

Raymond Evelyn

Dorothy at Oak Knowe



Evelyn Raymond
Dorothy at Oak Knowe

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CHAPTER I ON THE ROAD TO OAK KNOWE

“This way for the Queen!”

“Here you are for the Duke of Connaught! Right this way!”

“Want the Metropole, Miss?”

“Room there, stupid! She’s from the States – any fool could see that! I’m from your hotel, little lady, the American. Your luggage, Miss, allow me?”

If Dorothy’s hands hadn’t been too full, she would have clapped them over her ears, to drown the cries of the hackmen who swarmed about her as she stepped from the train at the railway station in Toronto. As it was, she clung desperately to her bag and shawlstrap, which the man from the American hotel seemed bound to seize, whether or no.

But her heart sank and it was a forlorn little girl, indeed, who looked anxiously around seeking some face on which might be a smile of welcome. But nobody paid any attention to her, except the obstreperous hackmen, and in a sudden fright she let fall the tears she had so bravely kept back until then. It had been a long and lonely journey, but she had been assured that she would be promptly met and cared for when it ended. Now, amid all the throng of travelers and those who awaited them, not one was looking for a “dark haired girl in navy blue” and the tears fell faster as she cried aloud:

“Oh! what shall I do! What shall I do!”

Even the hackmen had forsaken her in pursuit of other, more promising patrons. The short autumn day was at its close and in the growing darkness her fright increased and her usual common sense left her. But, as she spoke, a hand was laid upon her shoulder and a rather gruff voice demanded:

“Why, little stranger, what’s a-troublin’ ye?”

Dorothy winked her tears away and looked up into the face of an old man, whose gray beard swept his breast while his head was entirely bald. He wore a long blue smock, carried an ox-goad in one hand and a canvas bag in the other. He looked as kind as he was homely and Dorothy answered quickly:

“I’m lost, I guess. Or forgotten, and that’s just as bad! I – I – ”

“Lost? Right here in this town? Well, that couldn’t hardly be. Though I own it’s a biggish place. But if you be, I’ll see to it that you get found again, immediate. First start – who be ye?”

“I’m Dorothy Calvert, from Baltimore. I came to the Oak Knowe School for Girls. Somebody was to meet me. Nobody has and – and – I don’t know what to do.”

John Gilpin whistled and exclaimed:

“No! Never! I saw at a glance you was no Cannuck! The little maids we raise in our Province have redder cheeks ’an yours. An’ we don’t let ’em go traversin’ round the universe without their mothers or leastways nurses to look after ’em. But bless my soul, you’ve fell into safe hands. I know old Oak Knowe well. No better school in the whole Empire nor that. Moresomever, there’s been some miscarry betwixt your folks and the Lady Principal or she’d never let you come to this pass. But my road lies same as yours. I’ll just step-an’-fetch my oxen and head ’em straight for home. We’ll get to the School in next to no time. Leastways, betwixt now and bedding-bell – they ring it about half-past nine.”

“Is it so far? Why, it must be hours till then!”

At the cheerful sound of this old teamster's voice Dorothy forgot her fear. She didn't stop to reflect that she should have waited quietly in the station till somebody called for her, nor that she might have telephoned to her teachers to announce her arrival. All she realized was that here was a friend in need and that he was a quaintly interesting person.

"Tis a matter of some miles, lassie, and my old oxen are no electric tram. Slow and sure's their motto and what's an hour, more or less, in a little girl's lifetime? You got a box?"

Dorothy glanced at the rug and magazine, tightly strapped together, and at the handbag she had set down upon the platform and replied:

"No, Mr. – I don't know your name yet – I haven't now. I had one, but I ate the lunch out of it and tossed it from the car window."

The old man stared as if she had spoken nonsense, but informed her:

"Gilpin's my name. John Gilpin; but my dame says I'm no descendant of him that took that famous ride as is in the story books. I'm too slow, Dame says. But is all your clothes in that satchel?"

It was Dorothy's turn to stare and to laugh.

"Oh! no, indeed! They're in my trunk. Here is my check. Number 70777. I put that down in my little notebook, though it's easy to remember."

"Humph! I've heard that in the States they call a box a 'trunk,' same's if it was an elephant. Well, give me the check. I'll just step-an'-fetch it and we'll be jogging."

Mr. Gilpin took the check and lumbered away, dragging one leg stiffly as if he could not bend the knee, while Dorothy's spirits rose as she watched him. After all, this was a real adventure; and when it was over and she was safe at her fine school, she could write all about it to the friends at home. Thinking about them, she forgot how long John Gilpin tarried and roused from her reverie with a start when his hearty voice, guiding his oxen, came around the corner of the station.

"Here we be, lassie! Ever ride in an ox-cart? Ever see a neater yoke o' cattle? That's an unco big box for a small maid to own and hefty, to boot. Step right in, for it's gathering clouds, I see, and we can't have that tidy dress of yours get spoiled while it's new."

It was easy to "step in" to the low-hung vehicle and Dorothy nestled against her new friend on his spring-seat forward; all the back part of the wagon being filled with empty barrels and her own trunk.

It had been some sort of holiday in the city and the streets were gay with flags and bunting, causing Dorothy to exclaim:

"Why, it's just like Halifax, that time Earl Grey was coming! It's just as English as that was – even more so, for I don't see Old Glory anywhere, and there I did."

Old John turned his bare, bald head toward her and demanded:

"What do you know about Halifax? Or the Governor General? I thought you was United States."

"So I am, so I am! But people may travel once in a while, mayn't they? I can tell you lots about Halifax, even though I was there but a little while. That was on a vacation journey and it was delight-ful!"

Then, finding the farmer so interested, Dorothy eagerly recited the story of her "Travels" and their happy ending at her rightful home at Deerhurst and in the love of her Great-Aunt Betty.

"Sounds like a story book, now don't it! And to think after all that the old lady should be willin' to despatch you up here to our Province, just to get a mite of education. Should ha' thought there be institooshuns of learning nigher hand 'an Oak Knowe, where she could ha' clapped eyes on ye, now and again. She –"

"Oh! don't misjudge my darling aunt! She hated to have me come as badly as I hated to leave her; but, though I've never been really ill, she fancied that this climate would make me very, very strong. Besides, the minister who founded Oak Knowe – he was a bishop, I believe – was one of her girlhood friends, and so she chose it for that, too. Anyway, to her who has traveled so much, Canada and Maryland seem but a little way apart."

“That’s right, lassie. That’s right. Be loyal to your friends, whether they be right or wrong. An’ talk about travel, there beant many corners of this earth that I haven’t took a glance at. I’ve not always been a farmer, though you mightn’t think it now.”

They had passed out of the city streets into the open country, the oxen swaying and pacing sedately along, as if it mattered nothing how late they might reach home. To pass the time, Dorothy asked the old man to talk about his own travels, and he promptly answered:

“In course, and obleeged for anybody to care to listen. Dame has heard my yarns so often, she scoffs ’em; but I’ve seen a power o’ things in my day, a power o’ things. I was born in Lunnon, raised in Glasgo’, run away to Liverpool and shipped afore the mast. From sailor I turned soldier under Chinese Gordon – Ah! the man he wus! Miner, constable, me Lord’s butler, then his cook, and now, at the fag end of my days, settled down to be my Dame’s right-hand-man. She was a likely widow, coming from England to take up land here, and I met her aboard ship, last time I crossed seas. Didn’t take us long to strike a bargain. She needed a man to till her farm; I needed a good woman to mend me and do for me, for I was that tired of rovin’ – my hearties! We get along well. We get along prime. I do the talking and her does the thinking. She’s that uncommon thing – a silent woman. Like to hear how I come nigh-hand to death along of a devil fish? Want to feel your hair rise on end and your arms get reg’lar goose-fleshy? Makes me nigh get that way myself, every time I recall – Whist! If that ain’t thunder I’m a-dreamin’, sure! Thunder this season of the year! Now that’s fair ridic’lous. But mentionin’ devil fish, yon comes one them red go-devils, Dame calls ’em, as squawkin’, blazing-eyed automobeelyers – comin’ this minute. No marvel natur’ gets topsy-turvy with them wild things ramsaging round. But, quick, lassie! Do your young eyes see something or somebody lying beyond in the middle of the road?”

The old man checked his garrulous tongue to rise and peer into the darkness, while Dorothy sprang to her feet beside him, straining her own eyes to follow his pointing finger.

“There is, there is! Looks like a man or boy or bicycle or something and that horrid car is coming right toward it! Make ’em stop! Holloa! Loud, loud, for they don’t see him! they’ll run over him – he’ll be killed!”

But still the gay occupants of the car observed nothing; till at last a fiercer shriek from Dorothy sounded above their laughter and instantly hushed it, while the driver of the machine looked curiously at the cart which the wise oxen, perceiving their own danger, had drawn out of harm on the roadside. But the stop had been too late. Though the motor was swerved aside, it had already collided with the objects in its path, and it was in a terrified silence that the merrymakers descended from it.

But even old John had been quicker than they and was now bending above the lad crushed beneath the forward wheels of this hated “go-devil.”

“Oh! my poor lad! Oh! my sunny Robin!” he groaned: then in a fury of anger at the great machine, tried his strength to lift it from its victim.

Fortunately there were several men in the party, and the car well equipped against mischance, and so it was swiftly forced away, while the farmer again stooped over the motionless lad beneath and tenderly raised him in his arms. For a moment the group gathered about the pair believed that the boy was dead; then a low moan from his white lips mingled with the lamentations of John Gilpin and brought relief to everyone.

Again came flashes of lightning and the growls of thunder, and the owner of the car exclaimed:

“Lay the boy in the motor and we’ll get him to a hospital at once. Maybe he isn’t so badly hurt as seems. Pile up the cushions, somebody, and give him to me, old man. I’m stronger than you and better used to sick folks. Doctor Winston is my name.”

“The more shame to you then for what you’ve done this night!” hotly retorted old John, clasping his burden the closer and moving slowly toward his own humble cart.

“Idiot! Don’t put him in that shaky wagon. Delay may cost his life. Hospital’s the place and the car is swiftest!” cried another of the gentlemen, indignantly. “Of course we’ll see to it that he has the best of care with no expense spared.”

As if he had not heard, old John still moved away, quietly ordering Dorothy:

“Undo that shawl of yours. Roll them barrels out of the wagon. Take off your jacket and make a piller of it. Spread the shawl out and cover him with part of it whilst I lay him down. Poor little Robin! The ‘only son of his mother and she was a widow.’”

Dorothy was glad to obey this strange old man who had been so genial and was now so stern, and it relieved her distress to be doing something to help. But as she tried to roll the barrels out, a hand fell on her arm and the doctor said:

“I’ll do that, Miss. They’re too heavy for you. I wish you persuade your grandfather to trust me with this poor boy. It would be so much better.”

“He isn’t my grandfather. I don’t know him – I mean he was taking me – ”

But her words fell upon deaf ears, apparently. Having sent the empty barrels flying where they would, the doctor had now taken the pile of cushions somebody had brought him and arranged them on the wagon bottom. Next he calmly relieved John Gilpin of the injured boy and laid him gently down. Shaking out Dorothy’s thick steamer rug, her “shawl,” he carefully covered Robin and, sitting down beside him, ordered:

“Drive on, farmer! Chauffeur, follow with the car. Lady Jane, the medicine case. To the nearest house at once.”

There was no resisting the firm authority of the physician and John Gilpin climbed meekly to his seat and at his urgent “gee-ho” the oxen started onward at a steady gait. But despite his anxiety there was a satisfaction in their owner’s mind that the “nearest house” would be his own and that it would be his capable “Dame” who would care for Robin and not a hospital nurse.

Meanwhile Dorothy seemed forgotten both by the people who had returned to their car and Mr. Gilpin; so, fearing that she would be left alone by the roadside, she sprang upon the end of the cart and sat there, her feet dangling over its edge.

Now, indeed, her adventure was proving anything but amusing. What would Aunt Betty think of her heedless action? Or her dear guardian, Seth Winters, the “learned Blacksmith,” wisest of men, whom the reader of this series will recall in “Dorothy’s Schooling.” Would she ever reach Oak Knowe, and how would this escapade be regarded there?

Into her troubled thoughts now broke a sound of pain, that drove everything save pity from her mind. The rain was now falling fast and drenching her new clothes, but her anxiety was only that the injured boy should not get wet and she was glad that her rug was so thick and warm. It had been a parting gift from her “House-Boat” guests and held almost sacred as a memento of their happy trip together.

But now the oxen were turning into a lane. She could dimly see the hedgerows on either side, that now and then the lightning flashes showed more plainly; and, after a time, something big and white seemed to block their way. A moment more and the white obstruction proved to be a cottage with a lamp shining through its window. Then a door opened and a woman’s voice called cheerily:

“Welcome home, my man! You’re late the night. Met you up with any trouble? Didn’t the apples sell well?”

“More trouble than you dream, Dame, and I’ve fetched it for you to share. Light the bedroom to once. ’Tis the dead – or dyin’ – is here.”

Without a word the woman turned away, moving heavily because of her great size, and an inner door opened, showing a comfortable bed, its covers already invitingly spread back. Lighting more candles the dame stood quietly aside, waiting her unexpected guest.

The doctor brought the boy in, still wrapped in the rug and, tossing that to the floor, gently laid him down. John followed close behind, announcing:

“Tis Robin, Dame, our bonny Robin of the Glen. The heart of the mother will break. He – ”

“Help here. Hot water, please. More light. An old sheet for bandages. Don’t dally. Undress him, Lady Jane.”

“But, doctor, I’m afraid!” objected that lady who, partly from curiosity, partly to avoid the rain, had followed the physician into the house.

Indeed, all the motoring party had now swarmed into the kitchen, intending to be quiet yet really chattering noisily, and some of them sniffing covetously the odors from a great pot of soup, steaming away on the stove. But nobody was quite ready to respond to the doctor’s appeals for help, even Mrs. Gilpin being confused and stupid before these strangers who had taken possession of her home.

As for old John, he could simply stand and stare at the unconscious lad on the bed, too dazed and grieved to be of any use whatever.

Not so Dorothy, who had entered with the rest and who noticed Dr. Winston’s impatience – who knew that a hospital was where his patient should be and not this ill-equipped cottage. Throwing off her dripping jacket, she cried:

“I’ll help.”

A teakettle was singing beside the soup-pot on the stove and a dishpan was hanging near. To empty the kettle into the pan and to carry it to the chair beside the bed was an instant’s task. Then, seizing the upper sheet and using her teeth for scissors, she swiftly tore it into strips; and by this time the dame had regained her own presence of mind.

Without troubling to ask who Dorothy was or how she came to be there, she now took charge of things, saying:

“You’ll find clean towels in that chest of drawers. Fetch the doctor a pile. Shears are yon in that work-basket. You’re spry on your feet as I can’t be, but I do know how to take the clothes off this poor Robin. My, what’s this he clenches so tight in hand? One of them telegraph letters ’tis his errand to deliver. All over the countryside the laddie rode on his wheel to earn the bit money would pay his mother’s rent. Brave, bonny lad that he was!”

Gently releasing the telegram from his fingers, Mrs. Gilpin held it up for the doctor to see.

“For Oak Knowe. Open it, little girl, and read if it’s important.”

She obeyed, but her voice trembled as she read. It was the belated message that announced her own coming and the hour of her arrival. It explained why she had not been met at the station, but she felt both shocked and guilty as she exclaimed:

“Oh! it is my fault! It’s all my fault that he is killed! Just about me it happened! What shall I do – what shall I do?”

“Stop that sort of talk and see how your dead boy stares at you! Look well, Robin, you see a real live Yankee girl!”

CHAPTER II

UNFORTUNATE BEGINNINGS

Even the most cultured Lady Principals do not enjoy being roused from their slumbers, an hour after midnight, by the tooting of a motor car beneath their bedroom windows. It was annoying to have to dress again and descend to a dimly-lighted reception room to receive a new pupil who had missed a train, on the route, and misdirected her telegram. Nor was there anything prepossessing about this especial girl, whose clothes steamed with moisture and whose travel-soiled cheeks were streaked by raindrops and tears. So it was small wonder that Dorothy's reception by Miss Muriel Tross-Kingdon was decidedly cool and crisp.

"This is really unprecedented, Miss Calvert. I cannot understand how any young lady, whose friends consider her intelligent enough to travel alone, could have made such stupid blunders, as you have. At the point where you knew you were to change trains, why did you not keep watch and inquire for direction?"

"Well, you see there was a military parade and the soldiers looked so queer in their red uniforms and their funny little caps on the sides of their heads that – that – that I forgot. I mean the timetable told the right hour, course, but the first train was behind and so – and so –"

It was a very lame excuse and Dolly knew it. But it was the truth and as such she gave it.

Miss Tross-Kingdon made no reply. Inwardly she was commenting upon Dorothy's pronunciation of certain words, which was wholly at fault according to English custom, and realizing that here was the first fault to be corrected in her new pupil.

Dorothy's heart sank. Uncle Seth's last advice to her had been:

"Whenever you feel blue, just wave your flag of high courage and march ahead. Don't stop to think! March, march, march – toward the better time that will surely come."

But that high-courage flag hung limply now and she felt she could never again wave it at all. But, fortunately, the Lady Principal now rose to terminate the interview. Touching an electric bell for the maid on night duty, she said:

"It is very late and you are tired. Dawkins will show you to your cubicle and assist you in undressing. You may omit your bath, to-night, and are allowed an extra hour of sleep in the morning. Where are your suit case and hand bag?"

Dorothy rose, as the lady did, but a fresh feeling of guilt made her eyes fall as she murmured:

"I – don't – know."

"Don't know!" echoed the Lady Principal, in amazement. Then directing Dawkins to supply what was needed, she returned to her interrupted repose, while Dorothy wearily followed the stern-faced maid; being cautioned, meanwhile:

"Do not dare to make a noise and arouse the young ladies."

Yet arrived at the cubicle, or small division of the great dormitory which had been assigned her, Dorothy realized that Dawkins was kinder than she looked. For presently she was being undressed, her face and hands sponged with cool water, and herself reclined with the freshest of gowns. Then she was bodily lifted into the dainty little bed as if she were a baby.

This unexpected gentleness touched her heart and, flinging her arms about the maid's neck, she sobbed:

"Oh! do be good to me! I am so desolate!"

"Whist, child! We must no be wakin' the troublesome girls around. And sure the lonesomeness'll pass, like the dew afore sun, once you get a good sleep and meet up with your mates. Good night, child, and sleep well."

Then, since there was nobody to witness her unusual demonstration, maid Dawkins stooped and kissed the tired eyes of her new charge, and went quietly away.

But there had been one observer of this caress. Peeping from her own compartment stood a girl whose keen eyes had noticed everything, and who felt she could scarcely wait until morning to spread the news. Creeping back to her own bed, she lay long awake, thinking the matter over. For this schoolgirl, who rejoiced in the title of the Honorable Gwendolyn Borst-Kennard, had a deal of curiosity that was wholly roused now.

“Never saw old Dawkins kiss anybody. Dawkins, of all creatures! Never knew a new girl come at this time of night – and she certainly was new. And she hadn’t any clothes, I know, because that was one of the school hampers Dawkins had. Must be somebody very poor. I wonder who! Maybe – for goodness sake! Maybe she’s some relation to old Dawk! Else why should she kiss her? Humph! I thought this was a school for young ladies, not for the poor relations of servants. There’s one thing certain, mamma will never allow me to remain where there are paupers. Never in this world. Neither would Lord Christopher let Marjorie. No, indeed. So will Miss Tross-Kingdon find out. Why! one charity pupil at Oak Knowe would ruin it! Anyhow, I mean to hurry round in the morning and warn all my set against noticing the beggar and what our set does surely goes. Mamma gets odd notions about things, sometimes, like saying I must sleep in this old dormitory instead of having a private room, and that I have silly feelings about rank. Wanted the Lady Principal to make me more democratic: but even she couldn’t wish me to sleep among paupers. Heigho! I wish it was morning! But I’ll take a nap now and that will pass the time.”

Exhausted by the long journey she had taken, and by the startling events of the night, unconscious Dorothy slept calmly on, little dreaming of Gwendolyn’s fancies about her; nor did she wake till long after all her dormitory mates had dressed and gone below to breakfast. When she did arouse it was to wonder about this strange place in which she found herself and at an elfish-looking child perched on the foot of her little bed, staring at her with wide eyes and keen impatience, and who greeted her first movement with the exclamation:

“Well, old sleepy-head, I thought you never would wake up! Who are you, anyway, and what makes you stay in cubicle so long after breakfast? Won’t you catch a lecture, though! I wouldn’t be in your shoes for a sovereign!”

“Don’t believe you could be in them. You’re so small they fall off,” answered Dorothy laughing.

“No, they wouldn’t. I tie them on. If I wanted to. Who are you? When you come? How dare you stay in bed so?”

Dolly laughed again. She had fallen asleep convinced that she could never laugh again, so tired and homesick had she been. But now, refreshed by rest and with the sunlight streaming through the windows, the world seemed a very different place. Besides, there was something so winning about this inquisitive little maid, that the stranger’s heart was comforted that she had found a friend already.

“Well, dearie, I suppose I dare because Miss Tross-Kingdon – ”

“Did she say you could? Isn’t that odd! She’s my aunt. I haven’t any folks ’cept her, I’m a norphan. I’m Millikins-Pillikins, my brother Hugh calls me; and the girls, too. But I’m not, really. I’m Grace Adelaide Victoria Tross-Kingdon. That’s my truly name. Nobody could call me all that, could they? Wouldn’t be time. Auntie Princie calls me just plain ‘darling’ or ‘dear.’ I’m a Minim. I don’t have to do lessons and things. I’m in the ‘kindy.’ Auntie Princie doesn’t approve of a kindergarten in this School for Young Ladies; but it’s a speriment the Board of Directioners wanted to try. Them’s the gentlemen auntie has to mind. Fancy! My great big grown-up Auntie Prin having to mind them, same’s I have to mind her! My Lord Bishop, he’s the head Directioner, but he’s the jolliest! I just love him! He knew my papa and mamma before they got drowned in the sea. My brother Hugh lives with the Bishop and writes things for him. They call him a seckeratary. He gets money for doing it. Think of that! Sometimes he gives me pennies and even six-pences. Sometimes – not often. You see he wants to earn enough to buy a cottage for him and me. I’m to be the lady of it – the mistress!

Fancy! But Auntie Princie says I have lots to learn before then. I will have to make his bread, 'cause he won't have money enough to keep me and a cook, too. I'll have to have a housemaid to help me, but you know housemaids never do the cooking. But say, girl, you haven't told me your name yet?"

Dorothy sat up in bed and drew the child toward her:

"My dear, you haven't given me a chance yet, you've been so busy telling me who you are. But I've enjoyed it and I thank you for coming to wake me up. Now I must get up and dress. Maybe you will show me to the bathroom, though I don't like to go about in this way."

"That's a school nightie you've got on. Where's your bath robe?"

"In my trunk."

"Where's your trunk?"

"I suppose it's at John Gilpin's house. That is, if he didn't throw it out of the cart with the empty barrels."

"Why did he throw out the barrels?"

"To make a place for Robin to lie on."

"What Robin?"

"The messenger boy who was hurt. He was bringing my telegram and he fainted and fell and the motor car – but I mustn't stop now to talk. I must get dressed."

"Couldn't you talk without stopping? I could."

"I believe you, child. Will you show me?"

"Of course – if you'll tell the rest. Wait. If you want a robe I'll get Gwendolyn's. It's right yonder."

So it happened that the first act of the supposed charity pupil was to borrow a garment of the very girl who had so misjudged her, and who entered the dormitory just as Dorothy was leaving it for the lavatory.

Curiosity had sent Gwendolyn and Laura Griswold, her chum and "shadow," back to this apartment at this unusual hour, but at sight of Dorothy disappearing toward the bath wearing Gwendolyn's robe, its owner forgot her curiosity in indignation. Stopping short, midway the great room, she clasped her hands in a tragic manner and demanded of Laura:

"Did you ever in your life see anything so cool as that? The impudent girl! How dare she? I wonder what else she's taken! And that mischievous little Pill with her. That child's the nuisance of this school. Even if she is Lady Principal's niece, she shouldn't be given the liberty she has. But I'll report."

"Yes, indeed, I'd report!" echoed Laura. "First, have to sleep in the school things; then help herself to yours. It's simply outrageous. Why not go right away? It's recess and Miss Tross-Kingdon has no class."

"She has worse. The Bishop's in the reception-room, and Dr. Winston, too. They were all talking very fast and I wanted to stop and listen. But I didn't quite dare, for she was facing the door and might see me. But I did hear the Bishop say that if she was a Calvert she could hardly fail to be all right. She came of good stock – none better. I wondered who he meant; but Lady Principal saw me looking in and asked me if 'I wished anything?' Hateful woman! She has the most disagreeable manners!"

"Never mind. Anyway, let's go tell her!" advised Laura, and the pair departed.

However, the electric bell rang just then, announcing that recess was over and the telling had to be postponed to a better season. A few moments later a maid came to say that as soon as Dorothy was ready the Lady Principal would receive her in the west parlor. But she might stop in the breakfast-room on the way, where a dish of cereal and a bowl of hot milk was awaiting her. The maid added to the "Little Pill":

"As for you, Miss Grace, the Minims are ready for their calisthenics and your teacher wants you."

“But I don’t want her. I want to go with Dolly.”

“You’re too big a girl for dolls, Miss Grace, and quite big enough to obey orders.”

Grace’s sharp little face darkened and she made a mocking grimace to the maid, retorting:

“You don’t know anything, Dora Bond! You don’t know that the Dolly I play with is this new girl. I shall go with her. I hate them exercises. They make my back ache. I’m excused to-day, anyhow. I heard Auntie Princie tell a lady how I wasn’t a bit strong and that she had to indulge me a lot. I shall do as I please. I shall go where I like. I shall, so, old Bondy! So there!”

Dorothy was surprised by the unpleasant expression which had settled on the little girl’s face, but said nothing. Following Bond’s direction, she hurried through a long hall to a sunshiny breakfast-room and the simple meal prepared for her. She hastily drank the milk, but had no appetite for the cereal. Her heart was in a flutter of anxiety about the coming interview with Miss Tross-Kingdon. She had at once disliked and feared that lady, on the night before, and felt that her present appearance, in a rain-spotted frock and with her hair so hastily brushed, must only add to the sternness of this unknown Lady Principal.

However, the clinging hand of Millikins-Pillikins gave a little comfort. She didn’t feel quite so lonely and timid with the child beside her and, as she made her graceful curtsey at the open door, all her fear vanished and she became once more the self-possessed Dorothy of old. For, rising and crossing the room to meet her was her acquaintance of the night, who had brought her to Oak Knowe in his own car from John Gilpin’s cottage.

With extended hands he grasped hers and, turning to Miss Muriel, remarked:

“Any time you need a nurse, madam, just call upon this little lady. She was the best helper I had last night. Quick and quiet and intelligent. She must train herself for that vocation when she is older.”

The color flew to Dorothy’s cheeks and she flashed him a grateful smile, for the kind words that so soothed her homesick heart.

The other gentleman in the room did not rise, but held out a beckoning hand and, with another curtsey to Doctor Winston, Dorothy excused herself to him and obeyed the summons. This other was a venerable man with a queer-shaped cap upon his white head and wearing knee breeches and gaiters, which made the young American remember some pictures of old Continental statesmen.

“So this is my old friend Betty Calvert’s child, is it? Well, well! You’re as like her as possible – yet only her great-niece. Ha, hum! Little lady, you carry me straight back to the days of my boyhood, when my parents came from England – strangers to your Baltimore. But we were not strangers for long. There’s a distant blood relation between our house and yours and we youngsters found in beautiful Bellevieu a second home. So you must remember that, since your aunt has done me the honor to send you away up here to this school of mine – of ours, I should say – you have come to another home just as I did then. Dear little Betty! What a mischief she was! Are you mischievous, too, I wonder?”

Then he turned to the Lady Principal, warning her:

“Look out for this little miss, Miss Tross-Kingdon! She looks as meek as a lamb, just now, but blood will tell and she’ll bear watching, I believe.”

The dear old man had drawn Dorothy close to his side and was smiling upon her in a manner to win the heart of any girl and to cure her of her homesickness – at least for the time being. When he released her, he rose to depart, resuming for a moment the business talk with the Lady Principal, which Dorothy’s entrance had interrupted. Both she and the doctor also arose and stood respectfully waiting till the Bishop disappeared. Then said Dr. Winston:

“You’ll like to hear about your boy patient, I suppose, Miss Calvert. Well, I think he’s all right, or will be as soon as his bones and bruises mend. What I suspect is that the brave lad is about half-starved – or was. He’s in danger of being overfed now, since he has fallen into Dame Gilpin’s hands.”

“Half-starved, sir? How dreadful!” cried Dorothy, while Miss Tross-Kingdon exclaimed: “Can that be possible!”

“Quite possible, indeed. His mother is a widow and very frail, old John tells me. Her husband was a carpenter who worked in town and was trying to pay for the little place he’d bought out here in the suburbs, hoping the open-air life might cure her. She’d gone into chicken and flower culture, thinking she could help in the payment. They were proud of Robin, the ‘brightest, merriest, best boy in the Glen,’ John claims, and had somehow got a second-hand bicycle for him to ride into school for the ‘grand eddication’ they wanted he should have. Then the father died and Robin got a position as messenger boy. Every cent he earned he gave his mother and she took in sewing. They ate just as little as they could and the result has been disastrous. A growing boy can’t work all day and half the night, sometimes, on a diet of bread and water. So last night he fainted on his trip and fell off his wheel in the middle of the road. Then I came speeding along toward home and smashed them both up. But it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good and the lad’s accident may turn out his blessing. Dorothy and I and the Dame have mended a collar bone and a couple of ribs and my ambitious young ‘Mercury’ is laid up for repairs. John ‘step-and-fetched’ the mother, Mrs. Locke, and she, too, will get some rest and nourishment. She’s worrying a good deal, but has no need. Plucky little Robin will soon be chirping again, ‘fine as silk.’ Maybe, after school hours, Miss Tross-Kingdon will permit me to take Dorothy with me in the car to visit her patient. May I, Madam?”

The Lady Principal did not look pleased. The Bishop’s and the doctor’s treatment of the new pupil had really softened her heart toward the girl, but she was a stickler for “rules” and “discipline,” and remembered that this was not the day on which her “young ladies” were allowed to pay visits.

“Thank you, Doctor Winston, but I am obliged to decline the invitation for to-day. She has entered Oak Knowe some time after the opening of term and must pass examination, that I may understand for which Form she is best fitted. Nor have I yet been advised of such houses as her guardians desire her to visit. Commonly, the young ladies of Oak Knowe do not consort with laborers and messenger boys. But I thank you for your courtesy toward her; and, as that is the bell for my class in Greek, I must beg you to excuse me and I wish you good morning, Dr. Winston. Come, Miss Calvert, I will have your examination begin at once. Make your obeisance to the doctor.”

Dolly’s heart sank. Why should she be made to feel so guilty and insignificant? Still, as she turned to follow the teacher, she obediently saluted the physician and, glancing up into his face, saw – was it possible that he winked?

Though she felt as she were going to be tried for her life, this sight so surprised her, that she giggled hysterically and thus irreverently followed the haughty instructress out of the room. So doing, she added one more to the list of misdemeanors that lady had already placed against her account.

CHAPTER III

PEERS AND COMMONS

Along the hall down which Dorothy followed the Lady Principal were many doors opening into small class rooms. Each class was under its especial teacher, its number being limited to ten students. It was the policy of the school that by this division better instruction could be given each pupil, and Dorothy wondered to which of these groups – if any – she would be assigned. Another hall and other class rooms joined the first and longer one, at a right angle, and here Miss Muriel paused, directing:

“Proceed down this corridor till you reach the parlor at its end. There you will find Miss Hexam awaiting you. She will test your scholarship and report to me. Do not fail to answer her questions promptly and distinctly. I observe that you do not enunciate well. You slur some of your words and clip the endings from your participles. To say ‘hopin’ or ‘runnin’ is execrable. Also, there is no such word as ‘daown’ or ‘araoun’.”

Dorothy’s temper rose. She had done nothing right, it seemed, since she had arrived at this “school for criticism,” as she termed it, and now said pertly:

“I reckon that’s the Southern way of talking. I noticed that the Bishop didn’t bother about his ‘gs’ and he had the same twang that all do down home. He must have lived there a right smart time when he was little.”

“Many things are permissible in a cultured old gentleman which are not in an ignorant and forward girl. You came here for your own improvement. I shall see that you attain it; or, if you fail in this after a reasonable trial, you cannot be retained. That rule is plainly stated in our circular. I will bid you good morning until I send for you.”

Poor Dorothy fairly withered under this sternness that she felt was unjust, but she felt, also, that she had been impertinent, and running after Miss Muriel, as she moved away, she caught the lady’s sleeve, imploring:

“Please don’t think I’m all bad, Miss Tross-Kingdon! I’ve been heedless and saucy, but I didn’t mean it – not for badness. Please wait and try me and I *will* ‘improve,’ as you said. Please, please! It would break Aunt Betty’s heart if she thought I wasn’t good and – and I’m so unhappy! Please forgive me.”

The dark eyes, lifted so appealingly, filled with tears which their owner bravely restrained, and the Lady Principal was touched by this self-control. Also, under all her sternness, she was just.

“Certainly, Dorothy, your apology is sufficient. Now go at once to Miss Hexam and do yourself credit. If you have studied music, another person will examine you in that.”

Impulsively Dorothy caught the lady’s hand and kissed it; and, fortunately, did not observe that dainty person wipe off the caress with her handkerchief.

Then summoning her courage, the new pupil hurried to the end parlor and entered it as she had been taught. But the “den of inquisition,” as some of the girls had named it, proved anything but that to Dorothy.

“The Inquisitor” was a lovely, white-haired woman, clothed in soft white wool, and smiling so gently toward the trembling girl that all fear instantly left her.

“So this is Dorothy Calvert, our little maid from Dixie. You’ll find a wide difference between your Southland and our Province, but I hope you’ll find the change a pleasant one. Take this chair before the fire. You’ll find it comfortable. I love these autumn days, when a blazing log can keep us warm. It’s so fragrant and cheerful and far more romantic than a coil of steam pipe. Have a biscuit, dear?”

Miss Hexam motioned to a low wicker chair, which some girls had declared a “chair of torture,” but which suited Dorothy exactly, for it was own mate to her own little reading chair “at home.”

Almost she could have kissed it for its likeness, but was allowed no time for foolishness. The homely little treat of the simple crackers banished all shyness and the dreaded “exam” proved really but a social visit, the girl not dreaming that under this friendly talk was a careful probing of her own character and attainments. Nor did she understand just then how greatly her answers pleased the gentle “Inquisitor.”

“You want me to ‘begin at the beginning’? Why, that’s a long way back, when I was a mere midget. A baby only a year and a half old. Papa and mamma died away out west, but, of course, I didn’t know that then. I didn’t know anything, I reckon, except how to make Mother Martha trouble. My father was Aunt Betty’s nephew and she didn’t like his marrying mamma. I don’t know why; only Ephraim says ‘Miss Betty was allays full o’ notions same’s a aig’s full o’ meat.’ Ephy’s Aunt Betty’s ‘boy,’ about as old as she is – something over eighty. Nobody knows just auntie’s real age, except Ephraim and Dinah. They’ve lived with her always and treat her now just as if she were a child. It’s too funny for words, sometimes, to hear the three of them argue over some thing or trifle. She’ll let them go a certain length; then all at once she’ll put on her dignity and they fairly begin to tremble. She’s mistress then and they’re her servants, but I do believe either one would die to prolong her life. Dinah says: ‘Pears lak death an’ dyin’ nebah gwine come nigh my Miss Betty Calvert.’ And she’s just right. Everybody thinks my darling aunt is the sweetest, most wonderful woman in the world. But I beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to talk so much and hinder your examination.”

“Oh! that is all right. I love to hear your story that you’ve left off at its beginning. You’re only a ‘baby’ so far, you know.”

“Well, if you like. When my father died, my mother felt that she would die, too, and she couldn’t bear to leave me alone. So she just sent me to Aunt Betty. But she felt, auntie did, that she couldn’t be bothered with a ‘squalling baby,’ nor could she cast me off, really. ‘Cause she was my real great-aunt and my nearest relation and was rich enough to do what she liked in a money way. Besides, she wanted me to be raised real sensible. So she picked out a splendid couple she knew and had me left on their doorstep. She had pinned to my clothes that my name was ‘Dorothy C.’ Their name began with ‘C,’ too, so they guessed I was meant for them to keep, because they hadn’t any other child. What a lot I’m talking! Do you want to hear any more? Won’t the Lady Principal be angry if I don’t get examined?”

“I will make that all right, Dorothy, and I am greatly interested. It’s ‘like a story out of a book,’ as the Minims say. Go on, please.”

“Well, these dear people took care of me till I was a real big girl. I love them dearly. He was a postman and he walked too much. So he had to lose his position with lameness and he’s never gotten over it, though he’s better now. He has a position in a sanitarium for other lame folks and Mother Martha is the housekeeper, or matron, there. Uncle Seth Winters, who knows so much that he is called the ‘Learned Blacksmith,’ is my guardian. He and Aunt Betty have been dearest friends ever since they were little. They call each other cousin, though they’re no kin at all, any more than he’s my uncle. He was my first teacher at his ‘school in the woods,’ but felt I ought to go to a school for girls. So I went to the Rhineland Academy and he stayed at his smithy on the mountain, near Mother Martha’s little farm and Aunt Betty’s big one, and one vacation auntie told me who I was and took me home to live with her; and she liked Oak Knowe because the Bishop is her lifelong friend. She has had my name on the list waiting for a vacancy for a long, long time; so it’s a terrible pity I should have been horrid, and offended the Lady Principal.”

“Let us hope she is not seriously offended, dear, nor have you told me what the offense is. But bear in mind, Dorothy, that she is at the head of a great and famous institution and must strictly live up to its standards and keep her pupils to their duty. But she is absolutely just, as you will learn in time.

“I feel like hearing music, to-day, but get very little. All our practice rooms are sound-deadened. Do you play at all, on any instrument, or sing?”

“A little of both, when I’m at home. Not well in either, though Aunt Betty loves my violin and my little songs. If I had it here, I would try for you, if you’d like. But it’s in my trunk, my ‘box,’ Mr. Gilpin called it.”

Miss Hexam smiled and, opening a little secretary, took out an old Cremona, explaining:

“This was my brother’s, who died when I was young. He was a master of it, had many pupils. I allow few to touch it, but I’d be pleased to have you, if you would like.”

“Would you? May I?” asked Dorothy, handling it reverently for its sacredness to this loving old sister. And, after she had tuned it, as reverently for its own sake. It was a rare old instrument of sweetest tone and almost unconsciously Dorothy tried one theme after another upon it while Miss Hexam leaned back in her chair listening and motionless.

Into that playing the young musician put all the love and homesickness of her own heart. It seemed as if she were back at Deerhurst, with the Great Danes lying on the rug at her feet and dear Aunt Betty resting before the fire. Then, when memory threatened to bring the tears she was determined should not fall, she stopped, laid the violin silently upon the table and slipped out of the room, leaving Miss Hexam still motionless in her chair.

But she would have been surprised had she looked back into the “inquisition chamber” a few moments later to see the “inquisitor” arouse, seize a sheet of paper and rapidly write a few lines upon it. But the few lines were important. They gave a synopsis of Dorothy’s scholarship and accomplishments, and unerringly assigned her to “Form IVb, class of Miss Aldrich.”

The “terrible exam” was over and Dorothy hadn’t known a thing about it!

Outside that little parlor another surprise awaited her. A crowd of girls was racing madly down the hall, the foremost looking backward as she ran and roughly colliding with Dorothy; with the result that both fell; while the others, following in such speed, were unable to check in time to prevent their tumbling over the first pair. Then such shrieks of laughter rang out that the teachers in the nearby classrooms came to their doors in haste.

Even they were obliged to smile over the heap of girls and the tangle of legs and arms as the fallen ones strove to extricate themselves. They were all in gymnasium-costume and were bound for a side door of the building which led by a short cut to the gymnasium in the Annex.

This was Dorothy’s introduction to the “Commons,” the largest and wildest “set” in the great school. They were all daughters of good families but of no “rank” or titles; and there was an abiding opposition among them to the “Peers,” the smaller “set” of aristocrats to which the Honorable Gwendolyn Borst-Kennard and Lady Marjorie Lancaster belonged. Mostly the “Commons” were a rollicking company, going to the extreme limits of behavior where any fun promised to follow, yet mostly keeping just safely within rules. Their escapades kept the faculty in considerable anxiety as to what they would do next, yet their very gayety was the life of Oak Knowe and even the Lady Principal was secretly fonder of them than of the more dignified “Peers.”

As they now scrambled to their feet, she who had run against Dorothy heartily apologized, yet paused half-way in that apology to stare and remark:

“Why, heigho, there! I thought you were a Minim, you’re so little. But I fancy you’re a newcomer whom I don’t know. Please explain; are you ‘Peer’ or ‘Lower House’?”

Dorothy laughed:

“‘Lower House,’ I thought when you knocked me down, whatever that may be.”

“It means – is your father an Earl? or your mother a Duchess? Have you an Honorable amongst you? You hold your curly head as if you might have all three!”

All the girls had now gathered about the stranger whom their leader was so unceremoniously quizzing and were eagerly inspecting her, but somehow Dorothy did not resent the scrutiny. There were big girls and little ones, fat girls and thin ones, plain and pretty, but each so good-natured looking and so friendly in her curiosity that Dolly’s own spirits rose in response to their liveliness.

“No, indeed! I’m just a plain American girl and prouder of that than of any title in the world. You see, all of *us* are queens in our own right!” answered the newcomer, promptly.

“Well, come on then; you belong to us and we all belong to the queen. Queen, what shall we call you? Where do you hail from?”

“My home is in Baltimore, and my name is Dorothy Calvert.”

“Then you must be a sort of ‘Peer’ after all. I hate history, but I remember about that, for Lord Baltimore and Calvert are the same thing, I fancy. I’m sorry. I hoped you belonged to our ‘set’ and weren’t an aristocrat.”

“But I’m not, I’m not!” protested Dorothy. “I do belong to you, I want to because you look so friendly and I need friends dreadfully. I’m so lonely, or I was. I’ve just come, you know.”

“Have you been ‘inquisitioned’ yet?”

“I don’t understand.”

The questioner explained, and Dorothy exclaimed:

“Oh! I think that’s cruel! Miss Hexam is perfectly lovely!”

“So do we think, course, and she doesn’t mind the nickname. It was first given her by a silly Seventh Form girl who thought she was all ready for the University yet failed to pass even a Fifth Form exam. I guess you’ll not be put to study to-day, so best come over to the gym with us. What stunts can you do?”

“None. But I’ve told you my name and you haven’t told yours. Thank you, though, for asking me. I’m so glad to go.”

“Oh! you poor little lonesome Queen Baltimore! I’m Winifred Christie; this freckle face is Fannie Dimock; Annie Dow wears that blue bow in her hair; Florita Sheraton is the fat one; Ernesta Smith the thin; Bessie Walters – well, no need to point out Bessie. She’s the nimblest girl in the gym. We here extend the freedom of the Lower House; and all in favor of grabbing this Yankee into our set before the other set catches her, say – Aye!”

“Aye – aye – aye!” endorsed the motion and Dorothy clapped her hands over her ears, to keep out the ear-splitting shouts. How these girls dared make such an uproar amazed her; but she did not yet know that in the “long recess,” now passing, much liberty was permitted and that a noise which did not interfere with study hours was not reprimanded.

“It’s the overflow of natural spirits and inevitable in the young,” was one of the Bishop’s beliefs, and not even the Lady Principal disputed his authority.

“Come on, Queenie, and be put through your paces!” cried Winifred, throwing her arm around Dorothy’s shoulders and forcibly racing her out of doors and across the lawn toward the gymnasium.

But arrived there only one or two of the group attempted any exercise. The rest settled around Dorothy, whom the athletic Winifred had tossed upward upon the back of the wooden horse, and, with her arms folded upon the newcomer’s knees, this leader of the “Commons” proceeded to cross-question her victim.

“It’s the cast-iron rule of our set to find out everything about anybody we receive into it. Begin at the date of your birth and proceed in a seemly manner until you come up to date. Where were you born? What sort of baby were you – good, bad, or indifferent? Begin!”

Entering into the spirit of the thing Dorothy gave her simple life history in a few sentences. But when the questions came as to the events of the last few days her face grew serious and her voice faltered.

“Why did I come to Oak Knowe alone? Because there was nobody to come with me. That is, Dinah or Ephraim, who might have come, couldn’t be trusted to go back alone. My dearest girl friend, Molly Breckenridge, had been enrolled here and we expected to come together, but the Judge’s health suddenly broke down and he was ordered to California and couldn’t part with her. Uncle Seth wasn’t well. He’s my guardian and Aunt Betty’s friend. She’s my great aunt who takes care of me but she wouldn’t leave Uncle Seth, even if he’s not our kin at all, though we call him so. Jim Barlow is tutoring

in a boys' school and; well, Aunt Betty said I could perfectly well and safely travel alone. I was put into the conductor's care when I started from Baltimore and he passed me along to the next one, and they've all been splendid to me. There'd have been no mistakes if I hadn't been careless myself. But I was. I missed a train I should have taken and didn't send the telegram I ought at the right time and there was nobody at the station to meet me and – and – ”

“The idea! A girl like you, traveling all the way from Baltimore to Toronto without a maid or any grown-up to take care of her! That's the strangest thing I ever heard. Weren't you just awfully scared all the time?” asked Florita Sheraton, amazed. “An English girl would have been in a blue funk every minute of the time.”

“I don't know anything about a blue or other colored funk, but every well-bred American girl can take care of herself if she chooses. If she 'loses her head' she gets into trouble right away. I lost mine last night and went riding off at dark with a strange old man, who said he'd bring me here, instead of stepping into the telegraph office and wiring the Lady Principal. Then all I'd have had to do would be to wait for her to send for me, and after all it wasn't the old man who brought me, it was Dr. Winston in his motor. He called here this morning and asked me to ride back with him and see Robin, but Miss Tross-Kingdon wouldn't let me.”

“Course she wouldn't. She never lets anybody do anything she wants to, if she can help it. Hateful old thing!” remarked Bessie Walters; at which the others laughed and Annie Dow inquired, “Who is Robin?”

Dorothy told the story of last night, her new acquaintances listening intently, and Winifred commenting:

“If you aren't the very luckiest girl in the world! Why I never had an adventure in my life, yet I'm ages older than you.”

At this a shout of derision rose, and Fannie Dimock exclaimed:

“Don't believe that, Queen Baltimore. There's scarcely a day passes that she isn't in some scrape or other. Why, last term, she was in disgrace so often I really believed she wouldn't be allowed to come back.”

“Oh! little things like that don't count. But – ” she stopped speaking so abruptly and such an earnest expression settled on her face that a mate remarked:

“Look! There's something brewing this minute! Look out, Win, what you do! Don't mix any of us up in your schemes. I don't want any more extras so soon again;” then explained to Dorothy that “extras” were some difficult lessons any culprit was obliged to learn.

Just then came the bell for mid-day luncheon, and all the Commons except Winifred answered the summons promptly. But she lingered behind, detaining Dorothy till the others were out of hearing, and then suggested something to her which made her clap her hands in delight. For the secret thus imparted seemed the simplest thing possible and one in which, to Dolly's ignorance of Oak Knowe rules, was entirely right.

Arm in arm, the new friends entered the dining-room and Winifred marched Dorothy steadily forward to a seat at her own table, just opposite that occupied by some of the other “set,” with the Honorable Gwendolyn among them. Dolly glanced across and nodded, but that titled young person returned the nod with a stare so intent and contemptuous that the color flashed to the stranger's face and her eyes fell as if she were in guilt. Yet she couldn't guess why, nor why she should be relieved when there arose a sudden diversion outside the doorway toward which everybody turned their eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE GILPINS HAVE A PARTY

The young ladies of Oak Knowe went out for their afternoon exercise for the half hour before supper. Those who had been long at the school were allowed to roam about the spacious grounds without a teacher, but newcomers, or those who wished to go further afield, were always attended by one.

Most of Winifred's motherless life had been passed at Oak Knowe, even few of her vacations elsewhere. Her father was a very wealthy man, of large affairs which carried him often from the Province, to England or countries further away, so that his home was seldom opened. But to compensate his daughter for this state of things he had arranged with the authorities that her school life should be made as homelike as possible. She had her own private room with a tiny parlor and private bath adjoining. She was allowed to entertain her schoolmates there as she would have done in her father's house; always, of course, within the limits set by the faculty.

But Winifred cared little for all this unusual luxury. She rarely asked for any money "banked" with the Lady Principal beyond the twenty-five cents a week which any pupil might spend; and she liked the common parlor far better than her own richly furnished one. Nothing hurt her feelings more than to have her mates refer to her wealth or to treat her differently from the poorest pupil.

But there were times when she enjoyed her privileges to the utmost, and that first day of Dorothy's life at Oak Knowe was one such. Not having been "in disgrace" for a week at least she confidently asked permission to entertain the newcomer in her rooms, "Just we two by ourselves. She's lonely and I like her. Please, Miss Tross-Kingdon."

"You'll be quiet, Winifred, and keep out of mischief?" asked the Lady Principal, with more gentleness than ordinary. It was natural that she should feel great interest in the girl she had almost reared and whose own power for good or ill Winifred herself could not yet comprehend.

"Ah, now, Miss Muriel, you know I will! Why, surely, I've been as good for a whole week as if I were a kindergarten Minim. You should trust me more. I read the other day that people are just what you think they are. So, whatever you want me to be, please just think I *am* and I'll be it!" and the audacious creature actually dabbed a kiss on the Lady Principal's own cheek.

"Wheedler! Well, I'll try to fancy you're a saint, but I'm not so fanciful about this Dorothy Calvert. She's a pretty little thing and my Grace made friends with her at once and the Bishop says she is of good blood. That counts, of course, but she seems to me a little headstrong and very stupid. I don't yet understand how Miss Hexam came to put her into so high a Form. However, I know that she is very homesick, as all new pupils are, so you may entertain her if you wish. A maid shall send you in a tray and you are excused from school supper; but see to it, Winifred, that you use your influence aright. The more favored a person is in this world the more that individual should watch her own actions."

Winifred thanked the teacher and backed out of the room as if in the presence of royalty itself. This action in itself was offensive to the teacher but was one she could hardly criticise; nor did she guess that, once out of sight, the "wheedler" should first stamp her foot and exclaim:

"I'm sick to death of hearing about my 'influence' and being an 'individual.' Makes me feel like a spider, that time the German count came to visit Father and called his attention to 'that individual crawling down the wall.' He meant 'one, a solitary thing.' But I'm no 'solitary' just because Father has a little money. I often wish he hadn't a pound, especially when some of the 'Peers' try to make me believe he is at least a 'Sir'."

Then hurrying to Dorothy she danced about in delight at her success.

“Yes, she says you may come, and she’s sure to send us in a fine supper. Miss Muriel Tross-Kingdon never does a thing by halves, not even a lecture on ‘individual influence.’ Queen Baltimore, aren’t you glad you’re poor?”

“Neither glad nor sorry, Winifred, because I’m neither rich nor poor. Anyway neither of us can help being just as we are, I reckon.”

“Come on, though, and hurry up. ‘If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly,’” quoted Winifred, whose class reading just then was “Macbeth”; and seizing the smaller girl whirled merrily down the hall.

Five minutes later, with hats and jackets on, they joined the other pupils out of doors. To Dorothy it seemed the beautiful grounds were alive with all sorts and conditions of girls, pacing rapidly up and down, “sprinting” to warm themselves against the chill of the coming evening, playing tennis for the brief half-hour, or racing one another from point to point. There were girls so many and so various, from Seventh Form young ladies to the wee little Minims, that Dolly wondered if she would ever know them all or feel herself a member of the great company.

But Winifred gave her little time to gaze about her.

“Oh! don’t bother with them now. Our way is that lower gate, and it’s a good bit of a distance, I hope you’re a good walker.”

“Pretty good, I reckon,” answered Dolly falling into step with the taller girl and hurrying forward at even a swifter pace.

“But, begging your pardon, that’s no way. We Canadians learn pedestrianism – whew! what a long word! – just as we learn our letters. Begin very slowly at first. Then when your muscles are limbered, walk faster – and faster – and faster! Till it seems as if your legs swing up and down of their own accord, just like machines. It’s wonderful then how little you tire and how far you can go. Slack up a bit and I’ll show you.”

Absorbed in this new lesson Dorothy scarcely noticed when they left Oak Knowe limits and struck out along a country lane, with hedgerows at either side; nor when having climbed a stile they set out across a plowed field, till her feet grew heavy with the soil they gathered.

“Oh! dear! What mud! Why do you walk in it, Winifred?”

“It’s the shortest road. Here’s a stone. Stop a bit and scrape it off – as I do. See?” answered the other, calmly illustrating her advice.

“But I don’t like it. My shoes will be ruined!” wailed Dolly who was always finical about “dirt.”

“Humph! Haven’t you another pair? But they ought to be – such flimsy-wimpy affairs! Look at mine. A bit of mud more or less can’t hurt them and it’s the boot-boy’s business to clean them.”

The English girl held forth a good sized foot clad in a still larger shoe of calfskin, which though soiled with the clay had not absorbed much of its moisture: while the finer affairs of Dorothy’s were already wet through, making her uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t walk in such heavy boots. And it’s raining again. It rained last night. Does it rain every day in Canada? We ought to go back. Do let’s, and try this some other time. I reckon this will finish my new suit, entirely.”

Winifred put her arms akimbo and stared at her new friend. Then burst into a hearty laugh over Dorothy’s disgusted face.

“Ha, ha, ha! And ‘I reckon,’ little southerner, that you’ll be a more sensible girl after you’ve lived up here a while. The idea of turning back because it rains! absurd! Why, it’s fine, just fine! The Lady Principal will overhaul your fair-weather-clothes and see that you get some fit to stand anything. This homespun suit of mine couldn’t get wet through if it tried! But I shan’t stand here, in the middle of a plowed field, and let it try. Come on. Its the States against the Province! Who’ll win?”

“I will! For old Maryland and the President!” cried Dorothy, and valiantly strode forward again.

“For our Province and the King!” shouted the Canadian; and after that neither spoke, till the long walk ended before the cottage door of old John Gilpin and his dame. There Winifred gave a smart tap to the panel and holding her hand toward Dorothy, cried:

“Quits, Queen Baltimore! We’ll call it even and I’ll never doubt your pluck again. But you certainly must get some decent clothes – if I have to buy them myself!”

Then the door opened and there stood old John, peering from the lamp-lighted room into the twilight without. After a second he recognized Dorothy and drew her in, exclaiming joyfully:

“Why, Dame, ’tis our little lass herself! Her of the night last spent and the helping hand! Step ben, step ben, and t’other miss with ye. You’re surely welcome as the flowers in spring.”

Mrs. Gilpin came ponderously forward, a smile on her big but comely face, and silently greeted both visitors, while her more nimble husband promptly “step-an’-fetched” the best chairs in the room and placed them before the fire.

“Dry yourselves, lassies, whilst I tell the Robin you’ve come to see him. He’ll be that proud, poor laddie, to have Oak Knowe young ladies pay him that honor! and he’s mending fine, mending fine, doctor says. The mother – ”

He disappeared within that inner chamber still talking and as happy now as he had seemed sorrowful when Dorothy parted from him on the night before. Then he had anticipated nothing less than death for the boy he loved, despite the doctor’s assurance to the contrary. He came back leading a woman by the hand, as protectingly as if she had been a child, and introduced her as:

“The bit mother hersel’! Look at her well. Isn’t she the very sight and image of Robin, the lad? And mind how she’s pickin’ up already. Just one day of good victuals and Dame’s cossetting and the pink’s streamin’ back to her cheeks. Please the good Lord they’ll never get that thin again whilst I have my ox-team to haul with and the Dame’s good land to till. I’ll just step-an’-fetch the rocker out – ”

At that point in his remarks the Dame laid a hand on his shoulder, saying:

“That’ll do, John Gilpin. Just brew a cup of tea. I’ll tell the lad.”

Winifred was amused at this wifely reprimand, but no offense seemed meant nor taken. The farmer stopped talking and deftly made the tea from the boiling kettle, added a couple of plates to the waiting supper table, and drew from the oven a mighty dish of baked beans that might have been cooked in Yankee-land, and flanked this by a Yorkshire pudding.

“Oh! how nice that smells!” cried Dorothy, springing up to add the knives and forks from the dresser; while Winifred clapped her hands in a pretended ecstasy and sniffed the savory odors, admitting: “I’m as hungry as hungry! And this beats any supper I asked for at Oak Knowe. I hope they’ll want us to stay!”

Her frankness made timid little Mrs. Locke smile as she had not been able to do since she had known of Robin’s accident, and smiling was good for her. Indeed, the whole atmosphere of this simple, comfortable home was good for her, and the high spirits of these three young people delightful to her care-burdened heart.

For, presently, it was the three – not least of these her idol, her Robin! Dorothy had followed the Dame into the boy’s room and Winifred had promptly followed her; and because he was the sunny-hearted lad which the farmer had claimed him to be, he put all thought of his own pain or trouble out of mind, and laughed with the two girls at their awkward attempts at feeding him from the tray on the stand beside the bed. Having to lie flat upon his back he could still use one arm and could have fed himself fairly well. But this his visitors would not allow; and he was obliged to submit when Winifred, playfully struggling with Dolly for “My time now!” thrust a spoon into his ear instead of his mouth.

The truth was that under the girl’s assumed indifference to the fact that she was breaking rules by “visiting without permission” lay a feeling of guilt. “Double guilt” she knew, because she had imposed upon Dorothy’s ignorance by stating that during “exercise hour” any long resident pupil was free to go where she chose. This was true, but only in a measure. What was not true was that so distant a point as John Gilpin’s cottage should be chosen, much less entered without permission.

But curiosity had been too strong for her and she had resented, on Dorothy's account, the refusal of Dr. Winston's invitation in the morning. Besides, she argued with her own conscience:

"We're excused from school supper and free to entertain each other in my room till chapel. What difference does it make, and who will know? To-morrow, I'll go and 'fess to Miss Muriel and if she is displeased I'll take my punishment, whatever it is, without a word. Anyhow, Dolly can't be punished for what she doesn't know is wrong."

So, feeling that she "was in for it, anyway" Winifred's mood grew reckless and she "let herself go" to a positive hilarity.

Dorothy watched and listened in surprise but soon caught her schoolmate's spirit, and jested and laughed as merrily as she. Even Robin tried to match their funny remarks with odd stories of his own and after a little time, when he had eaten as much as they could make him, began to sing a long rigmarole, of innumerable verses, that began with the same words and ended midway each verse, only to resume. It was all something about the king and the queen and the "hull r'yal famblely" which Dorothy promptly capped with an improved version of Yankee Doodle.

Whereupon, the absurd jumble and discord of the two contrasting tunes proved too much for old John's gravity. Springing up from his chair in the outer room he seized his fiddle from its shelf and scraped away on a tune of his own. For his fiddle was his great delight and his one resort at times when his wife silenced his voluble tongue.

The old fiddle was sadly out of tune and Dorothy couldn't endure that. Running to him she begged him:

"Oh! do stop that, please, please! Here, let me take and get it into shape. You make me cringe, you squawk so!"

"You fix it? you, lassie! Well, if that don't beat the Dutch! What else do they l'arn children over in the States? Leave 'em to go sky-larkin' round the country in railway carriages all by themself's, and how to help doctors set broken bones, and how to fiddle a tune – Stars an' Garters! What next? Here, child, take her and make her hum!"

Presently, the preliminary squeaks and discords, incident to "tuning up," were over and Dorothy began a simple melody that made all her hearers quietly listen. One after another the familiar things which Aunt Betty and her guardian loved best came into her mind; and remembering the beloved scenes where she had last played them, her feeling of homesickness and longing made her render them so movingly that soon the little widow was crying and Robin's sensitive face showed signs of his own tears following hers.

The tempting supper had remained untouched thus far. But now the sight of his guests' emotion, and a warning huskiness in his own throat, brought John Gilpin to his feet.

"This isn't no mournin' party, little miss, and you quit, you quit that right square off. Understand? Something lively's more to this occasion than all that solemcholy 'Old Lang Synin',' or 'Wearin' Awa" business. Touch us off a 'Highland Fling,' and if that t'other girl, was gigglin' so a few minutes gone, 'll do me the honor" – here the old fellow bowed low to Winifred – "I'll show you how the figger should be danced. I can cut a pigeon-wing yet, with the supplest."

Away rolled the table into the further corner of the room: even the Dame merely moving her own chair aside. For she had watched the widow's face and grieved to see it growing sad again, where a little while before it had been cheerful.

Dorothy understood, and swiftly changed from the "Land O' the Leal" to the gay dance melody demanded. Then laughter came back, for it was so funny to see the farmer's exaggerated flourish as he bowed again to Winifred and gallantly led her to the middle of the kitchen floor, now cleared for action.

Then followed the merriest jig that ever was danced in that old cottage, or many another. The cuts and the capers, the flings and pigeon-wings that bald-headed John Gilpin displayed were little short of marvelous. Forgotten was the dragging foot that now soared as high as the other,

while perspiration streamed from his wrinkled face, flushed to an apoplectic crimson by this violent exercise.

Winifred was no whit behind. Away flung her jacket and then her hat. Off flew the farmer's smock, always worn for a coat and to protect the homespun suit beneath. The pace grew mad and madder, following the movement of the old fiddle which Dorothy played to its swiftest. Robin's blue eyes grew big with wonder and he whistled his liveliest, to keep up with the wild antics he could see in the outer room.

Nobody heard a knock upon the door, repeated until patience ceased, and then it softly opened. A full moment the visitor waited there, gazing upon this orgy of motion; then with an ultra flourish of her skirts Winifred faced about and beheld – the Lady Principal!

CHAPTER V

THE FRIGHT OF MILLIKINS-PILLIKINS

For another moment there was utter silence in the cottage. Even the Dame's calmness forsook her, the absurd performance of her bald-headed husband making her ashamed of him. She had seen the Lady Principal passing along the road beyond the lane but had never met her so closely, and she felt that the mistress of Oak Knowe was high above common mortals.

However, as the flush died out of Miss Tross-Kingdon's face Mrs. Gilpin's ordinary manner returned and she advanced in welcome.

“You do us proud, madam, by this call. Pray come in and be seated.”

“Yes, yes, do!” cried John, interrupting. “I'll just step-an'-fetch the arm-chair out o' Robin's room. 'Twas carried there for his mother to rest in. She –”

The mortified old fellow was vainly trying to put back the smock he had so recklessly discarded and without which he never felt fully dressed. He hated a coat and wore one only on Sundays, at church. But his frantic efforts to don this garment but added to his own discomfiture, for he slipped it on backwards, the buttons behind, grimacing fiercely at his failure to fasten them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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