EIGHT

Bonnie did not last long in the kitchen. The second time that the cook hit her with the frying pan, Bonnie picked up a sauce boat full of rancid gravy and dashed it in the cook's face.

There was a fierce struggle, but the cook, one Mrs. Moleskin, a large, stout woman with a savage temper, at last thrust Bonnie into the broom cupboard and reported her to Mrs. Brisket.

Mrs. Moleskin was used to having a dozen terrified small slaves running hither and thither at her beck and call, and announced that she would not have Bonnie working under her. Accordingly, after a punishment which consisted of losing all her meals for two days, Bonnie was put on to doing the outside work, which was considered a terrible degradation.

In fact, she did not mind it half so much as being in the squalid kitchen. Outside work meant fetching in coal and kindling, lighting fires, sweeping the front and back steps, cleaning windows and doorknobs, digging the front garden, and looking after the poultry.

Bonnie, who was as strong as a pony, bore her two days' starvation with stoical fortitude. Twice Sylvia slipped her a piece of bread, but the second time she was caught by Alice, who snatched the bread and ate it herself, subsequently reporting the affair to Mrs. Brisket. Sylvia then had to forgo her own supper, and after that Bonnie would not let her sacrifice herself.

One dark, foggy afternoon when Bonnie, shivering in her thin overall, was sweeping snow off the front path, she suddenly heard a familiar whisper from the other side of the front railings.

"Miss Bonnie! Miss Bonnie!"

"Simon!" she cried out joyfully, almost dropping the broom in her surprise.

"Miss Bonnie, why ever are you doing work like that?"

"Hush!" breathed Bonnie, looking back at the house to make sure that Mrs. Brisket was not watching from one of the windows. "They've sent us to school here, Simon, but it's more like a prison. We can't stand it, we're going to run away."

"I should think so, too," said Simon with indignation. "Sweeping paths, indeed! And in that thin apron! It's downright wicked."

"But, Simon, what are you doing in Blastburn?"

"Came in to sell my geese, of course," he said, winking cheerfully. "But to tell the truth, I was looking for you, Miss Bonnie. James and Pattern asked me to come. We was all uneasy about you and Miss Sylvia. What'll I tell them?"

At that moment a coal cart appeared and stopped outside the house. The coal man banged on the front door, shouting, "Coal up! Coal up! Coal up!"

Mrs. Brisket came out and ordered thirty sacks.

"Here, you," she said sharply to Bonnie. "Help the man carry them to the coal cellar. Who is that boy?"

She eyed Simon suspiciously.

"Geese for sale, geese for sale. Anybody want my fine fat geese?" he called, displaying the two geese he was carrying under his arms.

Mrs. Brisket's eyes lit up. She strode down the garden to the gate and prodded the two geese with a knowing finger.

"I'll give you five shillings each for them, boy."

"Ten!" said Simon.

"Ridiculous! Not a penny more than seven shillings!"

"Fifteen shillings the pair, ma'am—and it's a special price for you because I never resist a handsome lady," said Simon impudently.

"Guttersnipe!" said Mrs. Brisket.

But she paid over the fifteen shillings and told Bonnie to put the two geese in the fowl run. In fact, the price was a ridiculously low one, as she well knew.

"I'll carry in your coal for a brown, ma'am," Simon suggested.

"Very well." She dug in her purse for another coin. "You can help the girl—the School Inspector is coming to dinner in half an hour, and I don't want children running to and fro and getting in the way when he arrives."

Simon picked up one of the sacks without more ado and humped it across the garden to the coal-cellar entrance, a flap door directly under Mrs. Brisket's drawing-room window. Mrs. Brisket unlocked the door and he tipped the coal down the chute and ran back for an-

other load. By the time he returned, Mrs. Brisket had gone indoors, leaving the key in the lock.

Simon glanced round to make sure that he was unobserved. The coal man, considering that his help was not necessary, had climbed back on to the seat of his cart and gone to sleep. Simon scooped a handful of snow aside and, pulling a knife out of his pocket, carved from the ground a hunk of yellow clay which he warmed and rubbed in his hands until it was soft. Taking the large key from the cellar lock, he pressed it vigorously into the clay, first on one side, then on the other, until he had two clear impressions of it. Then he put the key back in the lock, whipped off his muffler, damped it with snow, and wrapped it carefully round the lump of clay, which he placed under some bushes.

By the time Bonnie came running back from shutting up the geese, he was hard at work carrying his fifth sack of coal.

"Don't you try to carry one, Miss Bonnie!" he said with horror, as she went matter-of-factly to the cart. "They're far and away too heavy for you."

"I'll take them in the wheelbarrow," Bonnie said, and fetched it from the shed. "Mrs. Brisket would dock me of my supper if she looked out and saw that I was letting you do all the work."

"Does she do that?" Simon was horrified. "Does she starve you?"

"Not me," Bonnie said cheerfully. "I soon found out what to do. When she cuts one of my meals I make up on raw eggs. I didn't much like them at first, but when you're really hungry it's surprising what you enjoy."

"You mustn't stay here!" Simon exclaimed.

"Will you help us to run away, Simon?"

"That I will!"

"But, Simon, if we're to escape we shall need some clothes. That's what has been worrying me. She has taken our own things, and our purses with our money, so that we can't buy other things, and if we walked about in these overalls everyone would know that we were escaped from the orphan school."

"I'll bring you clothes," he promised.

"Boys' things would be best. I go to feed the hens every evening at six. You could meet me then, by the henhouses, as soon as you've got the clothes. If you went to Pattern, I'm sure she could give you something.

"The difficulty will be to get Sylvia out of the house, for she never has an excuse to come outside except in the morning when she's hanging up washing, and it would be too dangerous then."

"Wait till next week and I'll have a key made to get you out. Can you get into the coal cellar from inside?"

Bonnie nodded. "All too easily. She locks us into it as punishment quite often."

"Then I will give you a key to the outside door, and you will only have to contrive to be locked in."

Bonnie flung her arms round his neck. "Simon, you are wonderful! Now I must fly back or I shall be punished for loitering."

Simon watched until she had run indoors. Then he shied the last lump of coal to wake the driver of the cart from his beery slumbers, carefully took his piece of clay from its hiding place in the laurel bushes, and, holding

it as if it were the most precious gold, walked swiftly away to find the nearest locksmith.

Sylvia was obliged to miss her tea. She had been given a dress of Diana Brisket's to mend, and the task had taxed even her skillful needle, so disgracefully torn were its delicate flounces. Her head ached, and her cold fingers were less nimble than usual: consequently the dress was not finished when Diana wanted it. She flew into a passion, slapped Sylvia, and told her mother that number ninety-eight was lazy and refused to work. In consequence, Sylvia had to stand at the back of the dining room with the other wrongdoers at teatime, while Bonnie burned with sympathetic fury.

During sewing time after tea, Bonnie chose a moment when Mrs. Brisket was out of the room, crept round to Sylvia, and pressed something into her hand.

"Eat it, quick, before she comes back!"

Sylvia looked at what was in her hand and saw with amazement that it was a little cake, crisp and hot from the bakery.

"Where did you get it, Bonnie?"

"It must be from Simon! I found two of them in the nesting boxes when I went to collect the eggs. If I'd known that horrid wretch Diana would make you miss your tea, I'd have saved mine for you, too."

And she whispered to Sylvia the news of Simon's plan for them.

Sylvia was pale already, but she became paler still with excitement.

"Escape? Oh, Bonnie, how wonderful! Here, you finish this cake. I think I'm too excited to eat it." And she coughed.

"No, you must eat it, Sylvia. You had no tea."

"I can't, my throat is too sore. Where shall we go, Bonnie?"

"Well," Bonnie whispered, frowning, "we can't very well go back to Willoughby Chase, for they'd search for us there at once. And if James and Pattern tried to help us they'd get into trouble. What do you say to trying to get to London to see Aunt Jane?"

"Oh, Bonnie, *yes!* Dearest Aunt Jane, how I long to know if she is all right." Sylvia spoke with such enthusiasm that she coughed again. "But how shall we get there, Bonnie? It is such a long way, and we have no money for train tickets."

"I have thought of that. Very soon Simon will be driving his geese up to London for the Easter Fair at Smithfield Market. Easter falls at the end of April this year, and he will want at least two months to get there—"

"—And we could go with him!"

"Hush," whispered Bonnie, for at this moment the door opened and Mrs. Brisket re-entered the room.

She cast her usual suspicious glance round the assembled children before beginning to read aloud from a volume of sermons, and they bent their heads and pretended to busy themselves over their work.

Every night that week, when Bonnie went to feed the hens and collect the eggs, her pleasantest task of the day, she felt a tremor of excitement. Would the key and clothes be there? But Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings went by without her discovering anything unexpected in the henhouse.

On Saturday there was another inspection by the Education Officer, this time in the morning. He had really come to invite Mrs. Brisket to dine with him next day, but she always seized the opportunity of showing him how well-behaved and biddable her pupils were, and she had them all standing in rows for an hour before his arrival. The strain of this was too much for poor Sylvia. Drenched through every day with cold water in the icy, draughty laundry, she had taken a bad cold and was flushed, heavy-eyed, and feverish. Just as the Inspector entered the room where she stood, she fainted quietly away.

"That child, ma'am, is ill," said Mr. Friendshipp, pointing to her with his cane.

"Very likely it is all a pretense!" exclaimed Mrs. Brisket, looking at Sylvia with dislike. But on inspection it was plain that Sylvia's illness was genuine enough, and Mrs. Brisket angrily directed two of the big girls to put her to bed in a small room on the ground floor, where sick children were kept so that they should not give the infection to others. A basin of cold porridge was dumped in her room and, as she was much too ill to eat it, she would have fared badly had Bonnie not come to her aid.

Bonnie, discovering at dinnertime that Sylvia was missing, whispered to the friendly Emma to ask where she was.

"Ill, in the little locker room."

"Ill?" Bonnie turned pale. She had suspected for several days that Sylvia was ailing, though Sylvia always stoutly denied it.

If she was ill, how could they escape? On the other hand, if they did not escape, what would become of Sylvia? It was not impossible, Bonnie thought, that she might *die* of neglect and ill-attention in this horrible place.

With great daring Bonnie took a chance when Mrs. Brisket was inspecting the dormitories upstairs, and ran in to visit Sylvia, whom she found conscious, but dreadfully weak, flushed, and coughing. A cup of cold water stood by her bedside.

"Here!" whispered Bonnie, "here, Sylvia, swallow this down. It's not much, but at least it's nourishing and warm!" And she pulled from her pocket an egg, only five minutes laid, tossed the water from the cup out of the window, broke the egg into it, and beat it up with her finger.

"I'm sorry, Sylvia, that it's so disgusting, but it will do you good."

Sylvia gazed with horror at the nauseous mess, but Bonnie's bright, pleading eyes compelled her to swallow it, and it slipped more easily than she had expected down her sore throat. Then, hearing Mrs. Brisket descending the upper stairs, Bonnie covered Sylvia as warmly as she could, gave her a quick hug, and dashed silently away.

That evening, when Bonnie fed the hens and searched for eggs, she put her hand beneath one warm, protesting, feathery body and felt something hard and long among the eggs—a key! She pulled it out and found attached to it a label, which said, in Pattern's printed script:

"TOMORROW NIGHT AT TEN. LOOK UNDER THE STRAW BALES."

Bonnie ran to the bales of straw which were kept for the nesting boxes and found behind them two warm suits of clothes, a boy's, with breeches and waistcoat, and a girl's, with a thick woolen skirt and petticoat. Both were of coarse material such as tinker children wear, but well and stoutly made, and both had beautiful thick sheepskin jackets, lined with their own wool. In the pocket of each jacket was a golden guinea.

Bonnie guessed that the boy's was for her and the girl's for Sylvia.

"For Sylvia could never be got to look like a boy. Oh, how clever and good Simon is! He must have got Pattern to help him. But will Sylvia be able to travel? We *must* manage it somehow!"

She bit her lips with worry.

Snatching the opportunity while it was dark and there was nobody about, Bonnie carried the two bundles of clothes indoors and hid them in the coal cellar behind a large mound of coal while she was supposed to be filling Mrs. Brisket's evening coal scuttle and making up her fire.

During the evening she seized another chance to take a fresh egg to Sylvia and whisper the news to her. Poor Sylvia dutifully swallowed the egg and tried to be excited by the plan, but she felt so weak and ill that she was sure she would never manage the escape, though she dared not tell Bonnie this. Bonnie could see for herself, though, how frail Sylvia looked, and she became more worried than ever.

Sunday passed in the usual tasks.

Mrs. Brisket departed after ten to the party at Mr. Friendshipp's, leaving the school in charge of her daughter, Diana, who, as her custom was, immediately began to bully and harry the children, making them fetch and carry for her, iron her clothes, curl her hair, and polish her shoes. Mrs. Brisket had forbidden her to leave the house, but she had no intention of staying in, and was proposing to visit a bazaar on the other side of the town, having calmly taken some money from her mother's purse.

"Here! You!" she called, seeing Bonnie hurrying past. "Where are you going with that hangdog look? Come here!"

Bonnie came, as if unwillingly.

"What have you got in your pocket?"

Bonnie made no reply.

Diana thrust in her hand and let out a shriek of disgust. She withdrew it and stared at her fingers, which were dripping with egg yolk.

"Thief! Miserable little thief! Stealing the eggs from my mother's henhouse!" She raised the dripping hand and slapped Bonnie's face with it.

Six months ago Bonnie would have slapped her back, and heartily, but she was learning patience and self-command. To be embroiled in a struggle with Diana was not part of her plan, though she longed to box the girl's ears.

"I was taking it to Sylvia," she said steadily. "Your mother is starving her to death. She has had nothing to eat all day but two raw onions."

"Is that any business of yours? Very well," said Diana,

white with temper, "since you think you can look after Sylvia so well, you *shall* look after her. You can look after each other in the coal cellar. Alice, help me shut them in."

Alice, and a couple of the larger, worse-natured girls, willingly did so. Others remonstrated, as Bonnie was

pushed, and Sylvia, still in her nightclothes, half-carried into the dark, dirty place.

"You shouldn't do it, Miss Diana. Sylvia's ill—it will make her worse," exclaimed Emma.

"Hold your tongue! Who asked *you* to interfere?" shouted Diana, and slapped her. The door was locked, and the key put in its accustomed place on Mrs. Brisket's parlor mantel-piece. Then, after making sure that everyone was in a properly cowed frame of mind, Diana wrapped herself in a velvet cloak and went out to the bazaar, locking the front door and taking the key with her.

Meanwhile Bonnie, in the coal cellar, was congratulating herself on the success of her idea as she swiftly helped to dress the trembling, shivering Sylvia in her new warm clothes.

"There, Sylvia! Now don't cry, there's a lamb, for I feel sure Simon will have some good plan and will be able to take us to a place where you can be properly cared for. Don't cry!"

But Sylvia was too weak to hold back her tears. She sat obediently on a large lump of coal while Bonnie prepared to change her own clothes. But before she could do so there was a creaking of the lock and the door softly opened—not the door to the garden, but the one through which they had been thrust in. A head poked round it—Emma's.

"Bonnie! Sylvia! Are you all right? You can come out and get warm! Diana's out and Alice has gone to bed."

Bonnie felt the tears prick her eyes at this courageous kindness on the part of Emma. But how ill-timed it was! At any minute Simon might arrive, and she did not

want anyone to know that he was helping with their escape.

She whispered to Sylvia, "Wait there, Sylvia, for two minutes, only two minutes, and then I'll be back," and ran swiftly to the cellar door.

Outside stood Emma and a large number of children, all deathly silent, in the passage that led from the kitchen. One of them pointed upward, meaning that they must make no sound for fear of Alice.

Bonnie was amazed and touched. She had had no idea how popular her bright face and friendly ways had made her with the other children, in the fairly short time she had been at Mrs. Brisket's.

Impulsively she hugged Emma.

"Emma, I won't forget this! If ever I get away from this hateful place" ("And oh, I pray it will be tonight," she said to herself), "I'll send back somehow and get you out too. But Sylvia and I mustn't leave the cellar. If Mrs. Brisket or Diana came back you would get into dreadful trouble."

She looked at the children's anxious, eager faces and wished that she could do something for them. Suddenly she had an idea. She ran to Mrs. Brisket's parlor and brought out the large hamper of cheese which the headmistress kept for rewarding tale bearers.

"Here! Quick, girls! Eat this up!" She tossed out the chunks of cheese in double handfuls to the ravenous children.

"Cheese!"

"Oh, Bonnie!"

"Cheese!"

"Wonderful cheese!"

They had gobbled up most of the savory lumps before Emma suddenly exclaimed, "But what will Mrs. Brisket say?"

"I'll take care of that," said Bonnie grandly. She had been scribbling on a sheet of paper. "This is to pay for the cheese," and she now signed it with her name, fetched the guinea piece from her jacket pocket, and put it with the paper on Mrs. Brisket's writing desk.

"There! She'll be angry, but she will see that I am the one to blame. Now, Emma, you must lock us up in the cellar again and put back the key. Yes!" as Emma protested, "I promise that will be best in the end," and she nodded vigorously to show that she meant it, and went back into the cellar.

With great reluctance Emma locked the door again. Instantly Bonnie flung off her brown overall and hustled on her boy's clothes, which felt very thick and strange, but comfortable.

"Oh, how funny I must look! I wish we could see ourselves. Here, Sylvia, I saved a piece of cheese for you. Try to eat it. It will give you some strength. We must take our aprons with us. It won't do to leave them behind, or they will guess that we have got other clothes and may be in disguise." She bundled them up and tucked them in her capacious pockets.

"Now for the key!"

Just for one awful moment it seemed as if the somewhat roughly made key would not open the outer door. However, wrapping a fold of her jacket over it and wrenching it with both hands, Bonnie got it round, and raised the flap. A gust of snowflakes blew into her face. "Good, it's snowing, so much the better. We shan't

leave any footprints. Now, Sylvia, you had better have my coat as well as your own." She buttoned it on to her cousin, who was really too ill and weak to make any objection, and half-pulled, half-hoisted her up the slope down which the coal was poured. Then, swiftly, she relocked the door, put the key in her pocket, and urged Sylvia toward the gate with an arm round her shoulders.

"We can hide in a laurel bush," she whispered. "There's a thick one beside the front railings. Then if Mrs. Brisket or Diana should come back, they won't see us. I can hear the town clock striking ten—Simon should be here at any moment."

And indeed, as they reached the railings, they heard his voice whispering, "Miss Bonnie? Miss Sylvia? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's us!" Bonnie called back quietly, and ran to open the gate.

Nine

"Sylvia's ill!" Bonnie muttered to Simon as soon as they were outside the gate. "She can hardly walk! I think we shall have to carry her."

"No, she can go in the cart," Simon whispered back, and then Bonnie saw that he had with him a beautiful little cart, drawn by a donkey.

Her eyes lit up with delight. "Why, it's the very thing! Isn't it the one from Willoughby that we use for picnics—"

"Hush. Yes!" whispered Simon. "Let's get away quick, and then I'll explain."

Between them they lifted the trembling, shivering Sylvia into the cart. She gave a little protesting moan as she came into contact with something soft that seemed alive.

"What is it?" breathed Bonnie.

"The geese! They won't hurt her. There are quilts and mattresses underneath."

Swiftly and skillfully Simon disposed Sylvia in the cart, on a warm mattress, covered with several quilts.

Thirty sleepy, grumbling geese were pushed unceremoniously to one side and then, when Sylvia was settled, allowed to perch all over and round her until only her face was showing.

"There! They'll keep her famously warm."

And in fact the warmth of the mattress and quilts and the soft feathery bodies on top was such that in two minutes Sylvia was in a deep sleep, and never even felt the cart begin to move.

"Will you ride too, Miss Bonnie?"

"No, I'll walk at the head with you, Simon."

"Let's be off, then."

They hastened away. Simon had tied rags round the wheels and they went silently over the cobbled road. The only sound was the tippety-tap of the donkey's feet.

When they had turned several corners, and put several streets between them and Mrs. Brisket's school, both Simon and Bonnie breathed more freely.

"No one will remark us now," said Bonnie, as they passed into a wide, naphtha-lighted street in the middle of the town, where, although it was nearly midnight, trams still clanged up and down, and pit and factory workers trudged to and fro in their clogs.

"Certainly no one would take you for Miss Bonnie Green," said Simon, chuckling. "You make a proper boy in those things, haircut and all. Here, I brought these for you." He turned, sank an arm into the cart and rummaged among the geese, and brought out two sheep's-wool-lined caps, one of which he carefully placed over Sylvia's sleeping head. The other he gave to Bonnie, who gratefully pulled it on, for the snow was falling thick and fast.

"Miss Pattern made them for you; they weren't finished in time to leave with the other things."

"Pattern? Oh, did she make the clothes?"

"Yes, she did, when she heard I was going to help you, and James found the donkey and cart—Miss Slighcarp was going to have sold them, but James told her they belonged to parson and hid them away. I reckoned it would be just the thing for our journey. And Miss Pattern gave me a saucepan and a frypan and some cups and plates and a great pie—they're all in the back, under the seat. We'll have a bite to eat presently—I dare say you're famished, Miss Bonnie—but not till we're out of the town."

"Where is Pattern?" asked Bonnie.

"She's gone back to live with her mother at the lodge. She sent her dear love but didn't dare ask you to call in, for Miss Slighcarp passes there every day and there's only the one room, as you know. If there's a search for you they'd be bound to go there. It's best Pattern should not have seen you."

"And is James still at the house?"

"Yes. He gave me the guineas to put in your pockets out of his wages—and gracious knows they're little enough now."

"I've spent mine already, Simon," confessed Bonnie, and told what she had done.

Simon shook his head at her, but all he said was, " 'Twas like you, Miss Bonnie."

"Simon, it's ridiculous to go on calling me miss. Just call me plain Bonnie."

Simon grinned, but answered indirectly, "Have you got that coal-cellar key with you? Here's a good place to get rid of it."

They were crossing the bridge over the wide river, with its busy traffic of coal barges and wool wherries. When Bonnie produced the key and the two overalls, he made them into a bundle with a bit of string, weighted it with a cobble, and threw the whole thing into the river. Then they went on with light hearts.

The town presently gave way to country. Not much could be seen in the dark, but Bonnie caught dim glimpses of snow-covered slag heaps, with here and there a great pit wheel or chimney. Then they passed fields, enclosed in dry-stone walls. After a while they were climbing up a long, slow ascent, the beginning of the wolds.

"You'd best have a bit of a sleep now," Simon suggested to Bonnie after a couple of hours had passed. "We're safe away, and 'twill be morning by and by."

"What about the wolves, though?" Bonnie said. "Shan't we be in danger from them? I'd better help you keep a lookout. Have you brought a gun?"

"Ay, I've my bow, and James gave me your fowling piece. It's in the cart. But I doubt we'll not be troubled by wolves; it's turned March now, and with spring coming they'll be moving farther north. We're not likely to see any of them once we're over Great Whinside."

"What shall we do about Sylvia, Simon? She ought to stop somewhere till she's well enough for the journey."

"I've been thinking that, and I know the very place. We'll reach it about six in the morning. You get in the cart and have a nap now."

"All right, I will," said Bonnie, who was beginning to be very sleepy, "if you're sure the donkey can stand the load." She patted the donkey's nose.

"Caroline's pulled heavier loads than that."

So the cart was halted, and Bonnie, carefully, so as not to wake Sylvia, scrambled in and made a nest for herself among the feather quilts and the warm, drowsy geese. Soon she, too, was asleep.

When Bonnie woke she lay wondering for a moment where she was. There was no clanging bell, no complaining voices, and instead of shivering under her one thin blanket she was deliciously comfortable and warm.

A cool breeze blew over her face, the cart jolted, and then she remembered what had been happening and said softly, "Simon?"

His voice came from somewhere in front. "Yes?"

"Stop the cart a moment, I want to get out."

"Not worth it," he said. "We're nearly there."

Bonnie wriggled to a sitting position and looked about her. The sky was still mostly dark, but daylight was slowly growing in the east. Thin fronds of green and lemon-yellow were beginning to uncurl among masses of inky cloud. When Bonnie looked back she could see that they had come over a great ridge of hills, whose tops were still lost in the blackness of the sky to the north. Ahead of them was a little dale, and loops of the white road were visible leading down to it over rolling folds of moor. A tremendous hush lay over the whole countryside. Even the birds were not awake yet.

"That's where we'll have our breakfast." Simon pointed ahead. "That's Herondale. We're way off the main road now. No one's likely to come looking for us here."

He began to whistle a soft tune as he walked, and Bonnie, curling up even more snugly, watched in great

contentment as the lemon-yellow sky changed to orange and then to red, and presently the sun burst up in a blaze of gold.

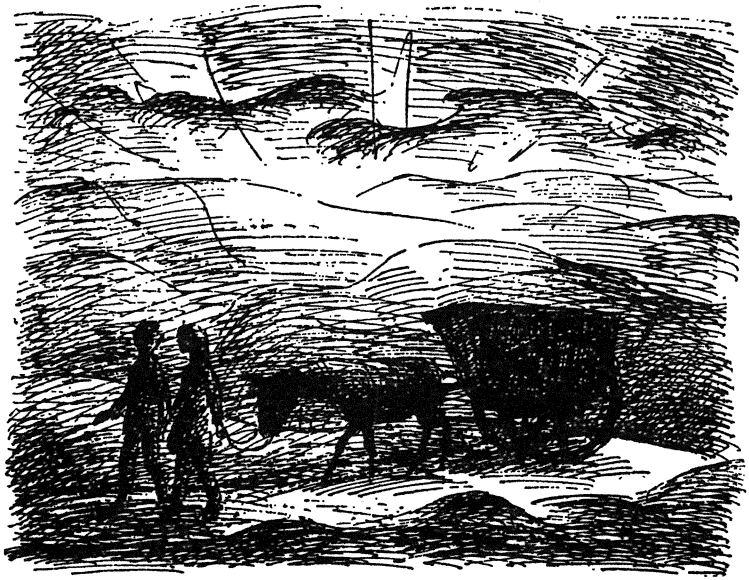
"Simon."

"What is it?"

"There's no snow here."

"Often it's like that," he said, nodding. "We've left snow t'other side of Whinside. Down in Herondale it'll be warm."

Presently they came to the last steep descent into the valley, and Simon then allowed Bonnie to get out of the cart while he adjusted the drag on the wheels to stop it running downhill too fast. All this time Sylvia slept. She stirred a little as they reached the foot of the hill and walked through a fringe of rowan trees into a tiny



village consisting of three of four cottages round a green, with a couple of outlying farms.

"We'll go to the forge," said Simon, and led the donkey across the green to a low building under a great walnut tree.

Bonnie fell back and walked beside the cart, smiling at Sylvia's puzzled, sleepy face. The geese were beginning to stir and stretch their long necks, and at first sight of them Sylvia looked slightly alarmed, but when she saw Bonnie she smiled too, and shut her eyes again.

"Smith's up," said Simon. A thread of smoke dribbled from the forge chimney, and they could see a red glow over the stable door in front, while the noise of bellows came in a regular wheezing roar.

Simon called over the forge door.

"Mr. Wilderness!"

The roaring stopped and there was a clink. Then a face appeared over the half door and the smith came out. He was an immensely tall man, wearing a blackened leather apron. Bonnie couldn't help smiling, he looked so like a large, gentle, white-haired lion, with a pair of dark eyes like those of a collie dog, half-hidden by the locks of white hair that fell over his forehead.

"Eh, it's you, Simon me boy? What road can I help you?"

"Caroline's loosed a shoe," said Simon, patting the donkey, "and as well as that we'd like your advice about the little lass here. She's not well."

"Childer come afore donkeys," Mr. Wilderness said. He moved over beside the cart and looked down at Sylvia's face among the geese. "Eh, a pretty little fair lass she be. What's amiss with her?"

"She's got a cough and a sore throat and a fever," explained Bonnie.

The smith gazed at Bonnie wide-eyed.

"And th'art another of 'em, bless me! Who'd ha' thought it? I took thee for a boy in that rig. Well, she's sleeping fair in a goose-feather bed, tha can't better that. Are they goose feathers?" he said to Simon.

"Stuffed the quilts and mattresses myself," said Simon, nodding. "My own geese."

"Champion! Goose grease for chilblains, goose feathers for a chill. We'll leave her in the cart."

"Shouldn't she be put to bed?" Bonnie said doubtfully.

"Nay, where, lass? I've only the forge and the kitchen, where I sleep mysen. Nay, we'll put her, cart and all, in the shippen, she'll be gradely there."

He led them round the corner of the forge and showed them how to back the cart into a big barn with double doors on each side. When he opened these, sunlight poured into the place and revealed that it was half-full of hay, and lined along the walls with lambing pens made from hurdles. A tremendous baaing and bleating came from these and, walking along, Bonnie saw with delight that each pen contained a sheep and one, two, or three lambs.

"There's nought like lying wi' sheep two-three days for a chesty cough," pronounced Mr. Wilderness. "The breath of sheep has a powerful virtue in it. That and a brew of my cherry-bark syrup with maybe a spoonful of honey in it, and a plateful or two of good porridge, will set her to rights better than the grandest doctor in the kingdom. Put her in the sun there, lad. When sun gets round we can open t'other doors and let him in that

side. Now for a bite o' breakfast. I'm fair starved, and happen you'll be the same, if you've walked all the way fro' Blastburn."

"We've a pie and some victuals," Simon said.

"Nay, lad, save thy pie for later. Porridge is on the forge fire this minute, and what's better nor that?"

The geese had climbed and fluttered out of the cart, and were busy foraging in the hay. Bonnie, after making sure that Sylvia was well covered and had gone back to sleep, was glad to come into the smith's clean little kitchen, which opened off the smithy and was as warm as an oven. They sat down at a table covered with a checked red-and-white cloth.

Mr. Wilderness's porridge was very different from that served in Mrs. Brisket's school. It was eaten with brown sugar from a big blue bag, and with dollops of thick yellow cream provided by Mr. Wilderness's two red cows, who stood sociably outside the kitchen door while breakfast was going on, and licked the nose of Caroline the donkey.

After the porridge they had great slices of sizzling bacon and cups of scalding brown tea.

Then the smith prepared a draught of his cherry-bark medicine, syrupy golden stuff with a wonderful aromatic scent, and took it out to Sylvia, who was stirring drowsily. She swallowed it down, smiled a sleepy no-thank-you to an offer of porridge and cream, and closed her eyes again.

"Ay, sleep's the best cure of all," said Mr. Wilderness. "You look as if you could do wi' a bit too, my lass."

Bonnie did begin to feel that she could do nothing but yawn, and so Simon made her nest in the hay and

covered her with one of his goose-feather quilts. Here in the sun amid the comfortable creaking of the geese and the baaing chorus of the sheep she too fell into a long and dreamless sleep.

They stayed with Mr. Wilderness for three days, until he pronounced Sylvia better and fit to travel.

In the meantime Simon helped the smith by blowing the fire and carving wooden handles for the farm implements he made. Bonnie washed all his curtains, tablecloths, and sheets, and, aided by Simon, did a grand spring-cleaning of the cottage.

"Two months ago I shouldn't have known how to do this," she said cheerfully, beating mats on the village green. "Going to Mrs. Brisket's at least taught me housework and how to look after hens."

Mr. Wilderness was sorry to lose them when they went. "If tha'd ha' stayed another two-three weeks th' birds would ha' been nesting, and th' primroses all showing their little pink faces. Herondale's a gradely place i' springtime."

"*Pink* faces?" said Bonnie disbelievingly. "Don't you mean yellow?"

"Nay, they're pink round here, lass, and the geraniums is blue."

But even with this inducement they wanted to press on to London. They left with many farewells, promising that they would call in on the return journey, or come over as soon as they were safely back at Willoughby Chase.

The journey to London took them nearly two months. They had to go at goose pace, for in the daytime the geese flew out of the cart and wandered along

as they chose, pecking any edible thing by the roadside, and, as Simon explained, "There's no sense in hurrying the geese or by the time we reach Smithfield they'll be thin and scrawny, and nobody will buy 'em."

"Anyway," said Bonnie, "supposing Mrs. Brisket and Miss Slighcarp have set people searching for us, the search will surely have died down by the end of two months."

So they made their leisurely way, picking flowers, of which they found more and more as spring advanced and they traveled farther south, watching birds, and stopping to bathe and splash in moorland brooks.

At night they usually camped near a farm, sleeping in or under the cart in their warm goose-feather quilts. If it rained, farmers offered them shelter in barn or haymow. Often a kindly farmer's wife invited them in for a plate of stew and sped them on their way with a baking of pasties and apple dumplings. In return, Sylvia did exquisite darning, Bonnie helped with housework, and Simon, who could turn his hand to anything, plowed, or milked, or sawed wood, or mended broken tools.

Pattern had smuggled one or two books and Bonnie's paint box from the attic out to the cart with the food and clothes, and these were a great resource on rainy evenings in the hay. They read aloud to each other, and Simon, who had never bothered about reading before, learned how, and even pronounced it quite a handy accomplishment. He also took a keen pleasure in making use of Bonnie's box of colors, and sometimes could hardly be torn away from some view of a crag or waterfall that he was busy sketching. The girls would wander slowly on with Caroline, the cart, and the geese, until

Simon, finished at last, caught them up at a run with the color box under his arm and the painting held out at arm's length to dry.

Sylvia and Bonnie thought his pictures very beautiful, but Simon was always dissatisfied with them, and would give them away to any passer-by who admired them. Several times people pressed money on him for them, and once, when they were stopping overnight in a little village named Beckside, the landlord of the inn, the Snake and Ladder, who had seen one of the sketches, asked if Simon would repaint his faded inn sign. So they spent a pleasant day at the village, feeding like game-cocks at the innkeeper's table on roast duck and apple cheesecake, while Simon painted a gorgeous green-and-gold serpent twined in the rungs of a pruning ladder.

"Should you like to be a painter, do you think, Simon?" Sylvia asked.

"I might," he confessed. "I'd never thought of such a trade before. Eh, though, but there's a lot to learn! And I doubt I'd never have the money for a teacher."

Bonnie opened her lips to speak, and then checked herself, sighing.

Late in April they came to the top of Hampstead Hill, among the gray old houses and the young green trees.

At the foot of the hill they could see the village of Chalk Farm, and, far away, the great city of London spread out, with its blue veil of smoke and its myriads of spires and chimneys. Sylvia felt a quickening of her heart to think she was so close to her dear Aunt Jane again. How pleased the old lady would be to see her beloved little niece!

They camped that night on Hampstead Heath near a tribe of gypsies—and indeed they looked like gypsies themselves. Bonnie and Simon were as brown as berries and their black locks were decidedly in want of cutting, while even Sylvia would hardly have been recognized for the thin, pale, fair child who had set out to Willoughby Chase so many months ago. Her cheeks were pink, and her hair, though not its original length yet, was thick and shining and reached to her shoulders.

They found an obliging dairyman in Hampstead Village who was willing to keep Caroline and the cart for them in his stable, and next day they drove the geese down into London.

"You girls had best not come to Smithfield Market," said Simon. "It's a rough, wild place, not fit for little maids."

"I've been thinking," suggested Bonnie, "how would it be if we tried to find Mr. Gripe's office while you are at the Market? Sylvia, can you tell us where lawyers' offices in London are usually to be found?"

Sylvia said she thought they were in the region of Chancery Lane. Having inquired the way of a constable, therefore, the girls accompanied Simon as far as Lincoln's Inn Fields, and there he left them with Goosey and Gandey, the two parent geese, who were never sold, while he went on to dispose of the rest of the flock.

Bonnie and Sylvia wandered along outside the houses that surrounded the Fields and saw on brass door plates the names of many attorneys, barristers, and Commissioners for Oaths, but nowhere that of Mr. Gripe.

At about midday when, tired, they were lying sunning themselves on the grass, and eating sliced beef and

lemon tarts procured at a nearby cookshop, Bonnie suddenly exclaimed:

"Look, Sylvia, look! Isn't that Mr. Grimshaw?"

A portly, middle-aged man was walking across the grass toward a nearby archway. Sylvia scrutinized him closely and whispered:

"Yes! I am almost sure it is he! If he would but turn his head this way!"

"We must follow him and find out," Bonnie said decisively. "If he, too, is in London we shall have to be on our guard."

The two children got up and, calling their geese, walked fast, but not so as to attract his attention, after the gentleman in question. He passed through the archway, descended some steps, and turned into a small street, where he stopped outside one of the houses.

"Perhaps it is his residence," whispered Sylvia.

They approached slowly. Unfortunately a large black cat was seated on the pavement, and if there was one animal that Goosey abominated, it was a cat. He set up a vociferous honking and cackling, and the gentleman, in the act of ringing the doorbell, turned his head and looked at the two girls. His eyes passed over Bonnie, but he stared very sharply at Sylvia for an instant—then the door opened and he was admitted.

"Oh mercy!" exclaimed Sylvia, "do you think he recognized me? For it was *undoubtedly* Mr. Grimshaw! I could not have sat so long opposite him in the train and been mistaken."

"I am not certain if he knew you," said Bonnie uneasily. "It is possible. You are not so sunburned as Simon or I. We had better not remain in this vicinity."

They were turning to go when Bonnie's quick eyes caught sight of the brass plate by the door that Mr. Grimshaw had entered.

"Look, Sylvia! Abednego Gripe, Attorney. Father's man of business! Is not that a lucky chance!"

"Is it so lucky?" said Sylvia doubtfully, as they retraced their steps along the street. "I do not like the fact that Mr. Grimshaw has gone to see him. Why can he have done so, do you suppose?"

"No, you are right," Bonnie answered thoughtfully. "It is very queer. At all events, we must not go to see Mr. Gripe while Mr. Grimshaw is there. We had best wait until we have seen Aunt Jane and asked her advice."

They remounted the steps and saw Simon crossing Lincoln's Inn Fields. He waved to them triumphantly.

"Twenty-two pounds, girls! They fetched fourteen and eightpence each!" he called as soon as he came within earshot. "We are rich!"

"Heavens, what a lot of money!" breathed Sylvia.

"Let us be off to Aunt Jane at once," said Bonnie.

"Shall you want me to come?" asked Simon diffidently.

"Gracious, yes! Why ever not?"

"I'm only poor and rough—"

"Oh, what nonsense," said Bonnie, seizing his hand. "You can't come all this way with us and then desert us now, just when things might turn out better! Sylvia, tell us how to get from here to Park Lane."

They finished their four-hundred-mile journey riding on the open upper deck of one of the new horse-drawn omnibuses, geese and all, though Sylvia did rather shud-

der to think what Aunt Jane would say to this, should she chance to be looking out of her window when they arrived. Aunt Jane had many times told Sylvia that *no* lady *ever* rode in an omnibus, and more particularly not on the upstairs deck.

"I feel half-afraid," confessed Sylvia, laughing, looking up at the familiar tall house with its Grecian columns on either side of the door and white window boxes filled with lobelia. "Look, Bonnie, that is our window—the attic one, right up in the roof."

"The window-box flowers are withered," commented Simon.

"So they are. That is not like Aunt Jane," said Sylvia, puzzled. "She usually waters them so carefully."

The main door to the house stood open, and they went in silence up the stairs—up, up again, and still up. As they passed a door on the fourth-floor landing, it flew open and a young man's head popped out, exclaiming, "Is that the grocer? Have you brought my pies and turpentine? Oh—" in disappointment, as he saw Simon and Bonnie and the geese. Sylvia had impatiently gone on ahead. The young man eyed them in surprise a moment, then shut his door again.

They caught up with Sylvia on the top landing. She was already tapping at Aunt Jane's attic door.

"It is strange! She does not answer!"

"Perhaps she's out shopping?" suggested Simon.

"But she always takes tea at this time of day." (It was five o'clock.)

"She could not have moved away?" Bonnie said with a sinking heart.

"No," exclaimed Sylvia in relief, "here is the spare door key that she always keeps under the oilcloth in case by some mischance she should lose her other one. She must be out, after all. We will go in and surprise her on her return."

She opened the door with the key, and, cautioning them by laying her finger on her lips, tiptoed in. Bonnie and Simon rather shyly followed and stood hesitating in the tiny hallway, while Sylvia went on into the one room which served Aunt Jane for kitchen, parlor, and bedroom.

Suddenly they heard Sylvia give a faint cry, and she came back to them, white and frightened.

"What is it, Sylvia?" said Bonnie anxiously.

"It is Aunt Jane! Oh, I think she must be dreadfully ill, or in a faint—she is there, and so thin and pale and hardly breathing! Come, come quickly!"

They hastened after her, Simon pausing but a moment

to shut the geese out on the landing. They saw the poor old lady stretched on her bed under the jet-trimmed mantle. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. "Aunt Jane?" whispered Sylvia. "It is I, Sylvia!" There was no reply.

TEN

All three children retreated on to the landing once more. It seemed dreadful to stay in the little close room and talk about Aunt Jane with her quite unconscious of their presence. Sylvia noticed that the window was shut, the dishes unwashed. A thick layer of dust covered everything.

"What do you think is the matter with her?" Sylvia said, her voice quavering.

"I don't know," said Bonnie decidedly, "but whatever it is, we must get a doctor to her at once."

"Yes, Bonnie, how sensible of you! But where shall we find one?"

"Has Aunt Jane no regular doctor?"

"She always said she could not afford one," said Sylvia, dissolving into tears. "She always said all her ailments could be cured by P-Parkinson's Penny Pink Pills."

"Now come, Sylvia, don't get into those crying ways again," Bonnie began, sounding cross because she was so worried, when Simon interposed:

"I think I saw a doctor's plate on the floor below. Wait a moment and I'll go down and make certain."

He pushed past the geese, who were roosting on the stairs, and ran down to the landing below. Sure enough, by the door out of which the head had popped was a notice: GABRIEL FIELD—PHYSICIAN AND CHIRURGEON.

Simon knocked. A voice shouted, "Come in, it's not locked," and so he pushed open the door and looked into a room which was in a considerable degree of confusion. Several shelves along the walls bore a clutter of bottles, phials, and surgical implements; a large table was covered with brushes, jars, and tubes of paint, while the floor was almost equally littered with stacks of canvases and piles of medical books.

The young man who had looked out before stood with a paint brush in his hand, considering a half-finished painting on a large easel.

"Oh, it's you again, is it?" he said, seeing Simon's perplexed face come round the door. "What d'you want?"

Simon found something reassuring in his rather brusque manner.

"Please, are you Dr. Field, sir?"

"Yes, I am."

"The old lady upstairs is very ill. Could you come and look at her?"

"Certainly. Just a moment while I wash my hands."

While Dr. Field was washing, and fetching a black bag of medicines from his bedroom, Simon stared at the picture on the easel.

"Like it?" said the doctor, coming back.

"Yes," said Simon. "I do, very much. But I'm not sure

about this bottom right-hand corner. It seems a bit too dark."

The doctor gave him a surprised look before waving him out of the door and hurrying upstairs. He brushed past the two girls and the geese without comment, and made his way in to Aunt Jane's bedside. "One of you two girls come and help me," he said, so Sylvia went, while the other two remained on the landing in a silence of anxiety and suspense.

They had to wait some time, while Dr. Field made a thorough examination of Aunt Jane. Then he and Sylvia came out to the landing again.

"She's your aunt, is she?" he said sharply. "Well, you've been neglecting her. She's suffering from malnutrition." As none of them appeared to understand this word he added impatiently, "Undernourishment. She's been starving herself."

Sylvia began to cry quietly.

"Oh, poor, *poor* Aunt Jane! I should never have left her."

"I'm to blame, too," said the doctor angrily. "I saw her coming upstairs, a couple of weeks ago, with her shopping—one egg and an apple.I should have guessed."

"What does she need, sir?" said Simon quietly. "I'll go out and get it."

"Firstly, champagne. She's too weak to take anything else at the moment. You needn't bother about that, I've a bottle in my room. Then beef tea, eggs, milk, butter, honey."

"We'll go and get them," said Bonnie. "Come on, Simon. I saw a basket in Aunt Jane's parlor. Sylvia, you stay with the doctor and see to the champagne. Can you

direct us to the nearest market, sir? We have only just come to London and don't know our way about."

Dr. Field told them how to find the nearest market, and they ran off with their basket, while Sylvia helped administer a few teaspoonfuls of champagne to Aunt Jane, tipping it between her motionless lips.

"You're the old lady's niece, are you?" the doctor said. "I've only been in this house a month. I thought she had no kin at all. It's high time she was properly looked after."

Sylvia considered the doctor. He had a kind, sensible face, and she was inclined to confide the whole story to him and ask his advice, but thought she had better wait till the others returned.

Simon and Bonnie soon came back. They were loaded, for, as well as the food, Simon was carrying a small sack of coal, and Bonnie had a blanket and a fleecy shawl.

While they were out they had had a short, brisk argument.

"Simon, this is your money we're spending—your year's money. We shouldn't be doing it."

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" he said uncomfortably. "Anybody would do all they could to help that poor old lady."

"Well, I shall pay you back as soon as I possibly can, Simon, if I ever get my own home and money back, but otherwise you do understand you'll have to wait till I can earn some money, and gracious knows how many months that will be!"

"Oh, get along with you, girl, you're wasting time," said Simon good-naturedly.

Dr. Field suggested that they should do their cooking

downstairs in his room in order not to disturb the invalid, so Bonnie, first borrowing Aunt Jane's cookery book, set about scraping some beef and putting it to simmer with carrots and a teaspoonful of brandy. Simon lit a fire in Aunt Jane's room, and Sylvia tiptoed about cleaning the place and setting it to rights. Every now and then Dr. Field came and administered another teaspoonful of champagne, and presently he reported with satisfaction an improvement in the patient's breathing and a tinge of color in her cheeks.

"Your cousin's cooked you a meal," he said to Sylvia and Simon after a while. "Better come down and eat it in my room."

They realized they had not eaten all day, and were glad to come down. Bonnie had cooked a great panful of bacon and eggs, which she cordially invited the doctor to share.

"Are you all cousins?" said he, when they were eating, among the paints and bottles of medicine.

"Oh no. Sylvia and I are, but Simon's no relation."

"Where are all your parents?"

They looked at each other, and, without the need for discussion, decided that they could trust the doctor. Bonnie told him the whole story, ending with the sight of Mr. Grimshaw at the lawyer's office that morning. "And oh, sir," she ended, with tears in her eyes, "can you tell me if the ship my parents sailed in truly sank? *Truly?*"

"What was its name?"

"The *Thessaly*."

"Yes, my poor child," he said sadly. "I wish I could tell you otherwise, but I read the report in *The Times* myself.

It was said that the captain should never have set sail, knowing the dangerous state of the ship's hull. It was said that someone must have paid him handsomely to do so, and it was rumored that he himself had escaped in a small boat, some hours before the wreck."

Bonnie could not speak for a moment. She turned away to the window and bit her lip.

Dr. Field went on hastily to break the unhappy silence:

"The whole business sounds to me like a plot, hatched up beforehand between this Miss Slighcarp of yours, who's evidently a thorough wrong 'un, and her precious friends Grimshaw and Mrs. Brisket. Whether Gripe the lawyer has a hand in it too we can't be sure, but I've a friend who's a lawyer, and as soon as old Miss Green's fit to be left I'll go and see him, and ask him what he knows about Gripe."

"Oh, *could* you, sir? Thank you indeed."

Their faces of gratitude evidently touched his heart, for he said gruffly, "A couple of you can bed down here if you like. I've plenty of cushions. Just shift some of those books and pictures and the skeleton off the sofa." (Sylvia gave a faint scream. She had not noticed the skeleton before.) "One of you should sleep upstairs with the old lady. And you'd better all get yourselves a wash and brush-up. You look as if you can do with it."

The beef tea was ready now, and Sylvia, with the doctor's help, fed some of it to Aunt Jane through a straw. She opened her eyes once or twice, but seemed hardly conscious of her surroundings yet.

With the aid of a couple of the doctor's blankets, Sylvia made herself up a couch for the night by the side

of Aunt Jane's bed. They were all tired, and went to sleep as soon as they lay down.

In the middle of the night Sylvia awoke. She had left a night light burning, and by its faint glimmer she saw that Aunt Jane had raised herself on her pillows and was looking wonderingly about her.

"Mind, Auntie," said Sylvia, springing up. "You'll uncover yourself!"

Carefully she arranged the woolly shawl round her aunt's shoulders again.

"It *is* Sylvia! But no," said Aunt Jane mournfully. "I have so often dreamed that she came back. This must be just another dream."

"No, it isn't!" said Sylvia, forgetting to be careful in her joy and giving her aunt an impetuous hug, "it really is me, come back to look after you. And I've brought Bonnie too."

"Sylvia, my precious child," Aunt Jane murmured, and two tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Now, Aunt dear, you *mustn't*! You must get strong quickly. Please try to sip some of this," said Sylvia, who had been hastily heating up the beef tea over the night light.

Aunt Jane sipped it, and soon, for she was still very weak, she slipped off to sleep, holding Sylvia's hand. Sylvia, too, began to doze, leaning against her aunt's bed, half-awake and half-dreaming.

She dreamed that she was on top of a mountain, the black ridge that they had crossed before they reached Herondale. She saw Miss Slighcarp coming up from Blastburn at the head of a pack of wolves. Sylvia was

dumb with fright. She was unable to move. Nearer and nearer Miss Slighcarp came, tramp, tramp, tramp . . .

Suddenly Sylvia was awake. And listening. And there *were* footsteps coming up the stairs.

She lay palpitating, with her heart hot against her ribs. Who could it be? The night was still black dark. No light showed under the door. If it was the doctor, surely he would be carrying a light? The steps were very slow, very cautious, as if whoever it was wanted to make as little sound as possible. Sylvia knew that she must move—she *must*—

A frantic cackling, hissing, and honking broke out on the stairs. There was a yell, a thud, more cackling, pandemonium!

"What is it?" said Aunt Jane drowsily.

"Oh, what can it be?" cried Sylvia, pale with terror. But the noise had shaken her out of her paralysis, and she seized a candle, lit it at the night light, and ran to the door.

The scene that met her eyes when she held the door open was a strange one. At the top of the stairs were two indignant geese, still hissing and arching their necks for battle. Prone on the stairs, head down, and cursing volubly, was Mr. Grimshaw. Simon held one of his arms and Bonnie the other.

Dr. Field, in a dressing gown, looking sleepy and considerably annoyed, was emerging from his front door holding a piece of rope, with which he proceeded to tie Mr. Grimshaw's hands and ankles.

"Breaking into people's houses at three in the morning," he muttered. "That's really a bit high! It's bad

enough having children and geese camped all over the place."

"It was lucky the geese sounded the alarm," said Bonnie, pale, but clutching Mr. Grimshaw gamely.

"True," Dr. Field agreed. "Now, lock him in the broom closet. Good. I'll just run down and bolt the outside door, then perhaps we can have a bit more sleep. We'll get to the bottom of all this in the morning."

Yawning, they all went back to bed, but Sylvia declared she was too scared to sleep without Bonnie, and so they brought up more of the doctor's cushions and made a double pallet beside Aunt Jane's bed.

ELEVEN

Dr. Field's face at breakfast next morning was grim, and the children were all rather silent. The unseen presence of Mr. Grimshaw in the broom cupboard put a damper on their spirits.

"What do you suppose he was trying to *do*?" whispered Bonnie.

"Oh, very likely just see if you were there," said Dr. Field doubtfully. "Or try to frighten the old lady into handing you over if you should turn up later. At all events, you and the geese between you put an effective stop to him. I shall take him straight to Bow Street after breakfast and put him in charge of the constables."

Luckily Aunt Jane was a great deal better this morning. After the doctor had inspected her, he pronounced that she might be given a little warm gruel and some tea and dry toast, which Bonnie and Sylvia prepared. Aunt Jane greeted Bonnie kindly and declared that she would never have recognized her—which was very probable, as the last time she had seen Bonnie had been at her christening. Then Sylvia announced that she would

remain with the old lady while the rest of the party went off with the prisoner; the very sight of Mr. Grimshaw, she said, made her feel sick with fright. Dr. Field considered this to be a sensible plan, and he told Simon to go out and whistle for a hackney cab.

Mr. Grimshaw was released from his closet, but his bonds were not untied. He was sulky, threatening, and lachrymose by turns; in the same breath he begged for mercy and then swore he would get even with them.

"That's enough, my man. You can spare your breath," said Dr. Field, and showed him a blunderbuss, ready primed, which he had taken out of his desk drawer. At sight of this weapon Mr. Grimshaw relapsed into a cowed silence.

"Shall I get my fowling piece?" exclaimed Bonnie, and then remembered that it was with the cart in Hampstead.

Dr. Field looked slightly startled but said he thought one weapon should be sufficient to keep the scoundrel in order.

At this moment Simon came back to report that a cab was waiting below, and after a solicitous farewell to Aunt Jane and Sylvia, bidding the latter keep the door locked and admit nobody, they took their departure.

At Bow Street they waited only a very few minutes while the doctor haled his prisoner into the Constabulary Office; he soon reappeared, accompanied by a couple of burly, sharp-looking individuals who marched Grimshaw between them, and they all piled into the cab again.

"Where is he to be taken now?" said Bonnie.

"We shall go to Mr. Gripe's office for some explana-

tion of Grimshaw's behavior," Dr. Field told her. "He has said that he worked for Mr. Gripe."

They were soon back in the region of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and drove up to the house that Bonnie and Sylvia had seen the day before. A scared-looking clerk, hardly more than a boy, admitted them into a waiting room, and next moment a thin, agitated, gray-haired man hurried into the room, exclaiming, "What can I do for you gentlemen? I am Abednego Gripe."

He appeared excessively surprised to see the children and the manacled Mr. Grimshaw. Bonnie soon decided that he could not have hatched a dark plot to obtain possession of Willoughby Chase—he looked too kind and harmless.

One of the Bow Street officers spoke up.

"I am Sam Cardigan, sir, an officer of the constabulary. Here is my card. Can you identify this person here?" indicating Mr. Grimshaw.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Gripe, looking at Mr. Grimshaw with distaste. "His name is Grimshaw. He was a clerk in my office until he was dismissed for forgery."

"Aha!" said the other Bow Street officer, whose name was Spock.

"Have you ever seen him since you dismissed him?" said Dr. Field.

"No indeed. He would have a very cold reception in this office."

"And yet he was seen entering here yesterday," snapped Cardigan.

Mr. Gripe seemed surprised. "Not to my knowledge."

Cardigan looked thunderously disbelieving and was about to burst out with his suspicions of Mr. Gripe,

when the little clerk who had let the party in, and who had been standing in the doorway with eyes like saucers, piped up:

"Please, sir, I saw him."

Mr. Grimshaw darted a furious look at this speaker.

"Who are you?" said Cardigan.

"Please sir, Marmot, a clerk. Yesterday while Mr. Gripe was out having dinner, th-that gentleman as is tied up there came and asked me to give him the address of Miss Jane Green, sister to Sir Willoughby."

"And you gave it him?"

"Yes, sir. He said he wished to take her some dividends."

"Dividends, indeed!" growled Dr. Field. "Wanted to murder her, more probably."

"Certainly not," said Grimshaw, pale with fright. "I merely wished to ascertain from her if these children, who are the runaway wards of a friend of mine, had taken shelter with her."

"At three o'clock in the morning? A fine story! More likely you wanted to terrify her into signing some document giving you power over the children. And what about this Letitia Slighcarp?" continued Dr. Field, glaring at the lawyer. "Were you responsible for sending that female fiend to feather her nest at Willoughby Chase?"

Mr. Gripe looked very much alarmed. "She is a distant relation of Sir Willoughby. She came with the highest references," he began. "From the Duchess of Kensington. I have them still." He pulled out a drawer in a cabinet and produced a paper. Cardigan scanned it.

"A patent forgery," he said at once. "I have seen the

Duchess's signature on many documents and it is utterly unlike this."

"Then I have been duped!" cried Mr. Gripe, growing paler still. "But what can have been the object of this deceit?"

"Why," said Bonnie indignantly, "Miss Slighcarp has taken our whole house for her own, dismissed all the servants, sent me and my cousin to live in a school that is no better than a workhouse or prison, and treated us with miserable cruelty! And I believe, too, she and Mr. Grimshaw had some hand in seeing that Papa and Mamma set sail on a ship that was known to be likely to sink!"

"This is a bad business, a very bad business," said Mr. Gripe.

"No, no!" cried Mr. Grimshaw, now nearly dead of terror. "We were not responsible for that! The ship was sunk by an unscrupulous owner to obtain the insurance. It was when I learned—through a friend who was a shipping clerk—that they were to sail on the *Thessaly*, that the plan took shape. I had seen Sir Willoughby's letter to Mr. Gripe, asking him to seek out his cousin, Letitia Slighcarp, as an instructress for his daughter and so—and so—"

"And so you conspired with Miss Slighcarp and forged her credentials," said Mr. Gripe angrily. "It is all very plain, sir! Take him away, gentlemen! Take him away and keep him fast until he can appear before a magistrate."

"After that it was very dull," said Bonnie, reporting the scene to Sylvia later. "I had to tell the Bow Street officers every single thing I could remember that Miss

Slighcarp had done, and the clerk wrote it all down, and Mr. Gripe looked more and more shocked, especially when I told what I had seen when we looked through the hole in the secret panel and watched them tearing up Papa's will and all the other documents.

"And the end of it all is, Sylvia, that Mr. Grimshaw is committed to prison until the Assizes, when he will stand his trial for fraud, and the Bow Street officers are to go to Willoughby tomorrow to seize Miss Slighcarp!"

"How surprised she will be!" exclaimed Sylvia with lively pleasure. "I almost wish I could be there to see!"

"But, Sylvia, you are to be there! They most particularly requested that you and I should be taken too, to act as witnesses."

"But who will look after Aunt Jane?" inquired Sylvia anxiously.

"Dr. Field has said that he would procure a nurse for a few days. And it need be for only two—you can return directly Miss Slighcarp is apprehended. And Sylvia, as soon as Aunt Jane is well enough to travel, I have asked Mr. Gripe to arrange that she shall come and live at Willoughby, and be our guardian."

"Oh *yes!*" exclaimed Sylvia, her face brightening, "what a splendid plan, Bonnie!"

It was a gay and lively party that assembled in the train next day—very different from that earlier and sorrowful departure when Sylvia had taken leave of Aunt Jane. A special coupé compartment had been chartered, and the Bow Street officers had no objection to Simon and his geese traveling in it as well. Dr. Field was remaining to keep an eye on Aunt Jane, but he bade the children a cordial farewell and invited them to come

and sleep in his apartment again when they returned to take Aunt Jane to Willoughby. Mr. Gripe the lawyer was with them, and had given his clerk instructions to procure a luncheon hamper from which came the most savory smells. Sylvia smiled faintly as she thought of the other tiny food packet and Mr. Grimshaw's sumptuous jam-filled cakes.

"I suppose he only pretended to have forgotten who he was when the portmanteau fell on him," she said to Bonnie.

"So that he would be taken to Willoughby," said Bonnie, nodding. "How I wish that we had left him in the train!"

"Still, he did save me from the wolves."

There were no wolves to be seen on this journey. The packs had all retreated to the bleak north country, and the train ran through smiling pasture lands, all astir with sheep and lambs, or through green and golden woods carpeted with bluebells.

The day passed gaily, with songs and storytelling—even the dry Mr. Gripe proved to know a number of amusing tales—and in between the laughter and chat Cardigan and Spock, the Bow Street officers, busily wrote in their notebooks more and more of the dreadful deeds of Miss Slighcarp recounted to them by Bonnie and Sylvia.

They reached Willoughby Station at dawn. Mr. Gripe had written to one of the inns at Blastburn for a chaise and it was there to meet them.

"How different this road seems," said Sylvia, as they set off at a gallop. "Last time I traveled along it there were wolves and snow and it was cold and dark—now I

can see primroses everywhere and I am so hot in these clothes that I can hardly breathe."

They were still wearing the tinker children's clothes Pattern had made them, for there had been no time in London to get any others made. Mr. Gripe's eye winced when it encountered them, for he liked children to look neat and nicely dressed.

"Let us hope that Miss Slighcarp has not got rid of all our own clothes," said Bonnie.

When they reached the boundary of Willoughby Park they saw an enormous notice, new since they had left. It said:

WILLOUGHBY CHASE SCHOOL
A select Seminary for the Daughters of Gentlemen and the Nobility
Boarders and Parlor Boarders
Principals: MISS L. SLIGHCARP AND MRS. BRISKET

"What impertinence!" gasped Bonnie. "Can she really have made our home into a school?"

"This is worse even than I had feared," said Mr. Gripe grimly, as the chaise turned into the gateway.

They took the longer and more roundabout road that led to the back of the house, for the Bow Street officers wanted to surprise Miss Slighcarp.

"Didn't you say there was a secret passage, miss?" Sam Cardigan said to Bonnie.

"Yes, and a priests' hole and an oubliette—"

"Very good. Couldn't be better. We'll put some ginger in the good lady's gravy."

He explained his plan to Mr. Gripe and the children,

and then they knocked at the back door. It was opened by James.

"Miss Bonnie! Miss Sylvia!" he exclaimed, scarlet with joy and surprise. They both flung themselves on him and hugged him.

"James, dear James! Are you all right? Is Pattern all right? What is going on here?"

"Terrible doings, miss—"

"Now, now," said Sam Cardigan. "Pleasure at seeing old acquaintance is all very well, but business is business. We must get under cover. My man, where can this carriage be concealed?"

"It can go in the coach house, sir," James told him. "There's only Miss Slighcarp's landau now."

The carriage was hastily put away, and the conspirators took refuge in the dairy.

"Now, James," said Bonnie, dancing with excitement, "you must go and tell Miss Slighcarp that Sylvia and I have come back, and that we are *very* sad and sorry for having run away. Don't say anything about these gentlemen."

"Yes, miss," said James, his eyes beginning to twinkle. "She's teaching just now, up in the schoolroom. The pupils study for an hour before breakfast."

"Is the entrance to the secret passage still open, James? Has Miss Slighcarp ever discovered it?"

"No to the second and yes to the first, Miss Bonnie," said James, and pulled aside the cupboard and horse blankets which he had arranged to conceal the opening.

"Capital! Go to her quickly, then, James! Tell her we are starving!"

"You don't look it, begging your pardon, miss," said James, grinning, and left the room. Mr. Gripe and the two Bow Street officers squeezed their way into the secret passage. Simon, who had left his geese in the stable yard, hesitated, but Mr. Gripe said, "Come on, come on, boy. The more witnesses, the better," so he followed.

Bonnie and Sylvia spent the time while they waited for James's return in artistically dirtying and untidying each other, rubbing dust and coal on their faces, rumpling their hair, and making themselves look as dejected and orphanly as possible.

James came back with a long face.

"You're to come up to the schoolroom, young ladies. At once."

He led the way, and they followed in silence. The house bore traces everywhere of its new use as a school. On the crystal chandelier in the ballroom ropes had been slung for climbing, and the billiards table had been exchanged for blackboards. The portraits of ancestors in the long gallery had been replaced by bulletin boards and the gold-leaf and ormolu tables were covered with chalk powder and ink-stains.

Even though they knew they had good friends close at hand, the children could not control a certain swelled and breathless feeling in the region of their midriffs as they approached the schoolroom door.

James tapped at the door and in response to Miss Slighcarp's "Come in" opened it and stood aside to let the children through.

A quick glance showed them that all the furniture had been removed and that the room was filled with

desks. The more senior children from Mrs. Brisket's school were sitting at them, with expressions varying from nervous excitement to petrifaction on their faces.

Miss Slighcarp stood on a raised platform by a blackboard. She had a long wooden pointer in her hand. Mrs. Brisket was there, too, sitting at the instructress's desk. She wore a stern and forbidding expression, but on Miss Slighcarp's face there was a look of triumph.

"So!" she said—a long, hissing exhalation. "So, you have returned!—Come here."

They advanced, slowly and trembling, until they stood below the platform. Miss Slighcarp was so tall that they had almost to lean back to look up at her.

"P-please take us back into your school, Miss Slighcarp," faltered Bonnie. "We're so cold and tired and hungry."

Into Sylvia's mind came a sudden recollection of the grouse pies and apricots they had eaten on the train. She bit her lip, and tried to look sorrowful.

Behind them, James quietly poked the fire, but no one noticed him. All eyes were on the returning truants.

"Hungry!" said Miss Slighcarp. "You'll be hungrier still before I've done with you. Do you think you can run away, spend two months idling and playing on the moors, return when it suits you, and then expect to be given roast beef and pudding? You'll have no food for three days! Perhaps that will teach you something. And you shall both be beaten, and we'll see what a taste of the dungeons will do for your spirit. James, go and get the dungeon keys."

"No, miss," said James firmly. "I obey some of your orders because I've got no alternative, but help to put

children in those dungeons I can't and won't. It's not Christian." And he left the room, shutting the door sharply behind him.

"I'll get the keys, Letitia," said Mrs. Brisket, rising ponderously. "You can be administering chastisement, meanwhile."

Miss Slighcarp came down from her platform. "Miss Green," she said, and her eyes were so glittering with fury that even Bonnie quailed, "put out your hand."

Bonnie took a step backward. Miss Slighcarp followed her, and raised the pointer menacingly. The children at the desks drew a tremulous breath. But just as the pointer came swishing down, the chimneypiece panel flew open, and Mr. Gripe, stepping out, seized hold of Miss Slighcarp's arm.

For a moment she was utterly dumbfounded. Then, in wrath she exclaimed:

"Who are you, sir? Let me go at once! What are you doing in my house?"

"In your house, ma'am? In *your* house? Don't you remember me, Miss Slighcarp?" said Mr. Gripe. "I was the attorney instructed by your distant relative, Sir Willoughby Green, to seek you out and offer you the position of instructress to his daughter. You brought with you a testimonial from the Duchess of Kensington. Don't you remember?"

Miss Slighcarp turned pale.

"And who gave you permission, woman," suddenly thundered Mr. Gripe, "to turn this house into a boarding school? Who said you could use these children with villainous cruelty, beat them, starve them, and lock them in dungeons? Oh, it's of no use to protest, I've

been behind that panel and heard every word you've uttered."

"It was only a joke," faltered Miss Slighcarp. "I had no intention of really shutting them in the dungeons."

At this moment Mrs. Brisket re-entered the room holding a bunch of enormous rusty keys.

"We can't use the upper dungeons, Letitia," she began briskly, "for Lucy and Emma are occupying them. I have brought the lower . . ."

Then she saw Mr. Gripe, and behind him the two Bow Street officers. Her jaw dropped, and she was stricken to silence.

"Only a joke, indeed?" said Mr. Gripe harshly. "Mr. Cardigan, place these two females under arrest, if you please. Until it is convenient to remove them to jail, you may as well avail yourself of the dungeon keys so obligingly put at your disposal."

"You can't do this! You've no right!" shrieked the enraged Miss Slighcarp, struggling in the grip of Cardigan. "I have papers signed by Sir Willoughby empowering me to do as I please with this property in the event of his death, and appointing me guardian of the children—"

"Papers signed by Sir Willoughby. Pish!" said Mr. Gripe scornfully. "You may as well know, ma'am, that your accomplice Grimshaw, who is already in prison, has confessed to the whole plot."

At this news all the fight went out of Mrs. Brisket, and she allowed herself to be manacled by Spock, only muttering, "Grimshaw's a fool, a paltry, whining fool."

But Miss Slighcarp still gave battle.

"I tell you," she shouted, "I saw Sir Willoughby before he departed and he himself left me full powers—"

At this moment a heavy tread resounded along the passage, and they heard a voice exclaiming:

"What the *devil's* all this? Desks, blackboards, carpet taken up—has m'house been turned into a reformatory?"

The door burst open and in marched—Sir Willoughby Green! Behind him stood James, grinning for joy.

Bonnie turned absolutely pale with incredulity, stood so for a moment, motionless and wide-eyed, then, uttering one cry—"*Papa!*"—she flung herself into her father's arms.

"Well, minx? Have you missed us, eh? Have you been a good girl and minded your book? I can see you haven't," he said, surveying her lovingly. "Rosy as a pippin and brown as a berry. I can see you've been out of doors all day long instead of sewing your sampler and learning your *je ne sais quoi*. And Sylvia too—eh, my word, what a change from the little white mouse we left here! Well, well, well, girls will be girls! But what's all this, ma'am," he continued, addressing Miss Slighcarp threateningly, "what's all this hugger-mugger? I never gave you permission to turn Willoughby Chase into a school, no, damme I didn't! Being my fourth cousin doesn't give you such rights as that."

"But, sir," interjected Mr. Gripe, who, at first silent with amazement, had now got his breath back, "Sir Willoughby! This is joyful indeed! We had all supposed you drowned when the *Thessaly* sank."

Sir Willoughby burst into a fit of laughter.

"Ay, so they told me at your office! We have been traveling close behind you, Mr. Gripe—I visited your place of business yesterday, learned you had just de-

parted for Willoughby, and, since Lady Green was anxious to get back as soon as may be, and relieve the children's anxiety, we hired a special train and came posthaste after you."

"But were you not in the shipwreck then, Sir Willoughby?"

The reply to this question was lost in Bonnie's rapturous cry—"Is Mamma here too? *Is* she?"

"Why, yes, miss, and ettling to see you, I'll be bound!"

Before the words had left his mouth Bonnie was out of the door. Sylvia, from a nice sense of delicacy, did not follow her cousin. She thought that Bonnie and her mother should be allowed those first few blissful moments of reunion alone together.

Sir Willoughby and Mr. Gripe had retired to a corner of the schoolroom and Mr. Gripe was talking hard, while Sir Willoughby listened with his blue eyes bulging, occasionally exclaiming, "Why, damme! For sheer, cool, calm, impertinent effrontery—why, bless my soul!" Once he wheeled round to his niece and said, "Is it really true, Sylvia? Did Miss Slighcarp do these things?"

"Yes, sir, indeed she did," said Sylvia.

"Then hanging's too good for you, ma'am," he growled at Miss Slighcarp. "Have her taken to the dungeons, Gripe. When these two excellent fellows have breakfast they can take her and the other harpy off to prison."

"Oh, sir . . ." said Sylvia.

"Well, miss puss?"

"May I go with them to the dungeons, sir? I believe there are two children who have been put down there

by Miss Slighcarp, and they will be so cold and unhappy and frightened!"

"Are there, by Joshua! We'll all go," said Sir Willoughby.

Sylvia had never visited the dungeons at Willoughby Chase. They were a dismal and frightening quarter, never entered by the present owner and his family, though in days gone by they had been extensively employed by ancestors of Sir Willoughby.

Down dark, dank, weed-encrusted steps they trod, and along narrow, rock-hewn passages, where the only sound beside the echo of their own footfalls was the drip of water. Sylvia shuddered when she remembered Miss Slighcarp's expressed intention of imprisoning her and Bonnie down here.

"Oh, do let us hasten," she implored. "Poor Lucy and Emma must be nearly frozen with cold and fear."

"Upon my soul," muttered Mr. Gripe. "This passes everything. Fancy putting children in a place like this!"

Miss Slighcarp and Mrs. Brisket trod along in the rear of their captors, silent and sullen, looking neither to right nor to left.

The plight of Lucy and Emma was not quite so bad as it might have been. This was owing to the kindhearted James, who, though he could not release them, had contrived to pass through their bars a number of warm blankets and a quantity of kindling and some tapers, to enable them to light a fire, and he had also kept them supplied with food out of his own meagre rations.

But they were cold and miserable enough, and their astonishment and joy at the sight of Sylvia were touching to behold.

Sylvia danced up and down outside the bars with impatience while James found the right key, and then she hurried them off upstairs, without waiting to see Miss Slighcarp locked in their place.

"Come, come quickly, and get warm by a fire. Pattern shall make you a posset—or no, I forget, Pattern is probably not here yet, but I think I know how it is done."

However, they had no more than reached the Great Hall when they were greeted with an ecstatic cry from Bonnie.

"Sylvia! Emma! Lucy! Come and see Mamma! Oh, she is so different! So much better!"

They went rather shyly into the salon, where Pattern, who had been summoned by Simon at full gallop on one of the coach horses, bustled about in joyful tears and served everybody with cups of frothing hot chocolate.

"Well," a gay voice exclaimed, "where's my second daughter?" And in swept someone whom Sylvia would hardly have recognized for the frail, languid Lady Green, so blooming, beautiful, and bright-eyed did she appear. She embraced Sylvia, cordially made welcome the two poor prisoners, and declared:

"Now I want to hear all your story, every word, from the very beginning! I am proud of you both—and as for that Miss Slighcarp, cousin of your father's though she be, I hope she is sent to Botany Bay!"

"But, Aunt Sophy," said Sylvia, "your tale must be so much more adventurous than ours! Were you not shipwrecked?"

"Yes, indeed we were!" said Lady Green, laughing, "and your uncle and I spent six very tedious days drifting in a rowing boat, our only fare being a monotonous choice of grapes or oranges, of which there happened to be a large crate in the dinghy, fortunately for us. We were then picked up by a small and *most* insanitary fishing boat, manned by a set of fellows as picturesque as they were unwashed, who none of them spoke a word of English. They would carry us nowhere but to their home port, which turned out to be the Canary Islands. On *this* boat we received nothing to eat but sardines in olive oil. I am surprised these shocks and privations did not carry me off, but Sir Willoughby maintains they were the saving of me, for from the time of the wreck my health began to pick up. On reaching the Canaries we determined to come home by the next mail ship, but they only visit these islands every three months or so, and one had just left. We had to wait a weary time, but the

peace and the sunshine during our enforced stay completed my cure, as you see."

"Oh, how glad I am you came home and didn't go on round the world!" cried Bonnie.

Sir Willoughby marched in, beaming. "Well, well," he said, "has Madam Hen found her chicks, eh? But as for the state your house is in, my lady, I hardly dare describe it to you. We shall have to have it completely redecorated. And what's to be done with all these poor orphans?"

"Oh, Papa," said Bonnie, bursting with excitement. "I have a plan for them!"

"You have, have you, hussy? What is it, then?"

"Don't you think Aunt Jane could come and live in the Dower House, just across the park, and run a school for them? Aunt Jane loves children!"

"What, Aunt Jane run a school? At her age?"

"Aunt Jane is very independent," Bonnie said. "She wouldn't want to feel she was living on charity. But she could have people to help her—*kind* people. And she could teach the girls beautiful embroidery!"

Lucy and Emma looked so wistful at the thought of this bliss that Sir Willoughby promised to consider it.

A happy party sat down to dine in the Great Hall that night. Spock and Cardigan, the Bow Street officials, had already left to commit their prisoners to the nearest jail, and the ruffianly gang of servants kept on by Miss Slighcarp had been summarily dismissed. Simon, riding about the country-side, had taken the news of Sir Willoughby's return to all the old servants, Solly and Timon and John Groom and Mrs. Shubunkin, and they had come hastening back.

The orphans, still dazed at their good fortune, sat at a table of their own, eating roast turkey and kindly averting their gaze from the pale cheeks and red eyes of Diana Brisket, who, having been in a position to bully and hector as much as she pleased, was now reduced to a state where she had not a friend to stand by her. Mrs. Brisket had sold the school in Blastburn and so Diana had nowhere to go and was forced, willy-nilly, to stay with the orphans (where, it may be said in passing, wholesome discipline and the example of Aunt Jane's unselfish nature soon wrought an improvement in her character). Some of the parlor boarders and daughters of the nobility and gentry had been fetched away by their parents, such as lived near enough, and the rest were awaiting removal.

Simon sat between Bonnie and Sylvia. Sir Willoughby gave him some very kindly looks. He had heard by now of Simon's brave part in rescuing the girls both from the wolves and from Mrs. Brisket's dreadful establishment, and of his help with Aunt Jane's illness. The money he had spent had been returned to him with interest.

"It looks as if we're going to have an adopted son as well as an adopted daughter," said Sir Willoughby. "Hey, my boy? What shall we do with you, then? Put you through school?"

"No thank you, Sir Willoughby," said Simon gratefully but firmly. "School wouldn't suit me at all."

"What then? Can't just run wild."

"I'm going to be a painter," Simon explained. "Dr. Field said I showed great promise, and he told me I could stay with him and go to one of the famous London art schools."

"Oh, Simon," said Bonnie, dismayed, "and leave Willoughby?"

"I'll come back every holidays," he told her. "Remember we promised to go and see Mr. Wilderness? I want to paint a picture of Great Whinside from the dale—oh, and a hundred other places round here."

"Sensible lad," approved Sir Willoughby. "Well, always remember, whenever you come back, there's a warm welcome for you at Willoughby Chase."

"Thank you, Sir Willoughby," said Simon, beaming. "And now if you'll excuse me, I think I ought to be returning to my cave. I want to see how my bees are getting on."

"Good night, Simon," cried Bonnie and Sylvia, "we shall come and see you tomorrow."

Bonnie yawned.

"It's long past these children's bedtime," said Sir Willoughby, "and they were traveling all night. Off with you now—I dare say your mother will be up by and by to say good night to you in bed."

Their own room had been hastily prepared for them and they were glad to tumble between the fine silken sheets. "And oh, Bonnie," called Sylvia, "*have* you seen the pretty dresses Pattern has been making for us?"

"I've grown accustomed to boys' clothes," grumbled Bonnie.

"Oh, what nonsense, miss!" said Pattern scoldingly, and ruined the effect by giving Bonnie a hug. "There now, go to sleep, you blessed pair, and don't let either of you move a muscle till you're called. We've had quite enough to worry about today, with everything at sixes and sevens, and no servants to speak of, and a hundred

orphans to feed. Mind! You're not to speak a word till eight o'clock. You're not even to dream!"

"Dream," murmured Bonnie sleepily, "we can't help dreaming, Pattern. We've so much to dream *about*—the wolves, and Miss Slighcarp, and walking to London, and helping poor Aunt Jane, and Mamma and Papa adrift in a boat full of oranges and grapes . . ." Her voice trailed away into sleep.

Light after light in the windows of the great house was extinguished, until at length it stood dark and silent. And though the house had witnessed many strange scenes, wolf hunts and wine drinking and weddings and wars, it is doubtful whether during its whole history any of its inmates had had such adventures as those of Sylvia and Bonnie Green.

Joan Aiken was born in Sussex, England, to American poet Conrad Aiken and his Canadian wife, Jessie McDonald Aiken. She wrote more than a hundred books for young readers and adults. She won the Lewis Carroll Award for her classic *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase,* which began the popular Wolves Chronicles. Her novels are internationally acclaimed, and, among other honors, she was a recipient of the Edgar Award in the United States and the *Guardian* Award in her native England. She was awarded the title Member of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II in 1999. Visit the author's website at joanaiken.com.