancy thinks perhaps it will bring us luck, Mummy.”

Mrs. Stoddart laughed.

“Who knows? Certainly, it was just after I refused to sell it that you met Nancy and our luck turned; but I am inclined to think it is she, and not the cedar, who should be thanked for that.”

Althea lifted her head and looked at Nancy with an expression which always made the other girl wriggle and grow red.

“I do thank her,” she said in a low voice. “I’ve got more to thank Nancy for than even you know, Mummy dear.”

“Then for goodness’ sake shut up!” exclaimed Nancy hurriedly. “If there’s a thing I loathe, it’s being thanked, especially when there’s no reason for it! Oughtn’t we to try over those tunes now, Althea? Phyl said ‘Peascods,’ and ‘Rufty-Tufty’ were the two she needed most. And ‘Gallopede,’ if you could learn another.”

“I expect it won’t take me long to learn them—they’re so clear and catchy,” said Althea. “Come on, then! I’ll just fetch my flute and we can start.”

The practice was a great success, and when, at last, Nancy, catching sight of the clock, sprang up to go, Althea said:

“I believe I can take my share of that music next Friday, and I have been learning some marches and things which might be useful. Thanks awfully for going over these with me.”

“You didn’t need much practice,” said Nancy. “We’ll have another go soon, and learn some more. Oh, by the by, what is it you are going to do for Merry Blackett and her pals, to-morrow? You said something about that at Guildry, and I meant to ask you then, but it went out of my mind.”

Althea laughed, as she put her flute back into its case.

“I haven’t the ghost of an idea!” she answered. “They were most mysterious about it, and I gather that I’m sworn to secrecy when I do know. But they’re jolly kids, and I’m glad if I can be of any use to them. I haven’t got so many friends at the Grammar School now that I can afford to despise even the overtures of Fourth Formers.”

Nancy looked doubtful.

“They’re well enough in their way,” she said, “but they can be regular little demons. I know, because they used to make up half my squad in the 1st Maudsley, so I’ve had plenty of experience in the past. Desda and I have suspected them for weeks past now of being up to some prank, and this looks as though they were trying to entangle you in it. However, it’s really no business of mine, since I’m no longer their Maid-of-Merit.”

Which same fact was a great grievance to her ex-squad; even though the Guardian had paid them the compliment of making Miranda their Marker, saying their behaviour had improved so greatly that it was no longer necessary to have a Senior in charge of them, and they could be treated as any other Junior squad.

“We’ll continue to be good,” said Miranda mournfully, “because our hearts are too heavy over the loss of Nancy for any ordinary badness to attract us. And if I’m to be Marker, you others will jolly well keep your end up, and not dare to lose marks at inspection, just because you think it doesn’t matter any more!”

“Of course not,” agreed Doris Frost, a Larkiston House damsel, once Merry’s sworn foe and now her inseparable ally. “It matters more than ever, too, because of—you know what!”

“Rather!” said Susy Miles. “It’s absolutely necessary for smartness to become second nature to us now.”

A selection of them, which included Merry, Doris and Susy, awaited Althea at the trysting-place by the forest stile on Saturday afternoon, and the Senior saw with surprise that they were wearing Guildry uniform.

“Hullo!” she said. “I didn’t know your company met on Saturday afternoon.”

“’More it does,” replied Miranda mysteriously. “You’ll soon know why we’re in these things, but you must never tell a single soul. You did promise, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes!” said Althea, “though it was probably very rash of me. What happens next? I’m dying to know.”

“You’ve brought your pipe thing? That’s all right, then. But we must blindfold you first. Where’s that big silk hankie, Doris?”

Althea submitted to having her eyes bandaged (having first stipulated that she might be allowed to mount the stile open-eyed), and was then led along forest paths where the turf felt dry and frost-withered beneath her feet.

“It’s a very good thing for us,” remarked Susy Miles, “that we’ve had such a long dry autumn, for I’m afraid we shan’t keep our secret long after the weather breaks.”

“We can try,” said Doris. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t keep it in the empty cottage.”

“What? The one where we shut Lord Woodridge up, last summer? It wouldn’t be big enough, not to mention being cold.”

“There’s a big barn place at the foot of Father’s raspberry acres,” said Merry thoughtfully. “We might use it; for nobody goes there at this time of year, and there’s a kind of fireplace.”

“Good idea!” exclaimed Susy. “Each kid might bring a log weekly, instead of a penny, for her subscription to the company.”

“Hush!” said Doris warningly. “Here we are! Now we can take the hankie off. It looks as though they’d all arrived.”

Somebody slipped the bandage from Althea’s eyes, and she found herself standing in a level open glade, where about ten or twelve village children were gathered together, evidently awaiting their arrival. They all wore some attempt at uniform, for across each frock was fastened a scarlet



ribbon passing over the left shoulder and pinned on the right hip in imitation of the Guildry sash, while round each hat was twisted a narrow strip of scarlet braid.

“Company fall in!” ordered Doris Frost, in would-be stentorian tones, and the group, with creditable smartness, formed a straight line in front of her, while Susy Miles and Bee le Mesurier (a Larkiston girl) fell in in advance of them.

“Are you playing at Guildry?” asked Althea in an undertone, as she and Merry halted at a few yards’ distance.



ALTHEA SUBMITTED TO HAVING HER EYES  
BANDAGED

“Not playing,” answered Merry firmly. “We *are* Guildry—so now you know our secret! I shouldn’t have let you into it, only I felt sure, somehow, you were to be trusted, and we simply had to have some music for our drill.

You've no idea how difficult it is to run a Guildry company in the middle of the forest without anyone finding out."

"But why is it a secret?" asked Althea, bewildered, as usual, by the surprising behaviour of Miranda and her familiars.

"I'll explain to you," she responded, nothing loth. "You're not needed yet, for Doris is going to give them a bit of company drill, and you'd better know all about this, since you've kindly promised to help. Let's sit on this log—it's quite dry and warm in the sun, if it is almost November."

Althea sat down, and Merry, clasping her hands about her knee, proceeded with her explanation.

"It was an idea Doris and I had at the close of last session," she said. "It came to us quite suddenly in the middle of our display, when we saw the President of the London Centre. We thought how ripping it would be to have a Centre here at Maudsley, with a President, and everything that Centres ought to have—but of course one needs a lot of companies for that sort of thing. So we made up our minds to start a company of our own, and that's what you see before you now," waving a comprehensive hand towards the two squads who were marching and counter-marching on the grass under Doris's businesslike directions.

For a moment Althea was speechless with astonishment; then she exclaimed incredulously:

"You've started a company—a pack of Juniors like you!"

"I don't think you need be rude about it," returned Miranda, with offended dignity. "We may be Juniors, but we're not a pack—and why shouldn't we—just as much as grown-ups?"

"I beg your pardon," said Althea feebly. "I didn't mean to be rude, but it *is* rather unusual, you know. And I thought every company had to be attached to some church or chapel."

"Ours can be attached to Woodridge parish church, all right, when the time comes. We're not a properly enrolled company, you know—not yet. We're what's called a nuckulus, and that's why it's a deadly secret. As soon as we've got a few more girls and taught them recruit drill, and what it means to join the Guildry, we shall go to our own Guardian, and give her this company as a beautiful surprise. Then she can see about having them enrolled, and finding them a real Guardian and Assistants. After that they'll be able to start Seniors, too. They can't, at present, with only us to drill them."

“Oh!” said Althea. “You haven’t gone the length of Seniors yet!”

“Of course not! We’re too young. We can only take kids of our own age, or younger,” said Miranda wisely. “But there are plenty of big girls in the village who’d come along like a shot if the thing was going properly, with grown-ups to run it.”

“So that’s what you mean when you say you’re a nucleus?” said Althea, warming up as the gist of the idea came home to her. “I can’t help thinking you’re little sports, and I’ll do my best to keep your secret. But why not tell Nancy? She’s so awfully keen on the Guildry, and she was your Maid-of-Merit.”

“I only wish she was still!” groaned Miranda. “It was her keenness which made us keen first of all, and started us wanting to do something big for the Guildry, and we want to surprise her as much as anybody. We’ve tried other schemes, you know, such as catching poachers, and things of that sort—and they really didn’t turn out so badly, because we caught Lord Woodridge by mistake, and he’s done a lot of good to the 1st Maudsley. This is our latest idea, and it isn’t going so badly, is it? Those kids are picking up drill. But we’ve never been able to have music before, and that’s where you will be such a help.”

“I’ll do my best,” Althea promised. “I’m Guildry, too, though I’ve only just joined, and I’m going to play sometimes for my own company. It will be practice to help with yours. But what will happen when the weather breaks?”

“That’s just what we don’t quite know,” admitted Merry ruefully. “There is our barn, certainly, but it won’t be very comfortable in really cold weather, even if the girls do subscribe a log each—and we shall be much more likely to be found out.”

“That’s bound to happen sooner or later.”

“We’d rather it didn’t, though, till these girls know their drill, and are worth showing to Miss Knevitt. Now, if you’re ready, please Althea, we should like to begin wands. I teach them that, because I do it better than the others, and we haven’t real wands, of course, only sticks. That’s one of the things we’d like to make money for. We have to teach them the exercises we learn ourselves in the 1st Maudsley, but it’s been very boring and difficult without music to keep time by. All right, Doris—just coming!”

## CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

### THE JAPANESE TREE

Althea had little time left now for brooding over school troubles. In addition to Wednesday evenings at her own company, the first half of Saturday afternoon was also given over to Guildry, and she scarcely missed the interest of the "Am," though it was still hard to see the others troop down to the playing-fields at twelve o'clock, and to know that she was debarred from their fun and exercise through the unfairness and discourtesy of a few. It was very evident that Constance, though her hand had been forced, sympathized with the Cinderella of V(a), and her manner towards Muriel Evans and Co. was decidedly short, not to say snappy; but she had not the courage, with the inter-form matches coming on, to turn them out of the team, neck and crop, as Nancy would assuredly have done in her place.

It was Charity Sheringham who eased the difficult situation for Althea, at a hint from the head-girl, who had been quietly observant of what was going on in the Upper Fifth ever since her talk with Nancy. Entering the deserted schoolroom, one day, where Althea was poring over some algebra, she asked in her languid drawl:

"Is it absolutely necessary for you to devote your recreation time to maths., Althea? I'm not asking out of idle curiosity, you know. Speaking as a prefect, it's quite as much against the rules for you to work when you should be playing, as it is to play in working hours."

Althea looked up nervously, and the sensitive colour flooded her face.

"I—I'm sorry, Charity. I thought we might do as we liked in rec."

"Your mistake, my dear. At no time may we do as we like within these walls. What I really want to know is whether you can help me a bit with V(b)'s net-ball. I coach them in their games, you know, when not required by Lois Hill in our own game, and it would be a great help if you could attend to one half, while I see to the other."

"I'd love to!" exclaimed Althea, springing up with eagerness. Then her face clouded, and she drew back hesitatingly.

"What's wrong?" asked Charity, quick to note the change.

“Is it quite fair to Constance? After all, our form will be playing the Lower Fifth soon.”

“Not at net-ball,” replied Charity calmly. “I ascertained that before I asked you. Constance has some sense, and she isn’t entering the lists against V(b) when she knows they’d wipe the floor with her team. They’ll meet at hockey, but V(a) can’t afford to take risks at net-ball this winter.”

“All right then; I’ll come with pleasure,” said Althea, slamming down the lid of her desk upon Hall and Knight. “I shall be very glad of a game.”

“Thought you might be,” said Charity placidly. “Elma Cuthbert and Barbara and the rest will be equally glad to see you. They’re very keen in that form.”

So Althea played net-ball with the Lower Fifth, who were apparently as untroubled by social scruples as were Miranda and her friends in the Fourth. Althea began slowly to realize that ill-mannered girls were, after all, in a minority at Maudsley Grammar School, and that the world was not bounded on all sides by Muriel Evanses and Eileen Cranes.

To compensate for her exclusion from the ‘Am’ she had the folk-dance tunes, which she practised with Nancy till they sang in her head.

“I can always come back with you for half an hour on Fridays,” Nancy volunteered, “if Mrs. Stoddart doesn’t mind the row we make. At that rate you’ll soon know all the company has learnt to dance, so far.”

“Come back to-night and stay to tea,” said Althea hospitably. “Mrs. Stephen has asked Mother out to Redgables, so I shall be quite alone. That is,” she added, reddening a little, “if you don’t mind a bread-and-butter tea.”

“I’d enjoy it,” said Nancy quickly, “and it’ll fit in beautifully, for I know Auntie Beth is bringing Mrs. Stoddart home in her car, so she can collect me.”

With Saturday ahead of them to be spent in preparation, the two girls felt very free and leisured, when they had washed up their tea-things together, and settled down to practise. The fact that they both loved the same sort of music was a great bond between them, and they soon wandered from the folk-tunes to more elaborate work, constructing duets for flute and piano out of such music as they had, till they had evolved some very pretty arrangements between them.

“What a pity you’ve chucked the ‘Am’!” said Nancy regretfully. “If we worked up that last thing a bit, it would go beautifully at the next concert.”

Althea shook her head with a little shiver.

“I’ve had enough of Upper Fifth concerts, thank you! How is the ‘Am’ getting on? Are you giving another show soon?”

“Not until just before the holidays. Desda has found some sort of play ‘with incidental music,’ which she thinks might be managed by way of combining both sides of the ‘Am’. I think the incidental music’s rather rot myself, but she says the acting part isn’t too ambitious, which is something. I daresay we shall get through without crashing too badly, and Consie and Helen seem to think it will be something very wonderful—but I wish you were in it, Althea.”

Althea shook her head again.

“I really don’t want to be. At first I felt awfully sick at being out of all these school things; but I’m getting to mind it less and less, for I feel it’s so petty and idiotic of the girls who have pushed me out. If I’d done anything disgraceful or dishonourable, it would be different, but as it is—well, I’m coming to the conclusion that I’d rather not be in anything to which that set belongs.”

“Something in that,” admitted Nancy. “I know I’d feel like that myself. In fact, there was a time in V(b) when I was considered a bit of an outsider, and I was very chin-in-air about it with everybody except Desda.” And she sighed involuntarily, remembering the cloud which had gathered during the last three weeks between her chum and herself.

Althea heard the sigh and looked troubled, for she guessed the cause, but she had more tact than to comment on it. Desda had been too fair-minded to wreak her annoyance on her, and indeed, she was far from realizing that it was chiefly on her account Nancy had got her transfer. She only knew that Desda resented Nancy’s change of company, and that the two were less friendly than when she had first seen them together.

“Come on!” said Nancy, turning back to the piano. “Let’s try that last bit through once more, before we forget just how it went. Is that the door-bell?”

Althea laid down her flute and turned to answer it.

“Yes—though I can’t think who it can be. Mother has her latchkey, and anyhow it’s far too early for her.”

She went out, leaving the sitting-room door ajar, and presently Nancy, hearing a startled exclamation, followed her. Althea was standing under the

passage light, talking to a small and sinister-looking Japanese, who pushed his way in just as Nancy appeared, closing the door behind him.

“Is your mother out?” he asked, speaking excellent English with a strong foreign accent. “Then it is all the better for me. I have come here to-night to buy the tree, and if you will not sell, then I shall take it. It is not that I shall be dishonest—no—for I shall leave the money, but I go not out of here without the tree.”

“But I can’t give it to you,” replied Althea, looking white and frightened, “even if I wanted to sell it. It is not my tree; it belongs to my mother. Please go away now, and come back some other time when she is in.”

But he stood immovable as an Eastern image and repeated:

“I have come for the tree, and I go not without it.”

Quick-witted Nancy in the background saw at a glance that trouble was brewing, and that Althea was at a loss to know what she should do. Stepping suddenly forward, she took charge of the situation.

“Well, if you won’t go without the tree,” she said in resigned tones, “the only thing we can do is to ask you to come in and wait till Mrs. Stoddart returns. We certainly can’t give it you without her permission.”

It was hard to read anything in his immobile face with its small disagreeable eyes, yet Nancy fancied that, for a moment, he looked a trifle disconcerted at her appearance upon the scene. Clearly he had known of Mrs. Stoddart’s absence and had hoped to find Althea alone.

“I do not wish to wait,” he said. “I have come for the tree, and outside I have a friend, by the door at the foot of your stairs. No one shall go out from here till I go with the tree.”

His voice contained a threat which was decidedly menacing, and Althea grew paler still, shrinking back from him; but Nancy, resenting what she inwardly termed his “cheek,” was stirred to resist him.

“It’s no good, Althea,” she said, turning to her friend, so that their unwelcome visitor could not see the wink she bestowed upon her. “You’ll just have to let him take the tree and go—though we can certainly let the police know about it later on. Come in here,” she added to the Japanese, opening the door of the little kitchen. “You see, we must put you where there’s nothing else to steal, while we fetch the tree.”

“I do not steal!” he replied indignantly. “I pay for it.”



“You may call it what you like,” said Nancy firmly, “but we’re not going to leave you in the hall with the umbrellas.”



A SMALL AND SINISTER-LOOKING JAPANESE, WHO  
PUSHED HIS WAY IN

Apparently he decided to humour her, secure in the fact that he was more than a match for two schoolgirls, who could not possibly escape him so long as his accomplice mounted guard over their only exit. He was anxious, too, to carry through the transaction without attracting attention from outside.

The new museum (which was not yet opened) stood in a street that was fairly busy at this time of the evening. If it occurred to either girl to throw up a window and scream, he and his friend might find themselves in difficulties.

The idea of screaming from a window did cross Nancy's brain, but she abandoned it at once. If it came to active hostilities, the Jap could easily put them both out of action and be gone with the tree before anybody outside understood that they were being screamed at, or why. The only wise course was that of pretending to yield, and to yield very ungraciously, but Nancy had another scheme at the back of her mind.

She shut the door on the intruder, bitterly regretting that the key was on the inside, for she felt it would have been a great help if they could have locked him in; then, drawing Althea into the sitting-room, she snatched up the pot which held the precious tree.

"Quick!" she said. "The private stair to the museum! We must hide there."

"He'll follow us," said Althea in a dazed voice; but she led the way, nevertheless, where the passage turned at right angles beyond the kitchen, and they darted noiselessly past the door, dreading lest it should open, and the enemy appear. They had scarcely rounded the corner before they heard the handle rattle, and at the same moment Nancy, thrusting the tree into Althea's arms, pushed her through another door just beyond. She herself paused for a brief second, since it was absolutely necessary that this key at any rate should be changed, or their flight would be in vain. She had barely slipped it into place on the other side, when the Jap came round the bend of the passage. He was almost upon her, when Nancy, with a great effort overcoming the fear that threatened all of a sudden to paralyse her, slammed and locked the door in his face, and the two girls were left, trembling and panting, but safe for the moment, at the top of a long dark stair leading downwards into a pit of blackness.

"I can't find the switch," murmured Althea uncertainly, out of the shadows, as they heard their baffled foe storming and cursing on the other side of the door.

"We may do better without it," said Nancy grimly. "For all we know, our friend can smash locks, and if that happens, the less light there is, the better."

"He won't find that one easy to smash," returned Althea comfortingly. "Lord Woodridge has had special patent locks put on all the doors of the

museum for fear of burglars. Still we'd better feel our way down, and find a hiding-place, in case of accidents."

"I quite agree," said Nancy, as they stumbled down through the gloom. "Anyhow, we're comparatively safe for the moment, and we've got the cedar. If only our friend up above had waited another week, this place would have been open, and a janitor in charge at the vestibule. I say! he must be awfully keen on the tree to run such risks over getting it; one would think it was worth its weight in diamonds."

"He's not going to get it, this time—thanks to you!" said Althea. "I hadn't the wits to remember this stair. Now the difficulty will be to find our way about in the dark without crashing into any of the cases. Keep close to me, Nance. There's a corner over there which might hold us, if he doesn't manage to pick the lock and turn up the lights."

"Heaven help us if he does!" Nancy exclaimed. "I only wish the vestibule was open. You don't happen to know where *that* key is?"

Althea gave a hysterical little laugh.

"In Lord Woodridge's pocket! There's only one at present, and he took it up to town yesterday to have it duplicated. The pattern's peculiar—that was done on purpose—and he wanted two more, for us and the janitor. Listen to the noise he's making, Nancy!"

"According to you the lock will hold," said Nancy, reassuringly. "And it can't be long now till Auntie Beth brings Mrs. Stoddart back. Then he and his pal will be caught redhanded."

## CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

### THE SECRET OF THE CEDAR

Crouching behind the somewhat inadequate shelter of a large case containing an array of stuffed birds, the girls heard the sudden cessation of the storm that had reached them, muffled, through the upper door, and the stillness made them uneasy.

“So long as he was making that row,” said Nancy, “we knew where he was and what he was doing. I don’t like this.”

“Nor I,” said Althea. “Hush! What’s that scratching sound? Do you hear it?”

Nancy listened intently. It was a very small noise in comparison with what had preceded it, but its very stealthiness was ominous.

“He’s picking the lock!” she gasped.

“Then,” said Althea, with forced calm, “it won’t take him long to find the switch, when once he gets in, and with the lights up he’ll discover us at once. What’s the next thing to do, Nancy?”

Nancy groaned.

“Nothing—as far as I can see,” she said. “If we knew of a better ’ole, we might go to it; but I suppose there isn’t one?”

“This is the most concealed part of the whole museum,” said Althea. “If only we could hear that car drive up, with Mrs. Stephen and Mother!”

The minutes seemed hours to the two frightened girls till a new sound replaced the scraping, and a faint glow in the distant corner, where the stairs ended, told them that the door was open at last, and the hunter one step nearer his quarry. Holding their breath they waited for the light to flash up, but to their relief and amazement, the tiny click of the electric switch, reaching them through the silence, was followed by no sudden illumination.

“Oh!” breathed Althea. “I remember! Only one switch has been connected yet—the one by the vestibule. We may be safe after all.”

“Hush, then!” said Nancy. “We mustn’t speak a word to let him know where we are.”

Clinging together they listened to the Jap's movements, which told them that he was at the foot of the staircase now, and beginning to twine his way like a cat between the cases, in his blindfold search for his prey. There was something painstaking and systematic about his progress, and Althea began to feel that discovery was inevitable, if only he kept on long enough. Just how long it would have taken him to reach their corner by these methods they were never to know, for Nancy, by an untoward accident, precipitated matters. Seized with sudden cramp in her leg, she gave an involuntary lurch, the pot (which she had taken again from Althea) fell with a crash on the parquet floor, and Nancy, putting a hand against the wall to save her balance, completed the catastrophe by touching the one active switch in the building, which was immediately flooded with light.

It only lasted for a fraction of a second. Horrified at what she had done, Nancy as promptly plunged the place into blackness again; but that fraction of a second had been enough to give their pursuer his bearings, and they heard him making for their nook as straight as the intervening obstacles would permit.

Then began a wild and breathless race round the dark museum, bruising themselves against the cases as they fled. Somewhere beside the stuffed birds lay the little cedar among the débris of spilt soil and broken pot, unknown to its would-be thief—the one piece of good fortune which had befallen the girls. It was obvious that he still believed them to be carrying it, otherwise he would have let them go, and devoted himself to securing his real object. Guessing this, Nancy made an effort to atone for some of the damage done by her unfortunate movement.

“Take care of the tree, Althea!” she called out. “Whatever you do, don't drop it!”

And Althea, with equal presence of mind, replied pantingly:

“Rather not!”

The whole thing seemed more like a horrible nightmare than an actual happening, and the two girls were beginning to feel that it could not last much longer, when deliverance came from an entirely unexpected quarter. Through all the hubbub, the sound of a key turning in the vestibule door passed unheeded alike by pursuer and pursued, and when the light flashed up again it would have been difficult to say which was most bewildered, for it revealed Lord Woodridge standing on the threshold, and beside him a stalwart policeman.

Nancy was the first to recover herself. Even as the Jap, the tables turned, sought to make a dive for freedom, she shrieked:

“Catch that man! Don’t let him go! He tried to steal Mrs. Stoddart’s tree!”

It was soon over. Held firmly in Robert’s iron grasp, the Japanese was finally led off in the direction of the police station, while Nancy, now that the strain and excitement was over, proceeded to disgrace herself by bursting into tears.

“I’m not—not really crying,” she explained. “It’s—it’s only that I can’t—help it.”

Lord Woodridge installed her on the nearest seat, while Althea, forgetting her own fright, tried to comfort her friend.

“I tell you I’m—not crying,” persisted Nancy.

“So I perceive,” said Lord Woodridge drily. “But perhaps, when you’ve finished whatever it is you are doing, you’ll be kind enough to explain why I find you and Althea playing catch-as-catch-can in my still unopened museum with a foreigner of doubtful appearance. I don’t know how it is that all the showcases haven’t been shattered.”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” said Althea, “only let’s go upstairs first, and be comfortable in the sitting-room. We’ve both had more than enough of this place, and Mother should be back directly.”

Nancy sat up and dried her eyes.

“Don’t go without the tree,” she reminded them, “after all the trouble we’ve had to save it. Oh, Lord Woodridge! I’ve done such a dreadful thing—I’ve dropped it and smashed that lovely, quaint old pot to atoms!”

“Bad luck!” said Lord Woodridge sympathetically. “Still the tree’s worth more than the pot, and we’ll soon fit it out with another, even if it’s not quite so *recherché*. Come and help me to collect all the soil we can scrape together, and we’ll carry the whole thing upstairs in my evening paper. It’s important, you know, to put it back into the mould it’s been accustomed to, so that its constitution can recover from the shock in its natural environment.”

“Anyhow, we’ve got another pot which will do, and it’s just the right size,” said Althea, “so don’t worry about the smash, Nancy dear.”

Upstairs, beside the fire in the cosy little sitting-room, they told Lord Woodridge the story of their adventures, while Nancy, with the earthy contents of the newspaper spread out before her, worked with deft and careful fingers to set the little cedar comfortably into its new quarters.

“How did you happen to come in like that, just in the nick of time?” asked Althea, when their own tale was finished.

“I was on my way home from the station, and I was walking, because the car had met the wrong train—luckily, as it turned out—and just as I got near the museum, I saw the light flash up inside it for a moment and then go out. It seemed a bit fishy, for there was no light up there in the flat, so I concluded that neither you nor your mother were in. As you know, I’m in a chronic scare of burglars getting after the valuable specimens (though Nancy’s uncle jeers at me!), so I picked up a convenient bobby, by way of a precaution, and brought him along. He came in very handy, too, what?”

“He certainly did!” exclaimed Nancy fervently, while Althea added:

“There you are, Nance! If you hadn’t had that accident, and bumped against the switch, Lord Woodridge would never have known that anything was wrong, and we might be there now! It quite makes up for breaking the pot.”

“The thing that beats me,” mused Lord Woodridge, “is what the chap wanted with the tree at all. He must have been pretty keen to go to such lengths about it. Even the most enthusiastic gardener will usually keep clear of the police when he’s after any particular plant. We’re all supposed to be mad on one point—I should say your pal is touched on dwarf trees.”

“Althea thinks he may have mistaken it for one of his household gods,” suggested Nancy, pressing in another lump of soil.

Lord Woodridge nodded thoughtfully.

“Something in that, perhaps. If the thing you’re potting at present chances to contain the soul of one of his ancestors, the johnny wouldn’t care, naturally, about leaving it in unhallowed hands like Althea’s. Yes. That’s the only possible explanation—some sort of fanaticism.”

Nancy withdrew the small clod of earth she had been trying to push into place, and asked:

“Is it good for cedars to grow in stony soil? There seems to be a little pebble in this mould. Shall I leave it out?”

“It may be there for drainage purposes. Better give it all the ingredients to which it’s been accustomed,” advised Lord Woodridge, but Althea said:

“All conifers do best in sand, not gravel. I shouldn’t put it back.”

Nancy, who had been idly rubbing the dirt off the pebble, uttered a sudden exclamation.

“This doesn’t seem to be an ordinary stone. Look, Lord Woodridge! is it a crystal, or what? It glitters so where I’ve scraped it clean.”

Lord Woodridge took one look at it, then snatched it excitedly out of her hand.

“Fetch some water—quick, Althea!” he said. “We’ll wash this. Seems to me there’s more in it than meets the eye.”

Althea hastily brought a tea-bowl, and the pebble was plunged into it. In a moment Lord Woodridge drew it out and held it up to the light, where it glowed and sparkled with a thousand changing colours.

“Well!” he exclaimed, and continued to twist it about, as though further words failed him.

“It’s very pretty,” said Nancy. “Can it have come off some ornament or other? And how did it get in among the roots of the tree?”

The power of speech returned to Lord Woodridge, and it came in a veritable spate.

“Pretty?” he almost shouted. “I should think it is pretty! But when you find a diamond the size of a pigeon’s egg, that’s not what you call it. Magnificent! Superb! By George! that Jap fellow knew what he was after, and it wasn’t the spirit of any old ancestor! I should be sorry to exaggerate in any way, Nancy, but it strikes me that you’ve made Mrs. Stoddart’s fortune by dropping that tree on the floor.”

The girls gazed at him incredulously. The evening had been so full of excitement that they hardly knew, now, whether they were on their heads or their heels. It certainly appeared as though Lord Woodridge was going mad, by way of a grand finale, and neither Nancy nor Althea felt as though they could stand much more.

He saw their scared glances, and laughed reassuringly as he calmed down a little.

“It’s all right,” he said, “and though it must sound a bit like a fairy tale, I can promise you it’s perfectly true. I know a diamond when I see one, even



when it's as unbelievably big as this. Is that a car stopping outside?"

"Mother and Mrs. Stephen at last!" exclaimed Althea, going to the door. "And what a lot we've got to tell them! I can't take it all in yet, but I suppose we shall be able to grasp it gradually."

"It may take you some time," admitted Lord Woodridge, "but I can tell you one thing—I shall get Mrs. Stephen to run me round to the County Bank, at once, and knock up old Ford. He'll have to deposit this in his strongest safe to-night—especially as the Jap johnny's accomplice must have got clear away, and he probably knows something. Good evening, Mrs. Stoddart! The girls and I have got a tale for you which is guaranteed to take your breath away before you've heard the end of it."

## CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

### AN IMPORTANT PERSON

Perhaps it was as well that these wild and upsetting events took place on a Friday evening, since it would have been difficult for those who had shared in them to settle down next morning to the ordinary school routine. As it was, Nancy and Althea had the week-end in which to recover from their excitement and recount their adventures to Desda, Angela and Barbara, who were bitterly envious.

“I really think, Althea,” said Angela reproachfully, “you might ask *us* to tea sometimes, if those are the sort of entertainments you give. Nancy has all the luck!”

“We didn’t either of us think we were very lucky last night,” said Nancy laughing; “not before Lord Woodridge came, at any rate! But I hope Mrs. Stoddart and Althea are going to have a little luck now. Anyhow, Lord Woodridge has taken the diamond up to town to-day, and he told Mrs. Stoddart he feared her days were numbered as the curator of his museum.”

“And she hasn’t even started curating yet!” exclaimed Barbara. “For, of course, she couldn’t call it beginning till the place was properly opened, and that doesn’t happen till next week. I say! won’t the girls at school be thrilled when they hear all this!”

“But they’re not going to!” cried Althea, starting up. “Look here, Babs! I don’t want my private affairs discussed all over Maudsley. There’s been enough of that already! I don’t wish you to tell anybody.”

“Oh, all right!” said Barbara, much disappointed. “But it would make a perfectly glorious sensation.”

“That’s not my ambition,” retorted Althea drily.

Nevertheless the story leaked out at the Grammar School, as it could hardly fail to do, though neither Barbara nor Desda betrayed it. Eileen Crane sought out Nancy during the dinner-hour, the following Wednesday, and asked excitedly:

“What’s all this about Althea Stoddart finding a diamond in the roots of a maidenhair fern, and turning into an heiress in consequence?”

“Better ask her,” said Nancy sarcastically. “Oh, I forgot! You can’t speak to her for fear of losing caste because she played her flute in the street. Then I don’t quite know how you can find out about the diamond and the maidenhair fern.”

Eileen reddened angrily.

“Don’t be an ass, Nancy Caird! You must know all about it, since you’re so pally with her. Is it true, or isn’t it?”

“It’s founded on fact,” admitted Nancy cautiously. “Who told you?”

“Enid. She says Lord Woodridge brought the stone round to the Bank House one evening, long after closing hours, and her father told them, when he came back from locking it up in the safe, that the Stoddarts’ fortune was made. It sounds like a fairy tale. Muriel couldn’t get over it when she heard.”

“No,” said Nancy. “I suppose not. Pity, isn’t it, that you and Muriel have treated Althea so abominably of late? But you couldn’t know, certainly, that she was going to turn into an heiress. I didn’t myself.”

Eileen flung off indignantly, to confide to Muriel Evans that she couldn’t stand that conceited ass, Nancy Caird, who never answered a question without sneering, and then didn’t tell you what you wanted to know. The position of the snobbish minority in V(a) was not altogether pleasant just then.

With Constance, Helen, and the others, it was different. They went frankly to Althea with questions and congratulations, while Barbara, hearing garbled editions of the story flying about the school, insisted on telling the true version.

“It can’t matter now that everybody knows it wrong side up,” she urged. “They may as well hear what really happened, mayn’t they?”

“Oh, very well!” said Althea good-naturedly. “But I do hate all this fuss!”

And she continued on her obscure way at school, as though nothing had happened.

A good deal was happening, though, and it was soon apparent that difficult days were over for Mrs. Stoddart. She was in treaty for a charming house at Woodridge, nearly opposite to Fernglade, and directly it was ready for them she and Althea were to move into it, leaving the flat above the

museum for the new curator, whom Lord Woodridge was busying himself to discover.

“We may not be fabulously wealthy, dear,” she said to Althea, “but we shall be comfortable at last, and I feel like a different person already.”

Althea was discovering that she, too, was a different person—at school—or could be, if she chose. Her fairy tale had glamoured all the girls, and those who had refused to have any dealings with Cinderella among the ashes, were quite ready to make overtures now that she had become a princess. Althea, however, held her head a little higher, and went her way as before, consorting only with the friends who had shown themselves such all through. She went to Guildry with Nancy as usual, and played on Saturdays for the secret company run by Squad Six (who had been compelled by the weather to transfer their activities to the Blacketts’ barn), but she made no attempt to return to the “Am” or to join in V(a)’s games.

“You know, Althea,” Constance said to her, one day, growing red and embarrassed as she spoke, “it would be all right now—I mean, if you’d care to play in the hockey eleven again. I don’t believe there would be any — —”

She stopped, floundering helplessly, and wishing Althea would help her out a little, instead of standing there very erect and almost stern.

Althea did.

“Objection?” she suggested, by way of supplying the missing word. “It’s very kind, thanks, Constance, but as I never could see the reason for that objection, I can’t now see any reason for its disappearance. I’m still Althea Stoddart, who played in the Maudsley streets for money, and so — —”

She broke off in her turn, not because she felt any difficulty in finishing her sentence, but from a merciful desire to spare Consie, who was looking thoroughly unhappy.

“Oh, I know we deserve anything you like to say!” she mumbled. “And I suppose you think if I’d been any good at all I would have stood out against Muriel and her lot. I know that’s Nancy’s opinion. But though they may be snobs, Althea—and goodness knows they are!—they’re the best hockey players we’ve got in V(a), and if you’re games-captain you have to put the form first.”

Althea relaxed a little.

“All right, Constance—I’m not blaming you. I can see the difficulties of your position right enough; and, as far as that goes, I’d come back and play

for you to-morrow with pleasure, but I'm not going in with Muriel and Eileen and their friends, just because (having enough to live on now) they think I may be a fit companion for them after all."

Constance nodded sorrowfully.

"I don't wonder that's how you feel," she admitted, "but you're a very good forward, and we haven't too many in the Upper Fifth. Do you mean to go on helping Charity with the net-ball in V(b)?"

"Yes—as long as she wants me," said Althea. "It's better than not being in the games at all."

But here, too, there were better things in store. Lois Hill, the school captain, went over one morning to V(b)'s corner of the field, with a message for Charity, and remained for a minute or two, looking on. In her opinion the Lower Fifth were "a sporting crowd," with future possibilities about them, and Lois had an eye to the future. The ranks of the school teams were liable to be thinned, in the nature of things, each successive term, as girls grew up and left; therefore Lois, who would soon be grown up herself, was constantly on the look-out for budding talent.

On this occasion it happened that Althea was captaining a side chosen at random from the rest of V(b) against their regular team lead by Elma Cuthbert, while Charity ran up and down the line, shouting comments and advice to the players. Elma was an excellent captain, and the elect seven were playing with considerable vigour, while Althea tried hard to infuse something of the sort into her followers; but they were by no means brilliant, and again and again it fell to her to save the situation. Elma won in the end, as was inevitable from the first; but, thanks to Althea, the opposition gave their form team some hard work before the final victory, and Lois greeted the Upper Fifth girl with approval as she came off the field.

"You know your game," she observed. "I've been looking on for some time now, and I'm going to make a suggestion to you. We haven't got a reliable centre attack in the school team, because of Marjory Leeland's groggy ankle, and I was wondering, just now, if you would care to understudy her. I think it might be rather a good plan."

Althea flushed with pleasure.

"But I say, Lois!" she protested, "you've got the whole of the Sixth to draw from, and there must be someone besides Marjory Leeland who can play centre."

Charity had joined them by this time, and she answered for the captain, in her own peculiarly dry manner.

“Plenty,” she said, “but Lois happens to be rather particular, and I told her your style of play might suit her. What about it, Lois?”

“You’ll have to find someone else to help you with V(b),” answered Lois firmly. “I shall want Althea to practise with the teams in future. That doesn’t mean you’ve got your colours, you know, Althea—not yet, anyhow. You’ll simply stand by in case Marjory’s ankle lets us down again; but, of course, if that should happen and you play for the school, you’ll be given your tie when the first vacancy occurs. Turn up on the Sixth Form field to-morrow morning.”

And with a kindly nod she walked off, slipping her arm into Charity’s.

Althea gazed after them, for a minute, in a dazed fashion, then betook herself slowly towards the house, being overtaken half-way by Nancy.

“What’s up? What was Lois saying to make you look so moonstruck? I saw her talking to you just now.”

Althea stopped short and gazed solemnly at her friend.

“Nancy! Can you believe it? I’m on the school reserve—actually on it, from this very moment—to play centre attack in the net-ball team, if Marjory Leeland crocks up!”

“*What?*”

“I don’t wonder you can’t believe it—I can’t myself. But it’s true! I, who wasn’t good enough to play for V(a), am to practise with the Sixth in future! Isn’t it sufficient to turn anyone’s head?”

Nancy gave vent to a whoop, hastily muffled, out of deference to the nearness of the school buildings, and declared:

“It would turn mine upside down, but yours may be better screwed on. What a tale for Muriel Evans! I’ll take care she knows all about it, too! if I have to demean myself to tell her in person.”

Such extreme measures, however, proved unnecessary. The news spread like wildfire through the Upper School, as news has a mysterious and occult way of doing at times; and most of Althea’s form-mates crowded round to congratulate her when they returned to their own schoolroom after dinner.

“I’m awfully pleased,” said Helen Hislop heartily. “It’s only once in a blue moon that anyone in the Upper Fifth gets a chance of playing for

Maudsley, because the Sixth is nearly always strong enough to supply the teams from itself.”

“So they are, this year,” said Brenda Lawson. “Marjory Leeland’s ankle is their one weak spot; but there are a good many among them who could understudy her quite well, without taking anyone from V(a). Lois must think a lot of you, Althea.”

“I consider it’s a tremendous honour for our form,” announced Constance, red in the face with the strength of her emotion. “I’m more bucked about it than I can say! Now, the one thing left to hope for is that Marjory may crock her ankle again very soon—quite painlessly, of course, I mean.”

What Muriel Evans and her familiars thought about it did not transpire, but their manners became extraordinarily subdued during the next few days, and they studiously avoided any encounters with Althea.

“It’s a splendid lesson for ’em,” remarked Nancy grimly. “At least it would be if it weren’t quite impossible to teach them to be sporting. Oh, well! I suppose the best and brightest school must have its blots. Althea, won’t you think things over, and come back to the ‘Am’ again? I could do with you nicely in the orchestra.”

But Althea shook her head.

“Not yet, thanks, Nance. It isn’t altogether because I’m playing Achilles in his tent, though. You’re practising on Saturday afternoons just now, and I’ve got an engagement then.”

## CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

### ANOTHER NEW COMPANY

Althea's engagement on Saturday afternoons (with Miranda and her friends) had become a very pressing one. They no longer met in the forest, for the long dry autumn had suddenly broken up in wild gusts of rain, which made open-air meetings out of the question, and their rendezvous was now the Blacketts' big barn. Here they found quarters which were dry and roomy; and if their log-fire gave no great heat, they were generally too busy and active to notice its shortcomings.

Squad Six's company was coming on. Already, in the three Saturdays which Althea had spent with them, she saw a difference, and Merry and Doris assured her gratefully that it was due to her music.

"You've no idea how it pulls things together," Doris declared. "They've got what Miss Knevitt calls rhythm in those wand exercises, now. I can't tell you what she means by that, but I know it when I see it, and our kids have started having it since you came."

"Not to mention their fancy marching," added Merry. "They never could keep step before. You can't think what a godsend you are, Althea! At this rate we shall be able to give the company to Miss Knevitt for a Christmas present."

"Unless we're found out before then," said Doris doubtfully. "I haven't felt so safe since we've come to the barn. You know, Merry, we do make a lot of noise, and if any of your people came near they'd begin to suspect something."

"I don't know whether you're hinting," said Miranda huffily, "that whenever people hear a noise they're bound to think it's a Guildry company meeting."

"Of course not!" retorted Doris. "But you couldn't expect anybody to believe that all this row is caused by one squad. Your family know *we're* in the barn, and as long as they don't come too near it, they may not suspect anything else, but if they got within earshot —"

She paused dramatically, and Althea laughed.



“If they did find you out, I don’t suppose they’d tell,” she said. “Not if you begged them to keep it a secret.”

“Yes, but it wouldn’t be such a *deadly* secret, then,” replied Doris. “Anyhow it can’t be helped, so we must just risk it. If they’ve finished their free exercises, Merry, hadn’t Susy better take them for company drill? She knows the orders much better than either of us.”

“Yes, I think so,” said Miranda, looking a little bit worried. “That’s the thing we’re least sure of,” she confided to Althea. “It takes such a lot of ‘taking,’ if you know what I mean, and we’ve none of us learnt the commands—not likely, being Juniors! It’s all we can do to carry them out when our own Guardian yells them at us.”

“Aren’t you attempting rather more than you can manage?” suggested Althea. “Why not leave company drill alone at present?”

But Squad Six was heroically determined.

“It’s compulsory in every company,” Miranda reminded her reproachfully. “If we left that out we shouldn’t be real Guildry—just playing at it. So if we can only get them to counter-march and form fours, it will always be something.”

“Teach them to right and left turn,” advised Althea. “That’s how they’ll learn to tell their right hand from their left, and it’s a very useful accomplishment. I know, because I’m a bit shaky about it, myself, when we do company drill in the 2nd Maudsley.”

The full strength (including the self-constituted Guardians) fell in for this item, and Althea, seated on an upturned fruit hamper, with her flute across her knees, looked on, her chin cupped in her hands. They had finished forming fours, and were trying, earnestly though with much confusion, to form company, when the door of the barn suddenly opened and Desda Blackett’s clear tones were heard on the threshold.

“Come in and shelter here, Miss Knevitt, Nancy will bring your bike. It isn’t a bear-garden, though it sounds like it—only Miranda entertaining the rest of Squad Six; so you’ll see— —”

Her voice died away as she turned inwards and beheld the nature of the entertainment provided for Squad Six. Miss Knevitt came in behind her, followed closely by Nancy and the bicycle, all flying before a sudden heavy shower, which pattered down on the roof of the barn in the sudden stillness caused by their unexpected entrance. For one brief moment both invaders and invaded stood petrified with astonishment; then Merry rose to the

occasion with the energy born of despair. If their cherished secret was prematurely out, at least let them put the best face possible on their discovery.

“Company, fall *in!*” she shouted. “(Never mind about forming now—just fall in—that’s right!) Company, ’ten—*shun!* By the right, dress!”

Then she stepped forward to Miss Knevitt, came smartly to attention herself, and said:

“Will you please inspect this company, Miss Knevitt? We hoped you wouldn’t see it for another week or two, when it would have been much better worth inspecting, but since you are here, will you please tell us what you think of it?”

A new and hitherto unsuspected Guildry company was the last thing the Guardian of the 1st Maudsley had looked to find in Mr. Blackett’s barn when driven to shelter there from the rain; but she also rose to the occasion with marvellous promptitude, and walked gravely down the line, straightening a “sash” here, or a hair-ribbon there, till the inspection was complete. Then she stepped back a pace or two in front of them, and, still struggling to maintain a proper gravity, she said:

“I don’t quite know what company I have just had the pleasure of inspecting, nor am I altogether certain who is your Guardian, but I know that you appear to be a very satisfactory little crowd, and I should like, if I may, to see what you are doing in the way of work. I think, if I could actually watch you drilling, I might feel less as though I had stumbled somehow into some queer sort of hobgoblin story! You see, one doesn’t expect to find a secret Guildry company in a barn on a showery afternoon, and I’m not sure, at present, that you won’t suddenly vanish through the floor and never be seen again!”

The village children laughed shyly and excitedly. Merry had told them that they would be inspected by “a real Guardian” some day soon, and thereafter become “a real company” themselves, which was, just then, the height of their ambition. They realized, however, that things were happening much sooner than either of their leaders had looked for, and that it was up to them to make a good impression. At Doris’s command, they fetched the garden stakes which served them as wands, and took their places very demurely to go through the exercises she had taught them; while Althea, picking up her flute, stood back in the shadows to play for them.

“So this is what you do on Saturday afternoons!” exclaimed Nancy. “This is why you won’t come back to the ‘Am,’ however much I beg you!

Des and I were just riding back from the practice when we met Miss Knevitt, and the shower started, and Desda brought us in here. What's the meaning of it all, Althea?"

"Better ask your late squad," returned Althea, when she was free to take the flute from her lips once more. "They seem to have been running this show for the last three months, and I'm a mere accident that occurred a few weeks ago. They were set on keeping the concern a secret till they considered it ripe for inspection, but sheer necessity drove them to confide in me. They needed some sort of music."

"They are little sports!" exclaimed Nancy softly, as Althea resumed her duties. "Who'd have thought it? Squad Six—the naughtiest in the whole company! But only Squad Six would have the brazen assurance to start a company on their own!"

When the wands were over, and Miranda had put the children through a short display of fancy marching, she suddenly gave the order to halt.

"Company dis-*miss*!" she called; then, dropping into her normal tone: "The rain's over now, and you can all go home as fast as possible. You've done rather well this afternoon. Come along next Saturday at the usual time."

Amid a cheerful chorus of "Good afternoon, miss!" the company which was no longer a secret trooped out on to the puddly field-path that led to the village. They bore with them the pleasant consciousness of having come creditably through a serious ordeal, and saw ahead of them, in the near future, the glittering prospect of becoming "a real company" at last.

The barn door had hardly closed upon the last of them, when Squad Six hurled itself upon its Guardian.

"What do you think, Miss Knevitt? Will they do?"

"Can they possibly be enrolled and made proper Guildry like us?"

"If they are, will they be No. 3 Maudsley, or No. 1 Woodridge?"

"What do you really think of them, Miss Knevitt? We've done our best to get them into shape."

Miss Knevitt subsided on the upturned hamper vacated by Althea and drew a long breath.

"My dears, I'm so taken aback—so pleasantly taken aback—that I feel quite bewildered. I think you've done marvels, and (as far as I can see)

you've actually laid the foundations of a new company. I shall have to write to Headquarters about this, and I shan't forget to tell them how it has all come about. We shall have to talk it over and see what can be done."

"Do you mean—talk it over with us?" asked Doris Frost incredulously.

Miss Knevitt gave her a whimsical smile.

"I don't know who has a better right to discuss it! Of course, the first thing is to get it attached to a church—Woodridge Parish Church, obviously; I shall ride round presently and see the vicar—then they can drill in comfort in the parish room on whatever evening it is free for them."

"But the most important thing of all," said Miranda earnestly, "is to find them a Guardian. Can you think of one, Miss Knevitt?"

"Not straight off in such a hurry," Miss Knevitt answered, "but the vicar may be able to suggest some one."

"Was that how you were found?" inquired Susy Miles with interest, and when Miss Knevitt nodded, she said, with a little sigh, "Oh well, then! I expect it's quite a good plan. Directly that's settled, they'll be able to have Seniors, and there are lots of bigger girls in the village who would have loved to join; but, of course, we couldn't let them when there was only us to run it."

"You see," said Doris wisely, "if they'd got out of hand, we couldn't have stopped them because of being so much younger—so it was better for discipline to keep to juniors."

A stifled sound from Nancy was hurriedly converted into a cough, while Desda permitted herself a slow grin. This concern for discipline was a little new in Squad Six, who, not many months previously, had been the root of all rowdiness in the 1st Maudsley. Miss Knevitt, however, kept a perfectly straight face, which was greatly to her credit.

"Very sensible of you! You seem to have done remarkably well all round, and I am very pleased to see how keen you have become. It isn't every Junior squad that can claim to have started a company. Now, Desda, if you'll kindly take my bike out again, I shall go off to the vicarage at once. It's going to be worth while taking pains over this affair."

She rode off along the puddly path, leaving Squad Six to consume a picnic tea by the remains of the barn fire, in a sort of awed rapture, which even silenced their active tongues for the time being. They pressed the three elder girls to join them, but Althea was expected home to tea that afternoon,

and Desda said frankly that she preferred the warmth and comfort of their own dining-room at the Yellow Farm.

“Besides, you’ve only brought enough grub for yourselves,” said Nancy comprehendingly, “and it would put you on short commons if you had to share it with stray visitors. Thanks awfully for asking us, but we must go home. You ought to have a special feast, to-day, to celebrate what you’ve done for the G.G.”

“It was you who made us keen, first of all,” returned Merry. “Nothing can quite make up to us for losing you as our Maid-of-Merit, but we’ve tried to drown our sorrows in this. Are you ever coming back to us again, Nancy?”

“Yes, Nancy! Surely you haven’t joined the 2nd Maudsley for good?” cried the others in chorus. “Even Phyllis Bainbridge is coming back to us some day.”

Nancy smiled and shook her head, but said nothing. Her eyes were fixed a little wistfully on Desda’s; for her chum’s resentment had caused the biggest part of her sacrifice in leaving the old company.

It was Desda who answered for her, and Nancy gasped a little as she listened.

“Why, of course she’ll come back some day—at least, I hope so—but even if she doesn’t, remember we’re doing our bit in giving her up to go where she’s needed most.”

## CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

### THE ROSEBURY FESTIVAL

Outside the barn Nancy slipped her arm hesitatingly into Desda's.

"I say! Do you really feel like that about it now?" she asked, half shyly. "I mean—you don't mind so much about my being transferred?"

Desda gave the arm a contrite little squeeze.

"Yes—I understand better now. I think I really understood all along, but I was a disagreeable ass, and I didn't like being left behind. I didn't realize how much you were doing it for the Guildry; I thought it was all on Althea's account, and—and—"

"I know," said Nancy quickly. "You felt you ought to come first. Well—so you do, old thing."

Desda dropped her eyes, shamefaced.

"I ought to have known—and anyhow, Althea's so decent, and she's had such a rotten time, that I was a beast to grudge her anything."

"You were, rather," assented candid Nancy, "because, of course, she got nothing that was yours—nobody could—from me. But all the same, it's only fair to confess that I did get that transfer as much for Althea as for the Guildry. Phyl Bainbridge talked to me and said they could do with me in No. 2, but it was mostly because I was so sorry for Althea that I went. Phyllis was sure she wouldn't join without me."

"I expect Phyl was right," said Desda, as they climbed the stile into the high-road. "But if that were all, you could come back now, you know. Althea has found her feet, both at school and at Guildry. You're staying in No. 2 because you're needed there."

Nancy admitted the accusation with an awkward laugh.

"Oh, well! I suppose I am. They haven't got a pianist yet, and they're a bit shaky in their company drill. Babs and I, and about two others, know the commands, and that helps to pull the rest through. I'm afraid I shall have to stick to it, Desda—especially as I've evidently finished my job with Squad Six. Not much trouble to be feared from them in future, I should think!"

Desda laughed, as she recalled the scene in the barn upon which they had burst.

“I’ve known for ages that some secret proceedings were going on, but I hadn’t an idea it was anything like that. Nobody else, at their age, would have had the cheek to start such an undertaking, but Merry and her chums stick at little or nothing. It was very good of Althea to help them out with her flute.”

“She’s always ready to use it for helping anyone out,” said Nancy, “but it seems to me that’s all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Desda doubtfully.

“I don’t believe we shall ever get her to play it again at school—just for the sheer pleasure of the listeners, I mean. What happened that night at our show has sunk in too deeply.”

They turned in at the gate of the Yellow Farm as she spoke. Nancy and Desda had not been much in each other’s houses for the last week or two, but with their reconciliation, old habits seemed automatically resumed. Desda took it for granted that Nancy was coming back to tea, and Nancy, as had been their custom, came without waiting for any special invitation.

“I can’t quite understand,” said Desda thoughtfully, going on with the conversation, “why it should matter so much to Althea what a handful of outsiders think. Personally, the opinions of Muriel Evans and Eileen Crane would never make me turn a hair.”

“I can understand it better,” Nancy answered slowly. “I don’t think Althea bothers about them in the ordinary way, but wild horses wouldn’t make her play again if they were in the audience, thinking their snobby little thoughts. At least, I know that’s how it would take me.”

“I suppose it’s on account of being musical,” was the explanation with which Desda satisfied herself. “I expect musicians go on being themselves even when they’re playing. It’s different when you’re acting, because then you’re somebody else altogether.”

Nancy grinned appreciatively.

“I shouldn’t go so far as to call myself a musician,” she said, “though it’s what I hope to be, some day. No, it wouldn’t be quite the same thing with you, perhaps. If you’re Beatrice or Lady Macbeth, you get rid of Desda Blackett’s personal enemies, for the time being. Sound scheme!”

They turned into the shabby dining-room, where Celia was just lighting the lamps, while her twin set out the cakes for tea. Though it was some time since they had last seen Nancy there, they were too tactful to make any embarrassing comments.

“Hullo!” said Rosalind. “Tea’s just coming in. Did you happen to see that little villain Merry on your way here?”

“Rather!” responded Nancy. “She’s been very busy starting a Guildry company in Mr. Blackett’s barn, and we left her having a preliminary tea with her fellow-workers, but she’ll be here directly.” And she and Desda between them told the tale of Miranda’s activities.

The twins heard the story calmly, being too well used to their youngest sister to be much astonished at any of her escapades.

“Well,” was Celia’s placid comment, “it’s a harmless outlet for them, and better than the things that used to happen before the feud ended between Maudsley and Larkiston. It’s not much more than a year since Merry couldn’t see Doris Frost without pushing her into the nearest pond—and Doris and her friends used to hunt Merry and Susy Miles through the streets of the town, going to and from school.”

“You’re talking about the good old days,” said Merry’s own voice regretfully, as she followed her mother into the room. “Doris and I were just saying, last week, that we can’t help missing it all. There’s no real adventure for any of us now that the feud’s been stopped. And the worst of it is that we’ve all become so pally we couldn’t possibly begin it again if we tried.”

“I sincerely hope you won’t try!” said Mrs. Blackett hastily. “Run and tell Father tea’s ready. Rosalind, dear, do you think you’ve cut quite enough bread and butter?”

When the bread and butter stage was past, and cake had been reached, Celia suddenly inquired:

“Did you see Miss Smith at all, yesterday, Nancy? I don’t know whether you go to her on Fridays, but if not, perhaps you haven’t heard the news.”

“What news?” asked Nancy. “I didn’t have a lesson yesterday. Did anything interesting happen to Miss Smith?”

“No; but something interesting is going to happen to you through Miss Smith,” Celia answered darkly.

“Oh, don’t be tantalizing!” pleaded Nancy. “If you know of anything to my advantage, tell me quickly. Rosalind! have you heard about it?”



The other twin nodded, laughing.

“It’s a shame to tease her, Celia!” she protested. “I’ll tell you about it, Nance. Miss Smith got a notice, yesterday, from the organist and choir-master at Rosebury Cathedral, about a big musical festival which he is getting up just before Christmas. Every school is invited to send in one candidate to compete in each class, and Miss Smith is all over herself about it. Celia has been chosen to represent Maudsley’s vocal talent—ahem!—and she thinks Miss Smith means to enter you as an instrumentalist.”

“I hope,” said Celia drily, “you can spell all those long words you’re so fond of airing. Let me translate it into English for you, Nancy. I’m to try for the singing medal, *faute de mieux*— —”

“That isn’t English!” objected Desda.

“Yes, it is—it’s naturalized by this time,” said Miranda.

“And Miss Smith is going to put you in for the one awarded in the instrumental music class,” finished Rosalind.

“Instrumental music? Why, that means pianos, ’cellos, violins— —”

“Sackbuts and psalteries!” added Desdemona. “Bless my soul, Nance! you’ll find yourself up against it! But you’ll win, of course.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort!” returned Nancy emphatically. “I shouldn’t stand a donkey’s chance against pianists alone, and if I have to compete with all these, it won’t be worth my train-fare to Rosebury! Why don’t they have separate classes for strings and wind and keyboards?”

“Wind?” repeated Desda, pricking up her ears. “What a pity they haven’t! Then we could enter Althea, and she could cover herself and the old Grammar School with glory.”

“We shouldn’t hear much more from those precious snobs of yours if that happened, eh?” said Rosalind lazily. “Upon my word, I’m glad Celia and I were moved up before V(a) disgraced themselves as they’ve done over this Althea business!”

“V(a) doesn’t consist entirely of Muriel Evanses and Eileen Cranes,” retorted Nancy quickly. “The rest of us knew how to appreciate Althea, even before the finding of the diamond.”

“I say nothing about you and Des,” replied Rosalind, with a judicious air, “and others like-minded with you; but Constance Reid’s behaviour can

be called nothing but weak. Why doesn't she turn those bounders out of the form team and lose respectably without them?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders.

"Can't tell you. Consie and I don't see eye to eye as to what reflects most credit on the Upper Fifth; but she's a good soul, all the same, and I don't think she's really weak, only the form's a fetish with her at present."

"Then she's deplorably lacking in discrimination," answered Rosalind, disregarding her twin's grimace at this fresh outburst of long words. "Otherwise, she'd see that the Upper Fifth's likely to gain far more kudos from that flute of Althea's than if they won every match from now till the crack of doom. I haven't forgotten how she played that 'Träumerei' thing at your show, before half-term, though no one has had the pleasure of hearing her since."

"I have," announced Miranda unexpectedly. "And Doris, and Susy, and Una—and all of us. She plays for our company; we couldn't have any music if she didn't."

"She's like that," explained Nancy, as she had explained earlier to Desda. "She'll play for the kids, and for our country dances at the 2nd Maudsley, but I doubt if we shall ever again get her on to the platform in hall."

"It's a pity," said Celia gravely. "Of course, it's hard to help being sensitive if one is made that way, but when it interferes with other people's pleasure one ought to have a good try. If you happen to be gifted like that, you can play for the school in other places than on the hockey-field."

"You speak like the preachiest of all prefects," observed Desda, with equal solemnity. "If everybody's finished, can we go please, Mother?"

Mrs. Blackett, who always declared that family circumstances had taught her (almost) perpetual silence, nodded assent, and the room immediately emptied itself.

Nancy went home in a thoughtful mood. If Celia's tale was true, she would certainly be sent for by Miss Smith on Monday morning, and told formally of the honour in store for her. That it was a very great honour, Nancy was quite aware. To be chosen out of the three hundred girls at the Grammar School to represent Maudsley in a big musical contest like Rosebury Festival was a distinction for which she had never hoped in her wildest and most ambitious dreams. Even now she found it hard to believe in the possibility, though she knew very well that Celia was not the sort of

person to spread idle stories, especially about such an important matter. Nancy felt as though she were nearing the summit of a very high hill indeed —higher than any she had hoped to scale for many a year—and immediately there rose before her dreaming vision (as was the way with Nancy) a higher summit yet. It was splendid to be chosen as Maudsley’s candidate, but how much more splendid if she could only win the medal!

“It’s out of the question, of course!” she exclaimed aloud, half-scared by her own ambitions. “There will be people there from all over Roseburysire —not only from the schools, but from all sorts of grown-up societies as well. And not only pianists, but every kind of instrument will be represented. I haven’t the foggiest chance, but if I had, wouldn’t it be ripping for the Grammar School to win it! I might even,” she caught her breath with a tiny gasp at the very thought, “have my name painted up in hall! Would the governors consider it good enough for that—if one got the gold medal at the Festival?”

To tell the truth, Nancy was chiefly absorbed in the idea of bringing honour to the school, though she would hardly have been human and fifteen if she had not also pictured her personal triumph, and the pride of her family. What news to send to her parents in South Africa! They would have no room left for doubt that she had made good at Maudsley.

But because her first thought was for the school, a second followed, which was far from welcome. Nancy tried hard to push it from her, but it would not be gainsaid. Her own victory was doubtful—in her own mind; but if, instead, Miss Smith were to enter Althea and her flute, then the result would be a certainty. Nancy’s musical instinct was wonderfully unerring for her age, and she knew with a conviction which was far above any partiality for her friend, that Althea’s gift was remarkable, almost unique.

“Miss Smith heard her on the night of our concert, and called her wonderful,” Nancy remembered. “She can’t have thought of her in connection with the Festival—probably because Althea is not her pupil—but if she did—if I reminded her—”

She broke off abruptly in her thoughts as she ran up the drive to Fernglade.

“I can’t give up my chance—the chance of a lifetime—to let Althea win. It’s the sort of thing that no one could be expected to do.”

## CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

### A STOUT HEART TO A STEY BRAE

The summons came on Monday at the end of morning school. A Junior arrived at the door of the Upper Fifth's classroom, when they were putting away their books, with the announcement:

"Nancy Caird is to go at once to Miss Smith in her room."

The rest of V(a) looked round in surprise.

"What have you been up to, Nance?" asked Jerry chaffingly. "It isn't often Miss Smith sends for you in that tone of voice."

Nancy's blue eyes were dancing gleefully.

"She isn't sending for me in that tone of voice at all," she retorted, as she swept her books hastily into her desk, and dropped the lid on them. "I know why she wants me (Celia Blackett told me on Saturday), and it's going to be the nicest thing that ever happened to me—at least, if it comes true."

With which, having thoroughly mystified them, she vanished through the door and down the passage.

"I know what she means," remarked Desda gratuitously, "but I'm not going to tell. Just wait till she comes back. I may mention, however, that the whole Upper Fifth will soon be basking in her reflected glory."

Nancy meanwhile, having sped upstairs and along a twisting corridor, found herself in the den of the head music-mistress, who was just dismissing the last of her morning pupils.

"And be sure you practise that second bar most carefully, Pauline. Your fingering was all wrong, too, in the last half of the study; follow my marking, please, and not your own ideas. Oh, good morning, Nancy! Come in and shut the door. I want a little talk with you."

"Yes, Miss Smith,"

Pauline went off, and Nancy waited eagerly for the confirmation of her hopes.

Miss Smith began by telling her what she had already heard at the Blacketts' regarding the Festival to be held in the neighbouring cathedral

town.

“And so,” concluded her music teacher, “I have decided to enter your name in the instrumental section, for I feel sure, even if you do not succeed in carrying off the gold medal, you will bring credit to the school. I am expecting great things from you, Nancy.”

Nancy had grown suddenly sober.

“Thanks awfully, Miss Smith,” she said earnestly. “I’ll do my level best, but—but—you don’t think I’ve any chance of the medal—not any real chance, I mean?”

Miss Smith hesitated.

“I shouldn’t go as far as that. Remember I know nothing about the other competitors, and you are very young to try at all in an open contest. Some day, Nancy, you are going to be a very fine musician, but for all your promise, you are still immature. At Rosebury you may be up against finished artists, and then—I don’t know. Thank heaven you are no infant prodigy burning yourself out with the fire of your own genius!”

“But have I a chance?” persisted Nancy.

“My dear, I can’t possibly say, but I hope so very much—both for your own sake and Maudsley’s.”

With which Nancy had to be content. She went off to join her companions on the playing-field with high ambitions surging through her inmost soul, though all she said to the others by way of expressing them was:

“I’m to try for the gold medal at the Rosebury Festival, but nobody need get on her hind legs, because I haven’t the foggiest ghost of a chance!”

V(a), however, thought otherwise, and said so with joy and vehemence. This was better than the highest achievement of the “Am,” and Constance was wild with delight.

“You’ll get it! You’ll get it!” she cried. “And your name will be painted up in hall. That’s never happened before to any but Sixth Formers and old girls, so no one will be able to say, after this, that V(a) does nothing for the school.”

“You wait till I’ve got the medal!” said Nancy, alarmed at the heights to which Consie’s imagination was soaring. Whatever her own hopes might be, they were far too frail to be breathed aloud in this confident fashion; but she

went home to tea that evening and practised till her grandmother indignantly ordered her off the piano stool.

“Overwork won’t help you to win medals or anything else. It would be more to the point if you went to bed an hour earlier for the next three weeks; then you might take a clear brain with you to the Festival.”

“Not to-night anyhow, Grannie,” answered Nancy, laughing. “Althea Stoddart is coming across to supper, you know, and afterwards we are going over some of the folk-dance tunes for Guildry next Wednesday. We haven’t touched them for the last ten days, because Althea has been too busy with their flitting when she has been free from lessons; but she told me this morning that they seem to have reached a sort of pause at last.”

“I am always glad to hear Althea’s flute,” said Mrs. Hawthorn graciously. “She plays remarkably well.”

“Yes, doesn’t she!” cried Nancy with enthusiasm. “Sometimes, when you’re listening to her, you forget all about Althea or her flute, and only hear the thing she’s playing. It’s like—disembodied music, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” said Mrs. Hawthorn, “but it sounds most unpleasant. Go and dress for supper now, and don’t mention music in any shape or form, please, until the meal is over.”

Nancy laughed and obeyed. She and her grandmother were excellent friends, despite their differing temperaments, and indeed there was a good deal of the old lady’s sturdy common-sense and brusquerie in her granddaughter.

That evening, when they had disposed of the folk dances satisfactorily, Althea lingered on, playing for the sheer pleasure of Nancy’s accompaniment, and wandering in desultory fashion from one melody to another, while Elizabeth Stephen (who had slipped over on some errand to her mother) sat by the fire listening, and watching the picture which the two girls made in the soft lamplight by the piano. It was a study in contrasts: Nancy, with her fair head thrown back, her eyes looking very blue in her clear pale face, her sensitive mouth relaxed into dreamy lines; Althea, with a wave of dark hair falling over her brow and her dark eyes kindling to the music as she fingered the flute at her lips.

Althea was playing her best, and Elizabeth shared Nancy’s experience of losing the musician in her music, as the moments went past. At length, however, it came to an end, and there were good-nights and various school

arrangements for to-morrow, as Althea wrapped herself in her cloak, preparatory to running down the drive and across the road to her new home.

“Oh, Althea!” said Nancy impulsively, “if you won’t come back to the ‘Am,’ you ought at least to play in the school concert at the end of the term. I wish you would!”

But Althea flushed and shook her head.

“No, no! I can play to you and some of the others, or make myself useful at Guildry, but I can’t play in hall again. I know I’m an ass, but I feel as though there was a sort of stigma on my flute at school, because of all that has happened, and I simply can’t play it before Muriel Evans and her following.”

“Well, I’m glad you realize you’re an ass!” said Nancy drily. “I should think you might have learnt by this time that Muriel’s lot don’t matter.”

She turned back into the drawing-room, where her aunt still lingered by the fire, though the old lady had gone into the dining-room to search in the bureau for some papers which she wanted to send across to her son-in-law. Nancy crossed the room, and, kneeling on the hearthrug at Elizabeth’s feet, looked up at her earnestly.

“Auntie Beth,” she began, in her abrupt fashion, “will you all be frightfully disappointed if I can’t get that medal?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“We shall know it is only the fortune of war, Nance. None of us will doubt that you have tried hard enough.”

Nancy leaned against her knee and turned her gaze on the fire.

“But that’s just it,” she said slowly. “Suppose—suppose I don’t try at all? Suppose Miss Smith enters someone else instead of me?”

“My dear!” exclaimed Elizabeth in astonishment. “What are you talking about? I thought it was all settled.”

“The names don’t go up till the end of the week,” said Nancy. “There’s still time to change, and—to tell you the truth—I thought of asking Miss Smith to do so. I thought of suggesting that she should send up Althea’s name instead of mine.”

“But why? Surely you aren’t nervous about it? I know it’s a big occasion, but then the honour will be equally big. I know you are keen on

honours rightly won, Nancy, and so you should be. If you brought this off it would be a greater achievement than the passing of that exam.”

“I know,” assented Nancy, in a queer, muffled voice. “I’d love the swank of it, and I’d really try my hardest. But I mightn’t get it, Auntie Beth; there’s no certainty in the matter.”

“Even to be sent up for it is a distinction. There can be no certainty about a thing like that, in any case. Miss Smith must think you have a chance.”

“I know she does, but she can’t be sure.”

“Just what I’m saying—there can be no certainty.”

“There can,” replied Nancy in low tones, “if Althea goes up. Don’t you see it? You’ve heard her play, and you can’t help knowing she’s a genius. Althea would win the medal and bring glory to the school. She’s the one who *ought* to play at the Festival.”

Elizabeth’s own musical sense was too acute to let her argue the point. There was no doubt that Althea’s playing was far in advance of her years. It surpassed Nancy’s in its depths of feeling, because Althea, during the past few years, had outstripped her in experience. There was that in the elder girl’s music which Elizabeth would be sorry to hear in Nancy’s for many a day to come, though it must inevitably creep into it some day. Althea had suffered; Nancy at present knew suffering only through the vividness of a sympathetic imagination.

“But Miss Smith has chosen you,” protested Elizabeth feebly.

“Only because she’s forgotten Althea. She has never heard her play except at V(a)’s concert; Althea isn’t learning music just now, but if Miss Smith had been here to-night you know what she would have said. I think—I’m afraid—I must remind her to-morrow.”

“Oh, Nancy!”

“Yes, I know! But there’s the school to be thought of, and Althea herself. She could never talk again about there being a stigma on her flute if she did a wonderful thing like that with it. She’d forget all about the petty little idiocies of Muriel and Eileen, because she’d have something more important to think of. It would make all the difference in the world to Althea—but, of course, there’s the school to think of first.”

Elizabeth was silent for a moment; then she said quietly and reluctantly:



“You’re right, Nancy, though it will mean a big sacrifice. But if that is what you feel about it, you can only stand down. I’m sorry, though—frightfully sorry!”

Nancy looked up at her with a funny little twisted smile.

“So am I! I don’t mind telling you, Auntie Beth, that I should have been thrilled by the whole business, even if I had won nothing at all—which is probably what would have happened. Still—I’m glad that you see I ought to go to Miss Smith to-morrow.”

“She may still decide in your favour,” said Elizabeth, with an improper hopefulness; but Nancy shook her head.

“She’ll hear Althea play first, and after that is it likely that she’ll turn her down? Miss Smith’s for the school first, every time, though I’m rather afraid you’re not! No, no! there won’t be a chance for me after she has tried Althea, and—and that will be all right, of course. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go to bed now. It’s nearly half-past nine.”

## CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

### A CHANGE OF CANDIDATE

Nancy had no opportunity of speaking to the music-mistress next day, but on Wednesday morning, when school was over, she ran upstairs to Miss Smith's room and knocked at the door.

"Come in, my dear," said Miss Smith, looking up from a pile of music which she was sorting. "You have just come at a lucky moment, for I have found that 'Nocturne' about which I was speaking to you—the one which I thought you might work up for the Festival—unless you would rather keep to our original choice."

Nancy closed the door and came slowly to the table.

"Miss Smith," she said, "is it necessary for every competitor to be a pupil in the school that enters her? I mean," seeing her teacher's look of astonishment, "can she play an instrument which she doesn't learn at school?"

"I know of no stipulation about that," replied Miss Smith, still bewildered. "I don't suppose any school would care to enter a girl who was taught music privately—and I don't suppose her teacher would consent to such an arrangement. He or she would naturally want to take any credit due to them from a talented pupil. But I can't exactly see what you're driving at, Nancy. It doesn't affect your case in any way."

"But it does," said Nancy earnestly, "because I don't believe I'm the person who should be sent up from Maudsley. I've been thinking a lot about it, Miss Smith, and I feel certain you've forgotten all about Althea Stoddart."

Miss Smith ceased turning over the music and stared at her pupil.

"Althea Stoddart! The girl who played the flute at your form's concert. Oh, I see now what you mean! Yes, I admit I had forgotten all about her, though I was greatly struck with her at the time and meant to make inquiries. But, my dear—I have arranged to send in your name and you were so eager to try."

"I know! I am," Nancy swallowed an inconvenient lump in her throat. "But you said, didn't you? that you couldn't be certain of my getting the medal, and it's frightfully important that Maudsley should win it."

“Of course!” exclaimed Miss Smith rather testily. “But it’s ridiculous to expect me to guarantee success beforehand. I can only send up the girl whom I consider is most likely to achieve it—and that happens to be you.”

“But it wouldn’t be me,” returned Nancy, with the twinkle in her blue eyes which nothing could altogether quench, “if you once heard Althea play again. And I believe you could almost bank on her succeeding, Miss Smith, because she’s really wonderful. They used to think a lot of her playing at St. Bride’s, and she’s improved tremendously since then. Honestly, I’m sure you ought to hear her before deciding finally. And there would be no difficulty about her teacher, for she hasn’t got one. Nobody has any claim on her except the Grammar School.”

Miss Smith was evidently struck by the fervour of her own candidate’s pleading; also, she had a higher opinion than she was disposed to admit of Nancy’s judgment on such matters. A busy life, in which every moment was filled to the utmost, had crowded out the memory of Althea’s performance at the Upper Fifth’s concert, but recollections of it were coming back to her as Nancy talked, and at last she said:

“You seem tolerably well convinced that Althea Stoddart would represent Maudsley better than yourself, but, after all, the casting vote must be mine, though I’m willing to hear her play before deciding.”

“Thanks awfully!” said Nancy, with a genuine gratitude, which seemed to her teacher rather amusing under the circumstances. “May I send her to you now? Then you could hear her at once, couldn’t you?”

“I don’t suppose she carries her flute about with her wherever she goes.”

“No, but she has got it with her here to-day,” responded Nancy eagerly. “This is our Guildry night, when we have tea at school and go on afterwards to St. Ninian’s, and Althea plays there for the country dancing, so she has got the flute downstairs in our cloak-room. Do let me tell her you want to hear her play, Miss Smith!”

“Very well, then,” said the music-mistress, yielding, “but don’t tell her why. I may not agree with you, after all, you see; so there’s no need to raise undue hopes beforehand. Now be quick, for I have got a good deal to do before dinner, and you ought to be out in the playing-field.”

Nancy flew off with her message, and dispatched Althea, greatly surprised, to find her flute and take it to Miss Smith’s room.

“Why on earth should she want to hear me play, all of a sudden?” she not unnaturally asked; but Nancy’s reply, truthful as well as discreet, was

merely:

“I can’t tell you, but she does, so hurry up! You can come and tell me afterwards what she says about you.”

Ten minutes later, Desda, watching one of the inter-form matches from the rope, felt Nancy’s arm slipped into hers, and heard her chum say in rather a queer voice:

“I say, Desda! I’ve done it now—done for my chances of playing at Rosebury, I mean! I’ve sent Althea and her flute to Miss Smith to be tried!”

Desda drew her lips together in a long, low whistle.

“Oh, Nance! What made you do it? I was dead set on your playing for Maudsley—and so were you!”

Nancy nodded.

“I was—but Althea will get the medal all right, and that’s the main point. Do you remember a talk we had with Jerry and Brenda, at the beginning of the term, about climbing hills, and Brenda said I liked sitting on a summit?”

“Yes, I remember,” said Desdemona sadly. “And I’m afraid, if you’ve put Miss Smith on to Althea’s flute for the Rosebury Festival, it’s all up with your chances of sitting on that particular summit.”

“You think so, too?” asked Nancy wistfully.

“I’m afraid so! You’re good, but Althea’s a marvel. Oh, Nancy! how could you be such an idiot? I wanted you so much to try for that medal!”

“But you wanted more that Maudsley should win it,” declared Nancy quickly. “Do you know, Des—if I was certain that I was as good in my own line as Althea, I don’t believe I *could* stand down for her! A hill-top like that isn’t lightly given up, even for a great pal.”

Then Desda had one of her flashes of insight.

“Don’t you see?” she exclaimed. “By giving it up you’ve climbed to a higher one still. You can take that to cheer you up, old thing!”

“Oh, rot!” said Nancy gruffly. “There! V(b) have just got another goal! They’re hot stuff, this term, you know. Shouldn’t wonder if they hold on to that Sports Cup we helped to win for them last session.”

“I can’t flatter myself that I did much towards it,” said Desda, laughing. “You and Jerry and Brenda contributed something, but I fancy Elma Cuthbert didn’t waste many tears over my remove!”

“She’s doing fairly well without us, anyhow,” remarked Nancy, and they gave their minds to following the fortunes of the game, till the Lower Fifth marched off the field in triumph, having routed the Fourth Form, horse and foot. Then the two friends turned back to the house again, and the news which awaited them when they should find Althea.

They found her in the dining-hall, waiting her turn at the buffet, but quite without the elation for which they were both looking. In fact, she seemed more crestfallen and depressed than she had been for many a long day, and Desda’s heart gave a sudden involuntary leap; she was too honest to pretend that she did not covet Nancy’s triumph more keenly than Althea’s—was it possible that, after all, Miss Smith had turned down the flute?

“What’s up?” asked Nancy anxiously. “Why on earth are you looking so glum? Don’t say you made a hash of it, and that Miss Smith isn’t going to enter you for the Festival!”

Althea laughed, but not very happily.

“Nancy! how could you? As if I didn’t know it was all your doing! No, no! she means to send me up, worse luck! I don’t know another girl in the school, or out of it, for that matter, who would deliberately wreck her own chances as you have done! Maudsley’s chances, too, for you were much more likely to get it than I.”

“If that were true,” returned Nancy, recovering herself, “Miss Smith would have stuck to me. As it is, she has shown her usual wisdom in taking my advice on such an important point. Congratulations, Althea! I’m awfully glad about it, old girl! And we can feel now that the school has got a chance at Rosebury. What did Smithie say?”

“Oh, not much!” Althea answered evasively; for the little that Miss Smith had said had been more laudatory than she cared to repeat. “All it amounted to was that she’d send up my name instead of Nancy’s, and I feel a perfect worm! My dear, how could you go behind my back and do a thing like that? Do you suppose I want to cut you out, when you’ve been so decent to me all through? Why, I shouldn’t be here now, if — —”

“Shut up!” growled Nancy. “As a matter of fact you’ve done me a very good turn. The thought of playing before all those judges made me dither all over with nervousness—but it won’t hurt you, for you’ve got double my allowance of cheek.”

Desda chuckled involuntarily.

“It’s true,” persisted Nancy. “Oh, I know she’s got a modest and retiring manner, while I’m supposed to be—well, perhaps a little self-assertive; but it’s only skin-deep on both sides. Althea forgets all about being nervous once she’s safely launched.”

“Anyhow, I hate the idea of taking your place,” declared Althea unhappily. “It wouldn’t have been quite so bad, even, if I’d been chosen first in the beginning, and there had been no thought of you. But I’ve one stipulation, Nancy, and I hope you won’t mind. I may take my own accompanist, and Miss Smith has promised that it shall be you—if you’ll do it?”

“Oh!” said Nancy, and said no more for the moment.

“If there’s any honour going,” Althea urged eagerly, “I want you to share it—Miss Smith says they pay a lot of attention to the accompanist. And there’s another thing—I never play so well as when you’re at the piano, and I must play my best at the Festival, for Maudsley. Oh, Nancy, say yes! After all you’ve let me in for this.”

There was a momentary struggle in Nancy’s soul, so brief that neither of her companions noticed it. To drop to being a mere accompanist, when she had hoped to take such a prominent part! Yet she knew that Althea had spoken the truth when she said that she played best to her accompaniment, and that it was for Maudsley. All unbeknown to herself, Nancy scaled another summit as she answered, with scarcely a hesitation:

“All right—if you want me and think I’ll really be any help.”

The Grammar School heard of the change in its representative with some astonishment, for it had become the fashion to regard Nancy Caird as their leading musical light, and the idea that she might possibly be surpassed by Althea Stoddart, or anyone else, was one which needed getting used to. V(a), however, was quite contented. Whichever candidate was entered the glory would be equally theirs, since never, for a single moment, did it cross their minds that anyone but Maudsley’s representative could win the medal. V(a) had by now taken Althea completely to their hearts, once more, Muriel Evans and her friends being *piano*, but extremely civil.

“We made a mistake about Althea,” Eileen Crane was overheard to say with dignity, “but I hope we’re not so small-minded that we need be ashamed to own it—especially as it really was very misleading, that business of her playing in the streets. If people do eccentric things like that, they must expect to be misunderstood sometimes.”

Althea bore no malice, though she still shrank from her erstwhile persecutors, and was somewhat unresponsive when they made advances. At Consie Reid's urgent request she promised to return to the games after the Christmas holidays; but with regard to the "Am," she was firm in her refusal.

"I'll help you in any other way you like," she told the committee, "but I can't play my flute at another 'Am' show. I—I can't explain why, but I just can't do it."

But Nancy told the others with discernment:

"If she wins the gold medal at Rosebury you'll find that will make all the difference to her. She'll be able to play her flute at anything after that. Leave her alone, at present, and we'll see what happens."

## CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

### ALTHEA'S TRIUMPH

Nancy did not feel at all nervous. She was rather surprised at that, for she had expected to be very nervous indeed. As the local train had dawdled along that morning, between Maudsley and Rosebury, she had looked forward with dread to the moment when Althea should be summoned to play before the judges; for Miss Smith had told her that a good deal would depend on the accompanist, and Nancy knew that she would never forgive herself if—after all their hope and planning—she should let Althea down, and perhaps be the means of her losing the medal.

Glancing across the carriage at Althea, who was chatting to Miss Smith with as much unconcern as she could muster, Nancy decided to keep her misgivings to herself; probably Althea had enough of her own, without requiring additions from outside.

“Anyhow, I’m not going to let her down,” said Nancy to herself valiantly, as she turned her head to stare out at the bare country where the leafless winter woods lay like smudges of dark smoke on the uplands. “I’m going to play as I’ve never played before, and help her to do likewise; but—I don’t know—I don’t believe I’d be sorry if the judges said she must play without an accompaniment. After all, they might.”

But they did nothing of the sort. And now the great moment had come, and—feeling like somebody else who was not Anne Hawthorn Caird at all—Nancy followed Althea on to the platform and set her music in place.

The candidates were being judged in public in the City Hall, a large building packed with an interested audience drawn from all over the county and beyond it, for the Rosebury Festivals occurred at irregular intervals and were events when they did occur. Most of the people who filled the seats in the big hall had arrived there when proceedings opened at ten o’clock in the morning, and had sat solidly through the hours which followed, only absenting themselves during the short break of the luncheon interval.

The vocalists had competed on the previous day and Celia Blackett had acquitted herself well, getting “Highly Commended,” which exceeded her modest expectations, and therefore pleased her not a little. She was among the Grammar School girls who had come over by private ’bus “to see Althea



through,” as they expressed it. Mrs. Stoddart was also there, having been motored across country in the Stephens’ car with Elizabeth, who had also brought Desda and Barbara. Angela, fuming with wrath and injury, had been forced to go to school as usual, since Larkiston House had sent no competitors to the Festival, and therefore saw no reason for granting a holiday so near the end of the term.

The judges were grouped in a semi-circle at the back of the platform, and Nancy noted that they did not look so ferocious as she had, somehow, pictured them. One of them even smiled at her in a kindly, reassuring fashion, as she took her seat on the piano stool. Beyond a bank of palms and ferns stretched the sea of white faces which represented the audience, but Nancy did not care much about them. She did not really care much about anybody or anything, now that the moment of ordeal had actually arrived; this (she realized) was a great blessing, and she glanced curiously up at Althea, trying to guess from her face if the same blissful and convenient state of indifference had settled upon her. But Althea’s face told nothing.

Somebody said “Now!” in a low voice, and she played the opening bars of the accompaniment; then the flute chimed in, low, sweet and lilting, and Nancy knew, with a thrill of joy, that her schoolfellow was playing as she had never dreamed she could.

Outside, the short winter day was closing in, and lights sprang up in the hall, here and there—not many. Nancy played on, and forgot that she was playing—forgot everything but the delicious joy of Althea’s dainty piping, which carried her away, as it had often done before, beyond the piper and her instrument.

When it ended, a roar of applause from the body of the hall told the mind of the audience, whatever might be the more balanced judgment of the professional arbiters. Nancy, coming down to earth again, discovered that she was nervous, after all, as she looked anxiously at their faces before following Althea off the platform. Surely such music must have impressed them! Yet they looked so horribly stolid and unmoved.

Miss Smith was awaiting them in the green-room, and she at least, was satisfied.

“Whether they give you the medal or not, my dear,” she said warmly, “you have certainly won a great deal of distinction, and I am very much pleased with you. Yes—on the whole I feel Maudsley hasn’t done badly in the Festival, and your performance was really on a higher level than most of those we have heard. I feel sure I may say that much without prejudice.”

“We can wait for the results, can’t we?” begged Nancy. “It won’t go on much longer now, because there are only three more items after ours. Oh, do let’s wait! Somebody told me the judges are marking each candidate as they play, just as they did the singers yesterday—so it won’t take them long to announce who has got the highest marks when everyone has finished.”

Miss Smith glanced from one girl to the other.

“Very well,” she said slowly; “but I do not wish you to return to the hall—you’ve both had enough of strain and excitement. We’ll go out into the town, and find a tea-shop, and by the time we come back the competition should be over.”

They followed the music-mistress out into the frosty winter evening, where the grand old cathedral loomed darkly against the last shreds of a crimson sunset. The town seemed full of a magic and a mystery to which both girls thrilled, as they moved among shoppers hurrying homewards in the glow of newly-lighted windows. Althea slipped her hand into Nancy’s, and Nancy, usually so undemonstrative, squeezed and held it. Both felt that they had come together through some big experience, and presently Althea said softly: “I couldn’t have got through it if there had been anybody else at the piano. You helped me no end, Nancy—you always do. If by any lucky chance, I get ‘Highly Commended’ for this, it will be one more debt I’ll owe to you.”

“Rot!” said Nancy in her gruffest voice. “It will be something more than ‘Highly Commended,’ and no lucky chance about it, either! You played as if you were possessed.”

They found an old-fashioned tea-shop, with rush-bottomed chairs and home-made cakes; and Nancy remarked regretfully that it was a pity they were too much excited to take advantage of their mercies, for she felt that at any other time she could have eaten a good many of those cakes.

“Don’t be silly!” said Miss Smith. “It’s all over, and very satisfactorily over, too, so there’s nothing to hinder you from making a good tea. Oh, the result! It’s sure to be quite good, whatever it is—and anyhow, you can’t alter it now. Have some jam with your Devonshire cream—that’s the proper way to eat it.”

But they were not to hear the result that night after all, as they discovered on getting back to the City Chambers. The medallist, when known, would receive a telegram next morning, and those who had earned lesser distinctions would hear later by post. So Althea and Nancy packed into the Grammar School ’bus with the rest of the Maudsley girls who had

been in the audience, and all trundled peacefully home by long switch-back miles of bare hedgerows.

It was hard to settle to work next morning. The windows of the Upper Fifth commanded a view of the iron gates and flagged court through which the messenger must come—if he came at all—and Desdemona's desk being nearest to the window, she found her attention wandering from time to time to more important matters than an isosceles triangle.

"I've got a sort of feeling," whispered Brenda Lawson, who sat next her, "that Althea has got that medal."

"Shut up!" muttered Nancy hastily, from her other side. "It's awfully unlucky to be too sure of anything beforehand."

In the end the telegraph boy must have managed to slip in unnoticed, for V(a) was completely taken by surprise when the classroom door opened to admit the headmistress, followed by Miss Smith. On Miss Smith's face was a broad beam, which lit up her spectacles till they seemed to shine with a light of their own—and in Miss Hale's hand was a strip of pink paper!

"Oh!" shrieked Constance, regardless of either deference or formality. "She's got it! Althea's won the gold medal!"

"Yes," said Miss Hale, smiling. "She has! Althea, my dear, the wire has just come, and I can't tell you how pleased and delighted we all are, and how proud of you! Miss Smith and I came at once to give you our very heartiest congratulations, and to say that—though we do break up next week—we feel that to-day must be a half-holiday in honour of the occasion. No, girls! wait a bit and save your breath! Maudsley is going to cheer Althea, of course, but not in sections of one form at a time! I am going to have the whole school together in hall, so that everybody may hear the news, and then will be the time to cheer."

"And one thing I should just like to add," said Miss Smith, raising her hand to check the babel which was about to burst forth. "The judges have sent a special message of commendation to Althea's accompanist, and I myself should like to say: 'Well done, Nancy Caird!'"

"All the same, I wish you'd won it," said Desda, a little ruefully, that evening, as she and Nancy returned from celebrating their holiday by a tramp along the frost-bound forest paths. "I'm delighted about Althea, of course, and very glad old Celia did so well, but I had set my heart on seeing your name painted up in hall."

Nancy smiled and shook her head with half a sigh.

“That won’t be just yet, Des, I’m afraid—perhaps it will never be at all. Why don’t you set your heart on it for yourself? You may be a great actress some day, you know, if you work hard enough. Mr. Blackett’s friends, who understand what they are talking about, think that you may. And then your name will be up beside Althea’s.”

“I don’t believe,” returned loyal Desda, “that I should really be awfully keen about it unless yours was there, too, Nancy. Let’s both try.”

“All right,” assented Nancy. “Let’s!”

THE END

## 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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

[The end of *Nancy to the Rescue* by Dorita Fairlie Bruce]