

Johnston Annie Fellows

The Little Colonel at Boarding-School



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Johnston Annie F. Annie Fellows The Little Colonel at Boarding-School

CHAPTER I OFF TO BOARDING-SCHOOL

Something unusual was happening at Locust. Although it was early in September, and the heat and dust of a Kentucky summer still lingered in every corner of Lloydsboro Valley, the great house with its vine-covered pillars was being hastily put in order for winter closing.

Rob Moore, swinging his tennis racket as he sauntered down the avenue under the arching locust-trees, stopped short with a whistle of surprise. The tennis net was down. He had come at the Little Colonel's invitation for a farewell game, as they were both to start to school on the morrow, she in the Valley, and he in town. He could not understand the sudden removal of the net.

Then he noticed that every hammock and garden-chair had disappeared from the lawn. Not even the usual trail of magazines and palm-leaf fans was left on the grass, to show that somebody

had been spending a comfortable hour in the shade. Usually at this time in the afternoon there was a flutter of ribbons and white dresses somewhere back among the trees; but the place was deserted now. The wicker tea-table was gone from its corner on the piazza. The rugs and cushions which had filled the cosy corners behind the vines were packed away. The lace curtains were down in the long drawing-room, and, peering through the windows which opened to the floor, he saw a coloured man, busily shrouding the handsome old furniture in linen covers.

"What's the matter, Alec?" asked Rob. "What has become of everybody?"

"Done had bad news from Ole Colonel las' night," answered the man. "Walkah telegraphed from Hot Springs that ole Marse's rheumatiz is wuss, and Mis' Sherman she's gwine down to stay with him awhile, an' the young ladies is gwine to bo'din'-school. We all's fixin' to shet up the place till Chris'mus."

Rob gave another long whistle, shrill and loud. "Boarding-school!" he exclaimed. "Well, this is the biggest surprise out!"

His whistle was answered from the upper hall by a clear high trill, which had been the Little Colonel's signal for him since the first summer they had played together. Giving the answering call he stepped inside the hall, and standing at the foot of the stairs peered up anxiously at the laughing face leaning over the banister-rail above him.

"Come down, Lloyd, and tell me all about it," he demanded.

"I can't now," she replied, in an important tone, smiling

tantalizingly at the tall, broad-shouldered boy who shook his racket at her with a threatening gesture. "Mothah has gone to town, and Mom Beck is packing my trunk. I have to show her what things to put into it. Betty is down there somewhere. She'll take the edge off yoah curiosity. Betty," she called, catching sight of a pink dress whisking through the lower hall, "don't tell Rob what school we are going to. Make him guess."

"All right," answered Betty, with a mischievous light in her brown eyes, as she tossed back her curls and led the way out to the stone steps. "We'll have to sit out here. All the hammocks and porch-chairs are packed away in the attic," she explained, as she spread out the pink skirt and leaned comfortably back against one of the white pillars.

"Seems to me you've been in a howling hurry with your planning and your packing," said Rob, in an aggrieved tone. "I didn't hear a whisper of all this when I was here yesterday evening."

"The telegram didn't come until after you had gone," answered Betty. "But I think godmother must have been expecting it, for in half an hour her plans were all made, and the packing began early this morning. As Papa Jack's business will keep him away nearly all fall, there was nothing to do but close the house and send Lloyd and me to boarding-school. You can't imagine how busy we've been. We are to leave to-morrow morning."

"So are we," answered Rob. "Oaklea looks nearly as deserted as Locust. I always hate this breaking-up time at the end of every

summer."

As he spoke, a delicious odour of hot gingerbread was wafted around the corner of the house from the distant kitchen, and he stopped to look at Betty and smile.

"What does that make you think of?" he asked.

"Of a lovely September afternoon just like this," answered Betty, dreamily, half-closing her eyes and drawing in the fragrance with a slow, deep breath. "Of long shadows on the lawn and the sunshine flickering down through the locust leaves like gold, just as it is doing now. Of Malcolm MacIntyre sitting over where you are, thrumming on his banjo, and of Keith and you and Lloyd and me all singing 'My Old Kentucky Home.' Is that what it makes you think of?"

"Yes, that and the chase we gave old Aunt Cindy. Wasn't she mad when I made off with that gingerbread! I can hear her old slipper soles yet, flopping down the path after me."

"How long ago that seems," mused Betty, "and yet it's only two years."

"It surely must be longer than that," exclaimed Rob.

"No, don't you remember, it was just after Lloyd's house party, when she was eleven and I was twelve. I went abroad that fall with Cousin Carl and Eugenia, and stayed with them a year. And I've only been living at Locust a year. Now I'm a little over fourteen and Lloyd's thirteen; so that just makes it."

"Thirteen yeahs and foah months exactly, if you're talking about me," said the Little Colonel, coming out on the porch

with a plate in her hands. "I smelled the gingahbread, so I told Mom Beck I'd have to stop for refreshments, and she could finish packing by herself. I've piled everything on the bed that I thought I could possibly need at bo'ding-school, and that's neahly everything I own. One needs so many things going off from home this way. Have some?"

She passed the plate to each one, and then, sitting down on the top step beside it, helped herself to a slice of the hot, spicy cake.

"Oh, Rob, we're going to have *such* larks!" she began. "I've always wanted to go away to school, and have midnight suppahs and do the things you read about in stories. I've heard mothah talk about the funny things that happened at the seminary when she was a girl, till I was simply wild to go there, too. And now it seems too good to be true, that we are really going, and are to have the very same room that she had one term when grandfathah was away from home, and she boahded there in little old Lloydsboro Seminary just as we are going to do. There!" she added, ruefully, clapping her hand over her mouth. "I've gone and told you, and I intended to keep you guessing for an hou'ah. I knew you'd nevah think that we were going to stay right here in the Valley."

"Of course not," answered Rob. "You've been a day pupil at that old seminary for the last five years, ever since you started to school. I'd naturally suppose that when you packed up all you owned and started off to school you'd at least go out of the sight of your own chimney smoke. I don't see where the fun is coming in. I can't think of anything more stupid. Instead of tearing

around the country on horseback after lessons, as you've always done, riding where you please, you'll have to take walks with a gang of other girls with a teacher at the head of the procession. It's great exercise, that, taking steps about an inch long and saying nothing but prunes and prisms."

"Don't you believe that's all!" cried Lloyd. "We'll have to take the walks, of co'se, but think of the time we'll have for basket-ball. We'll be able to play the Anchorage girls by Thanksgiving, and I couldn't have been on the team if I'd been only a day pupil."

"Of course we'll miss the ponies," Betty added. "Godmother tried to make some arrangement with President Wells to let us ride every day; but he said he couldn't make an exception in our case without being accused of partiality. If we came as regular pupils we must conform to the regular rules, and could not have even the liberties we always had as day pupils."

"Except in one thing," corrected Lloyd. "We can still go to the post-office for our mail, instead of having all our lettahs pass through the principal's hands. Mothah thought it wouldn't be worth while to change the address for just one term, especially as she wants me to forward the mail that comes to our box for Papa Jack. He changes his address so often on these business trips that he couldn't keep notifying the postmistress all the time, so I am to do it."

"Well, I pity *you*!" exclaimed Rob, teasingly, tapping his racket against the toes of his tennis shoes. "Boarding-schools are a bad lot, all that I've ever heard of. Scorched oatmeal and dried

apples, with old cats watching at every keyhole! Ugh!"

Both girls laughed at his scowl of disgust, and Betty hastened to say, "But we'll have Aunt Cindy to fall back on if the fare gets too bad. That's the beauty of staying so near home. Mom Beck is to come every Monday to get our clothes to launder, and every Saturday to bring them back and see that we are all right, and you know she'll not let us starve. And there aren't any old cats in this school, Rob. Miss Edith is a dear. The girls fairly love the ground she walks on, and I'm sure that nobody could be nicer and more motherly than Mrs. Gelling."

"How about Miss Bina McCannister?" asked Rob, with a wry face. "She is cross enough to stop a clock, sober and prim and crabbed, with eyes like a fish. I went up there one day with a note from grandfather to Professor Fowler, and she gave me such a stony glare because I happened to let a door bang, that I had cold shivers down my spine for a week."

"Oh, Rob," laughed Lloyd. "Aren't you ashamed to talk so? Anyhow, Miss McCannister will not bother us, because we are not in any of her classes."

"But she'll take her turn in trotting you out to walk, just the same. Then think what a glad procession that will be. You'll feel like prisoners in a chain-gang."

"Talk all you want to, if it amuses you any," said Lloyd, passing the gingerbread around once more. "It won't keep us from having a good time at bo'ding-school."

"Well, I'm coming out again at Thanksgiving. There's to be

a big family reunion at Oaklea this year, and if you've stood the storm and still think that boarding-school life is funny, I'll stand treat to a five-pound box of Huyler's best. You can let that thought buoy you up through all the hungry hours between that time and this."

"Mercy, Rob, don't throw cold water on all our bright hopes like that," cried Betty, springing up as she heard her name spoken in the hall. "Mom Beck wants me. She is ready to begin packing my trunk."

"I must go in a few minutes," said Rob, "so if you're disappearing now, I'll say good-bye till Thanksgiving."

Betty held out her warm little hand. "Good-bye. 'Be good, sweet child, and let who will be clever,'" she quoted, as Rob gave it an awkward shake.

"Practise what you preach, Grandma Betty," he said, in a severe tone, but his blue eyes were smiling into her brown ones with a softened light in them. She had been a merry little comrade in the summer just gone, and then there was something in the brown eyes that made everybody smile on Betty.

As she turned to go she saw that the last crumb of gingerbread had disappeared, and stooping, picked up the plate. She recognized it as her godmother's pet piece of Delft ware. "I'll take this in before anybody steps in it," she said.

"Thanks," said Lloyd, lazily, without looking around, but she turned to Rob as soon as they were alone. "Betty is always so thoughtful about such things. I wouldn't know how to get along

without her now, and to think, when she first came heah to live, I wasn't suah that I wanted her! I had nevah had to divide with anybody befoah, and I was afraid I should be jealous. But nobody could be jealous of Betty. She seems like a real suah enough sistah now, and bo'ding-school will be twice the fun because she can go with me."

"Betty's a brick," agreed Rob emphatically, "the nicest girl I know, except you, but I can't imagine her planning scrapes. She's too much afraid of hurting somebody's feelings for that."

"She's not planning scrapes. Neithah of us want to do anything really bad. We only want to stir the seminary up a bit, and make it lively. We're growing up so fast that if we don't have some fun soon, it will be too late. In only a few moah yeahs I'll be through school, and then I'll have to be a débutante and settle down to be propah and young ladified. Mom Beck always used to be telling me to 'sit still and be a little lady,' and if there's anything I despised it was that."

"How fast the shadows grow long these afternoons," said Rob, presently, looking at his watch. "It's nearly time for me to go. Come on down to the measuring-tree. We mustn't forget our good-bye ceremony."

Seven Septembers were marked on the tall locust that they called their measuring-tree. It towered above a rustic seat half-way down the avenue. Lloyd laid one finger on the lowest notch and another on the next mark a few inches above it.

"There wasn't neahly so much difference in our heights when

I was five and you six as there is now," she said, with a little sigh. "You're almost as tall as Papa Jack, and I'm only up to yoah shouldah. You're growing away from me so fast, Bobby."

Rob threw back his shoulders complacently. "Daddy says that is why I am so awkward; that my height is too much for a fourteen-year-old boy to manage gracefully. I'll soon be through growing at this rate. Maybe after a couple of years more I'll not have to change the mark on the tree."

"I should certainly hope so," cried Lloyd, "unless you want to be a giant in a side-show. Heah! Measuah me."

She stiffened herself against the trunk of the tree, standing as erect as possible, while he stuck the blade of his knife into the bark, so close to the top of her head that he almost pinned a lock of the light hair to the tree.

"You've grown a lot too, this last year, Lloyd," he said, looking down at her approvingly.

"Oh, Rob," she cried, with a quick, wistful look upward into his face. "I don't want to grow up. It would be so much nicah if we could stay children always."

"We have had a lot of fun under these old locusts, that's a fact," he admitted, as he began cutting the date opposite the measurements he had just taken. Then he became so absorbed in trying to make the figures neatly that he said nothing more until the task was done.

Lloyd, kneeling on the rustic bench to watch him, was silent also, and for a few minutes the only sound in all the late afternoon

sunshine was the soft rustling of the leaves overhead.

"If they could only stay children always!" the locusts were repeating one to another. "Children always! That is the happiest time!" Rob, intent on his carving, never noticed the stirring of the leaves, but the Little Colonel, who in a vague way always seemed to understand the whisperings of these old family sentinels, looked up and listened. As if she were one of them, she began recalling with them the scenes they had looked upon. How long ago seemed those summer days when she measured up only to the first notch. Mom Beck and Rob's faithful old nurse, Dinah, sat on the bench where she was now kneeling, and watched the two children that the locusts were whispering about, romping up and down the avenue. How well she remembered the little blue shoes she wore, and the jingling of the bells on the gay knitted bridle, as they played horse, with Fritz barking wildly at their heels.

The locusts had watched them in all the playtimes that lay between the first and last of those seven notches, eight it would be when Rob had finished; for it was in their friendly shade they had rolled their hoops and spun their tops and played at marbles and made their kites. Here, too, they had set their target when he taught her to shoot with his air rifle, and up and down in the winter holidays they had passed with their skates over their shoulders, with their sleds dragging after them, or their arms piled high with Christmas greens. Here they had tramped, shoulder to shoulder, whistling like two boys; here they had raced their ponies; here they had strolled and played and sung

together, the strong, deep friendship yearly growing stronger between them, as they yearly cut a higher notch in the bark of the old measuring-tree.

"If they could only stay children always!" whispered the locusts again, with something so like a sigh in the refrain, that Lloyd felt the tears spring to her eyes, she scarcely knew why.

"There," said Rob, closing his knife and slipping it into his pocket. "I must go now."

As usual, Lloyd walked down to the gate with him. He whistled as he went, a musical, rollicking negro chorus, and she joined in with an accompaniment of little trills and calls, in clever imitation of a mocking-bird. But just before they reached the gate her whistling stopped. Her quick eyes spied a four-leaved clover in the grass, and she sprang forward to get it.

"And heah's anothah!" she cried, triumphantly. "One for you too, Rob. That means good luck for both of us. Put it in yoah pocket."

Rob took the little charm she held out, with a skeptical smile, yet he had imbibed too great a belief in such omens from his old coloured nurse not to regard it with respect. "Thanks," he said, "I have a safer place than my pocket. I'll need all the luck this or anything else can bring me in my Latin this year, so I'll carry it to every recitation." Opening the back of his watch he carefully smoothed the green petals and laid them inside, then closed the case with a snap. "Now I'm fixed," he said, with a nod of satisfaction.

At the gate they did not shake hands, but parted as they had done so many times before, as if they expected to begin their playtime on the morrow.

"Good-bye, Lloyd," was all he said, with a slight lifting of his cap as he walked away.

"Good-bye, Bobby," she answered. She stood for a moment shading her eyes from the sunset, with the hand that held the four-leafed clover, as she watched him go striding down the road toward Oaklea, switching with his tennis racket at the asters and goldenrod along his path. Then she went slowly back to the house, thinking how tall he looked as he strode away. As she passed the measuring-tree she looked up at the old locusts overhead, and sure of their sympathy, said, half-aloud, "Oh, I *wish* we didn't have to grow up!"

CHAPTER II

A NEW FRIEND

Lloydsboro Seminary was not an especially attractive place viewed from the outside of the high picket fence, which surrounded its entire domain. The fence itself was forbidding. Its tall pickets, sharp-pointed and close together, seemed to suggest that strict rules were to be found inside; rules like the pickets, too firm and pointed to be easily broken through or climbed over.

The building was old and weather-beaten, but in its prime the school had been one of the best in the State, and many a woman remembered it loyally in after years when she had daughters of her own to educate. So it happened that some of the pupils came long distances, and from many parts of the country, to sit at the same old desks their mothers sat at, to study the same old lessons, and to learn to love every rock and tree on the seminary grounds, because of their associations with all the warm young friendships formed there.

A group of maples and cedars stood between the seminary and the high green picket gate in front, with a score of rustic seats and wooden swings scattered about in their shade. On the east an old neglected apple orchard sloped away from the house, where during the first few weeks of school, hard juicy winesaps, russets, and bellflowers lay in hiding from the hungry

schoolgirls, who searched for them in the tall grass, waving knee-deep among the trees. On the other side, the high fence separated the grounds from the closely clipped lawn of Clovercroft, one of the hospitable old homesteads of the Valley, whose wide porches and vine-covered tower made a charming picture from the western windows of the seminary.

The opening day of school was always a sort of gala occasion. No regular work could be done, for pupils were continually coming in on the various trains to be registered and assigned to classes. After chapel exercises the day pupils were at liberty to go home, but it was a time-honoured custom for them to adjourn to the apple orchard, to hold a reunion with all the last year's boarders who had returned.

The swings and seats in front of the seminary were left for the newcomers. Many a longing glance was cast toward the orchard by the strangers, who, left thus inhospitably alone, made shy advances toward acquaintance among themselves. On the morrow they, too, might be included in the friendly little groups exchanging confidences with their heads close together, and walking with their arms around each other under the gnarly old trees; but that they should be ignored the first day was as binding as the unwritten "laws of the jungle."

From her seat in the swing nearest the house, a new girl watched the others swarming out from chapel, laughing and talking and calling to those ahead to wait. The primary grades were racing through the warm morning sunshine, down to their

playhouses by the spring. The seniors and juniors strolled off in opposite directions in dignified exclusiveness, to different parts of the orchard. Each group as it passed attracted the new girl's attention, but her interest centred in a dozen or more girls lingering on the front steps. Their ages seemed to range from twelve to fifteen years. They were evidently waiting for some one.

"Why don't they hurry?" asked an impatient voice. "What's the matter?"

"The matron stopped them," some one answered. "I heard her asking about some bedding that was to be sent from Locust."

It was nearly five minutes before some one interrupted a discussion that had begun, to call "Here they come!" Then a chorus of calls began most confusing to the girl in the swing, who did not know the names of the newcomers who seemed to be so popular.

"I bid to walk with the Little Colonel!"

"Come on, Elizabeth Lloyd Lewis, I'm waiting for you."

"Hurry up, Betty! I've got something to tell you!"

"Lloyd! Lloyd Sherman! Can't you hear? Is it really true that you are going to board here?"

With the two girls in their midst, trying to explain to a dozen different questioners in the same breath, when and why they had become resident pupils, the noisy procession moved on. Only one was left behind, a pale-faced child in spectacles, who, in spite of all their protests, stood looking after them, insisting she must wait for Sue Bell.

As the others moved away, the new girl beckoned to her with a friendly smile. "You're Janie Clung, aren't you?" she asked, as the little girl advanced a few steps, and then stood awkwardly rubbing one foot against the other.

"You see I couldn't help hearing your name. They spoke it so often. I am Ida Shane, from Clay County. Won't you sit here in the swing with me until the girl you are waiting for comes out, and tell me something about the school? It's so hard," she added, plaintively, "to be a stranger in a place where everybody else has so many friends. You seem to know every one here. From the way they all begged you to go with them, I imagine you must be very popular."

Much flattered by this last remark from one so much older than herself, Janie climbed into the seat in the swing, opposite the girl from Clay County, and scrutinized her shyly.

Ida Shane was very pretty, she decided. She must be nearly sixteen, or maybe more, for she wore her dresses long and her hair in a soft, fluffy pompadour. Then Janie's gaze wandered from her hair to a bewitching little dimple that came at the corner of Ida's mouth when she smiled, and she thought to herself that the slow, soft drawl in which Ida spoke was exceedingly musical and ladylike. She found herself talking in a lower tone than usual, and quite slowly, when she answered.

"You know, I think it is always best to be very particular in choosing friends when one goes to a new place," Ida remarked, in a confidential tone, which seemed to insinuate that Janie could

be safely chosen. "I don't want to take up with everybody. That's why I want you to tell me which are the first families here in the Valley, and which are the girls whose friendship is worth while having."

Simple little Janie, who considered friendship with everybody worth having, looked puzzled.

"Well, for instance, who were those two girls in white duck dresses whom you were all waiting for so long? The one with the lovely long light hair that they called Lloyd and the Little Colonel? Now *she's* aristocratic-looking, and all the girls seem to regard her as a sort of leader. Tell me about her."

"Oh, that's Lloyd Sherman," answered Janie. "I reckon you might say she belongs to one of the first families. She lives in a perfectly beautiful place called Locust. The Valley is named after some of her ancestors, and old Colonel Lloyd is her grandfather. 'Little Colonel' is just one of her nicknames. She's had everything that heart could wish, and has been to Europe. When she came back she brought a magnificent St. Bernard dog with her that had been trained as a Red Cross war-dog for the ambulance service in the German army. They called him Hero, and he acted in a play they gave here last fall, called the 'Rescue of the Princess Winsome.' I was one of the flower messengers in the play. Lloyd was the Princess. She looked exactly like one that night. The dog saved her life while they were in Switzerland, and when he died the family made as much fuss over him as if he had been a person. He was buried with military honours, and there is a handsome

monument over his grave. I'll show it to you sometime, when we walk past Locust."

Janie paused with a long breath. It was more of a speech than she was accustomed to making, but Ida had listened with such flattering attention that it was easier to talk to her than to any one whom she had ever known.

"I thought she was like that," remarked Ida, in an I-told-you-so tone. "I rarely make mistakes in people. Now that other one they call Betty. She has a sweet face."

"I should say she has!" cried Janie, warmly. "She's the dearest girl in school. Everybody loves Betty Lewis. She is Mrs. Sherman's goddaughter, and lives at Locust too. She writes the loveliest poetry. Why, she wrote that whole play of the Princess Winsome, and every one thought it was wonderful. Mr. Sherman had several copies of it printed and bound in carved leather. He gave one copy to the seminary library, so you can read it if you want to."

"That'll be the first thing I shall draw from the library," said Ida, nodding approvingly at the account of Betty. "Then there's some one else I want to ask about," she continued. "I was told that General Walton's family lives here, and that his daughters go to this school. I don't mind telling you, in confidence, you know, that that is what made my aunt finally decide to send me to this school instead of the one in Frankfort. Were they here this morning?"

"Yes, and they are Lloyd's best friends. Maybe you noticed

two girls in pink, with great dark eyes, lovely eyes, who walked off with her, one on each side."

"Yes, I wondered who they were."

"The larger one was Allison and the other one Kitty. They live at The Beeches. We walk past there nearly every day. Once, last year, Miss Edith took some of us in there, and Mrs. Walton showed us all her curios and relics. It is a fascinating place to visit. There are things from all over the world in every room, and a story about each one."

"How interesting!" smiled Ida, showing a glimpse of her dimple and passing a slim hand, glittering with many rings, over her pompadour. "You can't imagine how entertaining you are, Janie; tell me some more."

With a slight movement of the foot she started the swing to swaying, and, leaning back in the seat with an air of attention, waited for Janie to go on. With such a listener, Janie was in a fair way to tell all she knew, when Sue Bell appeared in the doorway, beckoning to her. She even felt a decided sense of annoyance at the interruption, although Sue Bell was her dearest friend, so much was she enjoying Ida as an audience.

"That new girl is perfectly lovely!" she declared to Sue Bell, as they moved off together. She repeated the opinion so often after she reached the orchard, and had so much to say about Ida Shane's hair and Ida Shane's dimple, and the stacks of rings she had, and the stylish clothes she wore, that some of the girls exchanged amused glances. Kitty Walton remarked in a teasing

tone that she believed the new girl must have hoodooed Janie Clung, so that she couldn't do anything but sing her praises.

"You ought to be ashamed to talk that way, Kitty Walton," cried Janie, in angry defence of her new friend, "especially when she said such nice things about your family being celebrities, and that was one reason her aunt sent her to this school, because the daughters of such a famous general were pupils here. And she thinks Lloyd is so aristocratic-looking, and Betty awfully sweet, and so smart to write that play. And she said, even if you all are lots younger than herself, she'd rather have you for her friends than any of the seniors, because she could tell just by looking at you that you belong to the best old families in the place."

"What did she say about the rest of us?" cried Mittie Dupong, mockingly, winking at her nearest neighbour.

Janie, turning in time to see the wink, answered shortly, "Nothing. She doesn't intend to make friends with *everybody*."

It was an indiscreet speech, and the moment it was made she realized that it would be counted against Ida, instead of in her favour, as she had intended it to be. Significant glances passed among those who had not been included in Ida's classification of celebrities or first families, and Mittie Dupong retorted, with a shrug of her shoulders, "Hm! Miss Shane may find that there are people in the world as particular as herself. Who is *she*, anyway, that she should give herself such airs?"

No one answered the question, but there was sown at that moment in more than one girl's mind a little seed of dislike which

took deep root as the days went by. But if Ida's thoughtlessly repeated speech worked her ill in one way, it had an opposite effect with those whose favour she wished most to gain. Allison and Kitty met her with especial friendliness when Janie stopped them at the swing, as they started home at noon. It was pleasant for them to feel that she had been drawn to the school partly on their account. It gave them a sense of importance they had never experienced before.

Lloyd, too, unconsciously influenced by the flattering recollection that she had been singled out from all the others as aristocratic-looking, took especial care to be gracious when she found herself seated across from Ida at the dinner-table. The old pupils had been given their usual places, but Betty and Lloyd were among the newcomers.

"Now I feel for the first time that I'm really away at boarding-school," Lloyd said, with a smile, which included Ida in the conversation, as she glanced down the long table, stretched the entire length of the dining-room. "It seems as if we might be hundreds of miles away from home instead of one. I can hardly believe that we are still in Lloydsboro Valley. Betty, isn't it time for us to begin to feel homesick?"

"Not till dark comes," answered Betty. "Twilight is the regulation time in boarding-school stories."

Lloyd smiled across at Ida. "Do you think you are going to be homesick?"

"Oh, no, indeed!" answered Ida, in her slow, sweet voice. The

dimple which had charmed Janie flashed into sight. "This is the fourth boarding-school I have been sent to. I am used to going to new places."

"The fo'th!" exclaimed Lloyd, with surprised emphasis. A curious "Why?" almost slipped off her tongue, but she stopped it politely in the middle, and managed to stammer instead, as she salted her soup, "Wh-what fun you must have had!"

"I have," answered Ida, with a glance toward the end of the table where Miss Bina McCannister sat grim and watchful. "Sometime I'll tell you about some of my adventures."

As the dinner progressed, both Lloyd and Betty felt themselves yielding to the soft charm of manner which had won little Janie Clung's admiration, and by the time they had finished their dessert they were ready to join in Janie's most enthusiastic praises of the new girl.

"Do you know that my room is in the same wing with yours, just next door?" Ida asked, as they rose from the table. "At least, I think so, for as I came down to dinner I saw some trunks being carried in there, marked E. L. L. and L. S."

"I am so glad!" exclaimed Lloyd. "I wondered who we should have for neighbahs. Betty and I ran up there a few minutes this mawning, but the beds and things mothah wanted us to use hadn't been sent ovah from Locust, and it was so topsy-turvy we didn't stay."

"I came yesterday," said Ida, as the three went up the stairs together, "so I've had time to investigate. I imagine we shall be

able to do about as we please. You see, this wing of the house was added several years after the main part was built, so there are four rooms on this floor, nicely cut off by themselves."

She opened the door from the main corridor, and led the way into the narrow side-hall which separated the four rooms from the rest of the house.

"Several nights in the week the three of us will be here alone," she said. "This tiny room at the end belongs to that queer little Magnolia Budine whom everybody laughed at this morning. She lives near enough the seminary to go home every Friday night and stay till Monday morning. The three Clark sisters have this big room next to hers, and they go home to spend Sundays, too. By the way, wasn't it ridiculous the way Miss McCannister got their names all balled up this morning in the history division, trying to say *Carrie Clark, Clara Clark, Cora Clark*?"

"It was funny," laughed Lloyd. "Kitty Walton whispered to me that they ought to be called the triplets, because every one trips and stutahs ovah their names. It's as bad as trying to say 'Six slim, slick, silvah saplings.'"

They had reached the third room by this time, the door of which stood open. "This is ours," said Lloyd. "The very same one mothah had one term when she was a girl."

She paused on the threshold, looking around the large, airy apartment, well pleased.

"I wonder if the outside stairway was built when she was here," said Ida. "I discovered it yesterday."

"I nevah heard her say anything about it," said Lloyd. "Where is it?"

"This way," answered Ida, leading them past her own room, which came next, and pushing aside a heavy portière which covered a door at the opposite end of the hall from Magnolia Budine's room.

"The matron told me that a slight fire in the school, one time, led to the building, of this extra means of escape, but the girls are forbidden to use the stairs for any other purpose."

"Let's open it," proposed Lloyd, daringly, fumbling with the bolt, which had lain so long unused that it had rusted in its socket. It moved stiffly with a grating sound as she pushed it back. The door swung open on to a small, uncovered landing, from which an open staircase descended to the rear of the kitchen.

"I've often seen these steps from the outside," said Lloyd, "but I didn't know where they led to. No, I nevah heard mothah speak of them. Isn't it fun to have a secret stairway of our own! Why do you suppose they have a curtain ovah the doah?"

"To hide it," said Betty, wisely, "so that the daily sight of it will not put it into our naughty heads to make use of it, and prowl around at nights. They evidently think 'How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done.' So they cover it up."

"That's from Shakespeare, isn't it?" asked Ida. "I'd give anything if I could make appropriate quotations like that, but I never think of the right thing till it's too late. But then, I suppose it comes easy to any one smart enough to write as you do. I

am so anxious to read that play of yours, 'The Rescue of the Princess Winsome.' I was told that there is a copy in the library. Your room ought to be called 'Sweet Peas,' since it belongs to a princess and a poetess."

Betty blushed with pleasure. They had bolted the door again and were standing in front of their room, as Ida proposed the name of Sweet Peas.

"It is kind of you to give us such a sweet name for our room," said Lloyd. "Will you come in while we unpack?"

"No, thank you," was the answer. "I have some letters to write before four o'clock. That is the time, I believe, when we all have to turn out together for a walk." She turned away, but came back to ask, hesitatingly, "There's one thing I'd like to ask, Lloyd; do you mind if I call you Princess instead of Lloyd? The Princess Winsome? That name seems to suit you so well. The first thing I noticed about you was the proud little way you lift your head. You carry yourself like one."

A bright colour swept across Lloyd's face. "Of co'se I don't mind," she said, "and it is deah of you to care to call me that."

When Ida went back to her own room, it was with the comfortable feeling that she had left a very agreeable impression behind her.

"Isn't she a darling!" exclaimed Lloyd, enthusiastically, when she and Betty were alone, with their door closed. "She is pretty and stylish, and certainly has lovely mannahs. Besides, she is as sma'ht as can be, and mighty entahtaining. I've taken a great

fancy to her."

"So have I," admitted Betty. "I love to sit and watch her. The least thing she says in that soft, slow way sounds sweet. I am so glad that her room is next to ours."

Mrs. Sherman had advised taking few furnishings to the seminary, but Lloyd insisted that they could not feel that they were really away at boarding-school unless they had all that goes to equip a modern college girl's room. So pictures and posters, sofa-pillows and book-racks were crowded into the overflowing trunks. A chafing-dish, a well-furnished tea-basket, a dainty chocolate-pot, and a mandolin were brought over in the carriage that took Mrs. Sherman to the depot. Both girls were kept busy until four o'clock, finding places to put their numerous possessions. Neither one realized how far she had passed under the spell of the new pupil, but unconsciously every picture they hung and every article they unpacked was located with a thought of her approval.

Once as Lloyd passed the mirror, when Betty's back was turned, she paused to look at her reflection with the pleased consciousness that Ida had spoken the truth; that she did hold her head proudly and carry herself well. And Betty several times passed her hand up over the brown curls on her forehead, recalling the graceful gesture of the white, heavily ringed hand. While she tacked up posters and put away clothes, she chattered busily with Lloyd, but through her thoughts, like an undercurrent to their conversation, ran a few musical lines suggested by the

white hands and low voice. An "Ode to Ida" had already begun to weave itself into shape in her busy little brain.

A few minutes before the gong sounded, summoning the girls to the first of their daily walks, Ida tapped on the door. She had only stopped to ask a question about the rules, she said, and must run back and put on her hat; but catching sight of a picture of the long avenue at Locust, which hung over Lloyd's bed, she crossed the room to examine it.

"You've made a perfect love of a room with all these handsome things," she said, looking around admiringly. "But" – she scanned the few photographs on the mantel, and the two on the dressing-table in their frames of beaten silver – "it seems so queer, you know. You haven't the picture of a single boy. Didn't you bring any?"

"No!" answered Lloyd, in surprise. "Why should I?"

"But you have some at home, haven't you?" persisted Ida.

"Yes, I have lovely ones of Allison Walton's cousins, Malcolm and Keith MacIntyre, taken in the costumes they wore as 'two little knights of Kentucky.' And I have one of Ranald Walton taken in his captain's uniform, and nearly a dozen of Rob Moore. He's given me one whenever he's had them taken, from the time he wore kilts and curls."

"My *dear!*" exclaimed Ida. "Why didn't you bring them? They would have been such an addition."

"Because I don't want any boy's pictuah stuck up on my dressing-table. I like to have them, because they've been my

playmates always, and when we're grown up I'd like to remembah just how they looked, but that's no reason I want my walls plastahed with them now."

"What an original little thing you are, Princess," exclaimed Ida, with a laugh, which would have nettled Lloyd had not the compliment and the title taken away its sting. "Come into my room and see how my walls are plastered, as you call it."

Lloyd stared around in astonishment when Ida threw open her door. Boyish faces looked back at her from every side. Handsome ones, homely ones, in groups, in pairs, framed and unframed, strung together with ribbons, or stuck in behind Japanese fans. Added to all the other pictures of girls she had known in the three boarding-schools which she had attended, it gave the room the appearance of a photograph gallery.

"Well!" exclaimed Lloyd, at length, after a long, slow survey, "I don't see what you want them for." Unconsciously her head took the haughty uplift which Ida had admired.

"For the same reason that an Indian hangs up all the scalp-locks he takes, I suppose," drawled Ida, sweetly. "Of course, you're young yet. You don't understand. But you'll look at things differently when you are as near 'sweet sixteen' as I am, Princess."

Again that flattering title took the sting out of the patronizing manner which Lloyd otherwise would have resented. Was it only the afternoon before, she wondered, that she had cried out to the friendly old locusts her longing to be a child always?

As Ida crossed the room with a graceful sweep of long skirts, and settled her hat with its clusters of violets jauntily over her fluffy pompadour, there stole into the Little Colonel's heart, for the first time, a vague desire; a half-defined wish that she, too, were as near the borders of grown-up land as "sweet sixteen."

CHAPTER III

IDA'S SECRET

"Betty," said Lloyd, one morning, the third week of school, as she sat on the edge of her bed lacing her shoes, "you know that little glove-case you embroidered for my birthday present; would you feel hurt if I were to give it away?"

"No," answered Betty, slowly, turning from the mirror, brush in hand. "I made it to please you, and if you can find more pleasure in giving it away than in keeping it, I'd be glad for you to give it away."

"Honestly, Betty?"

"Yes, honestly." The brown eyes turned with truthful directness toward Lloyd.

"Oh, you are such a comfortable sort of person to live with, Betty Lewis," exclaimed the Little Colonel, with a sigh of relief. "Most girls would think that I didn't appreciate all those fine stitches you put into it, and didn't care for either the gift or the givah if I was willing to part with it; but I was suah you would undahstand. You see, the violets on it make it such a perfect match for everything on Ida's dressing-table, that it seems as if it ought to belong to her. I can't look at a violet now without thinking of her. She is so much like one, don't you think? Refined and sweet, and her eyes are such a dark blue, and have such a

shy, appealing way of looking out from undah those long lashes. And have you evah noticed what delicious sachet she uses? So faint it's not much moah than the whispah of a smell, but there's always a touch of it about everything belonging to her. I call her Violet all the time now."

Only the mirror saw the bored expression that shaded Betty's face for an instant. For the last week, morning, noon, and night, she had heard nothing from Lloyd but Ida's praises. A sudden intimacy had sprung up between the two which threatened to eclipse all Lloyd's other friendships. Betty began brushing her hair vigorously. "Will you promise not to feel hurt if I give you a piece of advice?" she asked.

Lloyd nodded, lazily wondering what was coming, as she reached down to pick up her other shoe. She did not put it on, however, but sat with it in her hand, staring at Betty, scarcely believing that she heard aright, the advice was so different from anything she had expected.

"Then don't call her Violet before the other girls. And if I were in your place I don't believe I'd talk about her to them, quite as much as you do. You see," she hurried on, noticing the quick flush of displeasure on Lloyd's face, "I don't suppose you realize how much you do talk about her, or how you have changed lately. Last year you were good friends with all the girls, ready for any fun they proposed. They liked that independent, bossy little way you had of deciding things for them. That was one thing that made you so popular. But now you always wait to find out what

Ida thinks, and what Ida wants, and they feel that you've not only dropped your old friends for a stranger whom you've known only three weeks, but that in some sort of a way – I can't explain it – you've dropped your old self too. Really, I believe that they are as jealous of the influence she has over you, as of the way she monopolizes you."

Betty did not see the gathering storm in the Little Colonel's face, and went serenely on brushing her hair. "You know she's so much older than you. They always smile so significantly when she calls you Princess, as if they thought she was doing it to flatter you. While they wouldn't say it openly to me, of course, I've heard them whispering among themselves that Ida had hoodooed you as she had Janie Clung, so that all you live for nowadays is to wait on her and buy her candy and violets."

Bang! went Lloyd's shoe against the wall. She had sent it spinning across the room with all her force. Betty, turning in dismay, saw that the advice which she had given with the kindest of motives, had aroused the Little Colonel's temper to white heat.

"The mean, hateful things!" she cried. "They've no right to talk about Ida that way! The idea of her stooping to such a thing as to flatter any one for what she could get out of them! It's an outrageous –"

"But Lloyd, dear," interrupted Betty. "Listen a minute. You promised that you wouldn't get mad, or I wouldn't have said a word."

"I'm not mad with you, but Mittie Dupong and some of the

rest of them have been hateful to Ida from the very first." There was something like a sob in her voice. "And she's so alone in the world, too. She's told me things about her life that almost made me cry. Her aunt doesn't undahstand her at all, and she has a misa'ble time at home."

"But she needn't feel alone in the world here," insisted Betty. "Every girl in school would have been her friend, if she hadn't said at the start that she didn't care for anybody but us and the Walton girls. They'd be only too glad to take her in, even now, for the sake of having you back again. Oh, it was so much nicer last year."

Lloyd faced her indignantly. "Betty Lewis!" she exclaimed. "You're against her too, or you wouldn't say that."

"No, I'm not," insisted Betty. "I like her now just as much as I did the first day I saw her. I think she is sweet and lovable, and I don't wonder that you are very fond of her; but I must say that I'm sorry that she's in the school, for you don't seem to care for anything now but being with her, and that spoils all the good times we had planned to have."

Dead silence followed Betty's speech. The Little Colonel walked across the room, picked up her shoe and put it on, jerking the laces savagely. It was the first time that she had ever been angry with Betty, and her wrath was more than Betty could endure.

"Please don't feel hurt, Lloyd," she begged. "I can't bear to have you angry with me. I wouldn't have said a word, only I

thought that if it was explained to you how we all felt, you'd be willing to spend a little more time with the others, and gradually they'd get interested in Ida and be nice to her for your sake, and things would go on as they used to, when we all had such good times together."

Again the painful silence, so deep that Betty felt as if a wall had risen between them.

"Please, Lloyd," she begged, with tears in her eyes. But Lloyd, with an air of injured dignity, went on dressing, without a word, until the last bow was tied, and the last pin in place.

"And she knew all the time that Ida is my dearest friend," Lloyd kept saying angrily to herself, as she moved about the room. "I could have forgiven her saying mean things about *me*, but for her to stand up and say to my very face that she is sorry Ida is in the school, and that her being here spoils all the good times, when she *knows* what I think of Ida, that is simply a plain insult, and I can nevah feel the same to Betty Lewis again!"

By the time the breakfast-bell rang, both the girls were almost in tears; for the longer Betty's speech rankled in Lloyd's mind the worse it hurt, and the longer the angry silence continued the worse Betty felt.

"It is not like Lloyd to be so unfair," thought Betty. "She's just so blinded by her infatuation for Ida that she can't see my side of the matter at all."

It was on the point of her tongue to speak her thought, but realizing that it would only add fuel to the flame, she checked the

impulse, and in the same uncomfortable silence they marched stiffly down the stairs to breakfast.

It was a miserable day for both. To peace-loving Betty it seemed endless. She could hardly keep the tears back when she stood up to recite, and instead of joining the other girls at recess she wandered off with a pencil and note-book. Sitting in one of the swings she wrote some verses about broken friendships that made her cry. They began:

"Dead are the snowy daisies!
Dead are the flowers of May!
The winds are hoarse and voiceless,
The skies are cold and gray!"

And yet a more gloriously golden October day had never shone in the Valley. The sun on the sumach bushes and sweet gum-trees turned their leaves to a flaming red that the heart of a ruby might have envied, and the dogwood berries, redder than any rose, glowed like living fire in the depths of the woods.

For the last week Lloyd and Ida had spent every recess together, wandering off by themselves to a far corner of the apple orchard, where the trunk of a fallen tree provided them with a seat, and its twisted branches with a rustic screen; but this day when Lloyd needed sympathy and companionship more than on any other, it was suddenly denied her.

Ida had a worried, absent-minded air when she came out at recess after the distribution of the morning mail. She came up to

Lloyd in the hall with a grave face. "I am in trouble, Princess," she said, in a low tone. "I'll explain sometime before long, but I must go to my room now. I have an important letter to write."

With heavy forebodings Lloyd wandered back to her desk and sat looking listlessly out of the open window. She could hear laughter and merry voices in conversation outside. Nuts rattled down from the old hickory-tree by the well, and an odour of wild grapes floated in from the vine that trailed over it, where some belated bunches hung too high for any fingers but the frost's to touch. She took no interest in anything.

The afternoon recess passed in the same way. Miss Bina McCannister led the procession when they went for their afternoon walk. Ida had been excused from joining them, so Lloyd walked beside Janie Clung, in stony silence. Betty was in front of them, and Lloyd, almost stepping on her heels, could think of nothing but the remark that had changed her whole day to gall and wormwood. She resented it doubly, now that poor Ida was in some mysterious trouble.

Betty occasionally cast an anxious glance backward. "She'll surely make up before the sun goes down," she thought. But the sun went down as they strolled homeward, the moon came up, and lights twinkled from all the seminary windows. The supper-bell rang, and a horde of hungry girls poured into the dining-room, but through all the cheerful clatter of dishes and hum of voices, Lloyd kept her dignified silence toward Betty unbroken. Ida had evidently been crying, and had little to say. She left the

table before the others were through.

When Betty went to her room for the study hour, she found Lloyd sitting with her elbows on the table before the lamp, seemingly so absorbed in her history lesson that she did not notice the opening of the door. With a sigh Betty sank into a chair on the opposite side of the table, and drew her arithmetic toward her, but she could not fix her mind on the next day's problems. She was rehearsing a dozen different ways in which to open a conversation, and trying to screw her courage to the point of beginning.

While she hesitated there was a slight tap at the door and Miss Edith looked in. It was her evening to make the round of inspection. Seeing both girls apparently absorbed in their books, she closed the door and passed on. Five minutes went by, in which Betty kept glancing at Lloyd, almost on the point of speaking. There was another tap at the door, and before either could call Come, Ida opened it and beckoned. With an answering nod as if she understood, Lloyd gathered up her books and joined her in the hall. There was a whispered consultation, then Betty heard them go into Ida's room and close the door.

Feeling that the breach between them was growing wider every hour, and that Lloyd never intended to be friendly with her again, Betty laid her head down on her arms and began to cry. Not since she had lain ill and neglected in the bare little room at the Cuckoo's Nest, the time she had the fever, had she felt so miserable and lonely. Not once in all the time since she had been

at Locust had she cried like that, with choking sobs that shook her whole body, and seemed to come from the depths of her poor little aching heart.

She was crying so bitterly that she did not hear Ida's door open again or light footsteps go cautiously down to the end of the hall. Somebody slowly and carefully slipped back the bolt that barred the door leading to the outside stairway. Then the knob turned, and two muffled figures stood outside in the moonlight.

"Hurry!" whispered Ida, catching Lloyd by the hand. Like two shadows they tiptoed down the stairs and across a little open space in the rear of the kitchen, till they reached the cover of heavier shadows, under the protecting trees. Then they ran on as if pursued, keeping close to the high picket fence.

Down in the old apple orchard, in the far corner where the fallen tree lay, they stopped at last, and Ida dropped breathlessly to a seat on the log, and leaned back among the twisted branches.

"There!" she exclaimed, throwing off the heavy golf-cape in which she had muffled herself. "Now I can breathe. Oh, I've been so upset all day, Princess. I felt as if I should choke if I stayed in that old building another minute. Besides, walls do have ears sometimes, and I wouldn't have anybody find out what I am going to tell you for worlds! It would get me into no end of trouble, and aunt would take me out of school again."

She paused a moment, and Lloyd, waiting expectantly, felt the witchery of the moonlighted night stealing over her. She had been Ida's confidante often of late. She knew the history

of each friendship represented by each boy's photograph in Ida's collection, and she had found them all interesting, even when told in prosaic daylight. Beyond the shadowy old orchard a row of yellow-leaved maples gleamed a ghostly silver in the moonlight, and from the direction of Clovercroft stole the music of a violin. Some one was playing Schubert's Serenade. It stirred her strangely.

"Will you promise that you'll never tell a living, breathing soul?" asked Ida, finally, in a low voice.

"Of co'se I wouldn't tell," said Lloyd. "You know that perfectly well, Violet."

"Well, *I'm engaged.*"

"You're what?" exclaimed Lloyd, with such a start of astonishment that she nearly slipped off the log.

"Sh!" whispered Ida. "Somebody'll hear us if you talk so loud."

Feeling as if a chapter of some thrilling romance had suddenly opened before her, Lloyd sat up straight, waiting for the heroine to speak again. The moonlight gave Ida's face an almost unearthly whiteness, and there were dark shadows under her eyes. She had been crying.

"Aunt never wanted me to have anything to do with Edwardo," she began, in a low tone. "That isn't his real name, but I always call him that. She took me out of the Lexington school because he lived near there. She thought that sending me down here would put an end to our correspondence, but it didn't, of course.

We kept on corresponding, just the same. Some way she has found it out. She doesn't know that we are engaged. I don't know what she would be tempted to do if she knew. She is angry enough just about the letters. I had one from her this morning, and I saw one on the table addressed to President Wells, in her handwriting. There is no mistaking it. I am sure she has written to him to watch my mail and intercept his letters. I wouldn't have her get hold of them for anything, because she scorns anything like sentiment. She seems to think it is something wicked for young people to care for each other, and Edwardo's letters simply *breathe* devotion in every word."

The faint strains of the distant violin swelled louder as Ida held out her hand from which she had taken all the rings but one. She turned her white fingers in the moonlight, to show the glimmer of a pearl.

"He has told me so many times that that is what my life seems like to him," she said, with a sob in her voice, " – a pearl. I know he has been awfully wild and fast, but when he tells me that only my influence over him can make him the man I want him to be, and that if it were not for my love and prayers he wouldn't care what became of him, or what he did, do you blame me for disregarding aunt's wishes? Don't you think it is cruel of her to interfere?"

Lloyd, listening with breathless interest to the friend whom she loved with all a little girl's adoring enthusiasm for an older one whom she has taken as her model, gave a passionate assent.

"Oh, I knew you'd feel that way about it," said Ida, reaching out to clasp Lloyd's hand with the white one on which glimmered the pearl. "It is *so* good to have some one to talk to who can understand and sympathize."

An eloquent silence fell between them, broken only by the rustle of the dead leaves and the wailing voice of the violin, repeating its plaintive refrain like a human cry. The music and the witchery of the moonlight laid an ever-deepening spell on the listening child, till she felt that she was part of some old tale in which Ida was the ladye fair, and Edwardo the most interesting of heroes, held apart by a cruel fate. She drank in every word eagerly, seeing in her imagination a tall, handsome man with a haughty, dark face, who stood with outstretched hands, murmuring, "Oh, my Pearl, you can make of my life what you will!"

When Ida took a tiny locket from a chain around her neck and opened it to show her his picture, Lloyd felt a distinct twinge of disappointment. It was not at all like the face she had pictured. But Ida explained that it was not a good likeness, only a head cut from a group picture in which he had been taken with the members of his football team. She had a fine photograph of him in her trunk, but had to keep it hidden, not knowing what day her aunt might swoop down upon her for a visit of inspection.

"Seems to me as if I had seen that face befoah somewhere," said the Little Colonel, studying it intently in the dim light. There was a familiarity about it that puzzled her.

Ida slipped the locket back and gathered up her cape about her. "We won't dare stay here much longer," she said. Then she hesitated. "Princess, I have told you all this because I need your help and am going to ask a great favour of you. Your mail doesn't have to go through the principal's hands. Will you be willing to let Edwardo address my letters to you? It couldn't do you any harm, simply to take them from the post-office box and hand them to me, and it would make a world of difference to me – and to him," she added, softly. "If I were to refuse to let him write to me, as aunt wants me to do, and were to break off our engagement, I think it would make him so reckless that he would do something desperate. Knowing that, I feel so responsible for him. Princess, I'd give my life to keep him straight."

As Ida rose in her earnestness, the tears glistening in her eyes, she seemed to Lloyd like some fair guardian angel, and from that moment she was set apart in her imagination as if she had been a saint on a pedestal. With such a noble example of devotion to one in need, it seemed a very small thing for Lloyd to consent to the favour she asked, and she gave her promise gladly.

"I shall do everything I can to keep any one from suspecting that he is sending letters to me through you," said Ida, as they strolled slowly back toward the house. "I can't let your friendship for me get you into trouble. They'll watch me very closely now, so maybe it will be as well for me not to appear so intimate with you as I have been. We'll not come off here alone any more at recess. By and by, when I feel that I can, I'll try to interest myself

in the other girls. We'll still have our little confidential meetings just the same, but no one must suspect us.

"I wish Mrs. Walton would invite me to her house sometimes," she said, impulsively, when they had walked a few minutes in silence. "If I could fill up a long letter to aunt about that, it would make her feel that I was interested in something besides Edwardo, and would appease her wonderfully."

"I'll ask her to," said Lloyd, eagerly. "Mrs. Walton told mothah she intended to have Betty and me at The Beeches very often while she was away. The first time she invites us I'll ask her to have you too. She's so kind and sweet, that I'd as soon do it as not. All she seems to live for is just to make othah people happy."

"Oh, Princess, if you only would!" exclaimed Ida, giving her a delighted hug. "Aunt would be so pleased, for it would be in all the home papers that I had been entertained at the home of the late General Walton. She would consider it such an honour, and feel that in one way, at least, I was a credit to her. Aunt thinks so much of attentions from distinguished people. It is one of her hobbies. I would like to please her as much as possible in every way I can, as long as I have to disregard her wishes about – what I just told you, you know. Sh! We're too near the house to talk any more."

The rest of the way they slipped along in silence under the shadow of the trees. Up the creaking stairway they crept, pausing a moment before they opened the door. Then they shot the rusty bolt noiselessly back in place, dropped the portière, and listened

again.

"It's all right," whispered Ida, giving Lloyd's hand a reassuring squeeze as they tiptoed down the hall. "Oh, you're *such* a comfort! You'll never know what a load you've taken off my mind. Good night!"

In those few moments of silence between the orchard and the house, Lloyd's thoughts travelled rapidly. Her quarrel with Betty had faded so far into the background, that it seemed ridiculously trivial now. She had forgotten her grievance in listening to the tale of larger trouble. And since Ida had made it clear to her that it would be to her interest to be friendly with all the girls, she was eager to enlist Betty's sympathies and help. She wished fervently that she could share her secret with her. She burst into the room, her eyes shining with excitement, and blinking as they met the bright lamplight.

Betty was standing in her nightgown, ready for bed. She saw at the first glance that Lloyd's anger was over, and she drew a great sigh of relief.

"Oh, Betty," began Lloyd, impetuously, "I'm awfully sorry I made such a mountain out of a mole-hill this mawning and got into a tempah about what you said. You were right, aftah all. Ida thinks just as you do, that we oughtn't to go off by ourselves all the time, and she wants to be friends with the othah girls if they'll let her. I'm going back to the old ways to-morrow, and try not to let anything spoil the good times you talked about. Ida is so unhappy. I wish I could tell you, but I haven't any right – what

she told me was in confidence. But if you only knew, you'd do all you could to help make it easier for her with the girls."

"I'll do anything on earth you want me to!" exclaimed Betty. "This has been the longest, miserablest day I ever spent."

"Oh," cried the Little Colonel, a look of distress in her face. "Then I've spoiled 'The Road of the Loving Heart' that I wanted to leave in your memory. I haven't been true to my ring." She looked down at the talisman on her finger, the little lover's knot of gold, and turned it around regretfully.

"No, you haven't spoiled anything!" cried Betty. "It was my fault too. You're the dearest girl in the world, and I'll always think of you that way. Let's don't say another word about to-day. That's the best way to forget."

Lloyd began undressing, and Betty knelt down to say her prayers. The gong rang presently for all lights to be put out. The seminary settled itself to silence, then to sleep. But long after Betty's soft, regular breathing showed that she was in dreamland, Lloyd lay with wide-open, wakeful eyes. The moonlight streaming through the open window lay in a white square on the floor by her bed. She heard the clock in the hall toll eleven, twelve, and one before she fell asleep. The spell of the orchard was still upon her; the moonlight, the faint strains of music, Ida's white face with the tears in the violet eyes, and the glimmer of the pearl on her white hand came again and again in her fitful dreams, all through the night.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOW CLUB

Lloyd's return to the old ways came about so naturally next morning, that no one seemed to notice her sudden desertion of Ida. Just after the morning recess began, little Elise Walton came running up to Allison, crying excitedly, "Oh, sister! Give me your handkerchief! Quick! Somebody has upset a bottle of ink on Magnolia Budine's hair, and it's running all over everything!"

Before Allison could fish her handkerchief from her sleeve, where she had thrust it during recitation, Lloyd seized a basin of water and hurried out to the back hall door. There stood Magnolia, her head craned forward like a turtle, as far as possible over the steps, to keep the ink from dripping on her dress. Half a dozen little girls were making excited passes at it with handkerchiefs, slate-rags, and sponges.

"Heah!" cried Lloyd, putting the basin down on the step. "Bend ovah, Magnolia, and dip yoah head in! Anna Louise, you run and get anothah basin in the hall, and Marguerite, ask some of the big girls to bring a bucket of watah. It'll take a tubful to soak this out."

Whatever the Little Colonel undertook was thoroughly done, and when Magnolia emerged from the last vigorous rinsing, only a faint green tinge remained on the flaxen hair. But that would

not wash off, Lloyd declared. She had had a similar experience herself when she was in the primary grade. It would simply have to wear off, and that process might take days.

Kitty and Allison with all the girls of their set had crowded around to see the amusing sight, offering advice and laughing all the time the performance lasted. As she worked Lloyd related her own experience. Rob Moore had tipped the bottle of ink on her head one day, when they were writing letters to Santa Claus, and Mom Beck had washed her hair every day for a week to get it out.

Finally, turning her charge over to the primary girls with a couple of towels and directions to rub her dry and leave her in the sun to bleach, Lloyd led the way to the swing, where they sat laughing and joking over Magnolia's accident until the bell rang again.

The school had laughed at Magnolia from the first day, when an old carryall stopped in front of the seminary and she climbed out with a huge carpet-bag in her hand. It was the most old-fashioned of carpet-bags, an elaborate pattern of red roses on each side. And she was the most old-fashioned of little girls, buttoned up in a plain-waisted bright blue merino dress, with many gathers in the full skirt. It was such a dress as her grandmother might have worn when she was a child. Her light hair was drawn back tightly behind her ears, and braided in two little tails. She was fat and awkward and shy, and so awed by the strange surroundings that a sort of terror took possession of her

when she found herself alone among so many unfamiliar faces.

It was Lloyd Sherman who came to the rescue when she saw tears of fright in the round, blue eyes. Lloyd had begun the school term with a resolution to keep true to the talisman she wore, the little ring that was to remind her constantly of the "Road of the Loving Heart" which she wanted to build in every one's memory. This was her first opportunity. She led the little stranger to the principal's room, and stayed beside her until she was delivered safely into the matron's hands. Later it was Lloyd who saw her in chapel looking around in bewilderment, uncertain where to go, and beckoned her to a seat near her own. And again at roll-call, when somebody tittered at the unusual name, and the child's face was all afire with embarrassment, Lloyd's friendly smile flashed across to her was like a rope thrown to a drowning man, and she could never forget to be grateful for it.

As she was in the primary department, she could only worship Lloyd from afar during the day, but as rooms were assigned irrespective of classes, and hers was in the same wing and on the same floor with Lloyd's, she often left her door ajar in the evening, in the hope of seeing her pass, or hearing her voice in the hall. Once she heard Ida call her Princess. The name struck her fancy, and as "*The Princess*" Lloyd was henceforth enshrined in her adoring little heart. Lloyd often caught her admiring glances in chapel, and several times found little offerings in her desk on Monday mornings, when the old carryall came back from the Budine farm with the little girl and the huge carpet-bag.

There was an enormous red apple one time, polished to the highest degree of shininess; several ears of pop-corn at another, and once a stiff little bunch of magenta zinnias and yellow chrysanthemums. There was never any name left with them. Lloyd guessed the giver, but she did not realize what a large place she occupied in Magnolia's affections, or how the child choked with embarrassment till she almost swallowed her chewing-gum, whenever Lloyd chanced to meet her in the hall with a friendly good morning.

"Let's go down to the playhouses and see if the green is bleaching out of Magnolia's hair," proposed Lloyd at the afternoon recess, with all her old-time heartiness; and again the girls forgot to wonder why she stayed with them instead of wandering off with Ida to the orchard.

Just as they reached the spring a shout went up from the circle of little girls gathered around Magnolia. She was facing them defiantly, her fat little face red with mortification.

"What's the matter, Elise?" asked Allison, in a big-sister tone. "Why are you all teasing Magnolia?"

"I'm not teasing her," cried Elise, indignantly. "I told her just now not to mind anything they said, and I'd lend her my paper-doll bride to play with till next Friday afternoon."

"She said that she learned to read in a graveyard, off of the tombstones," giggled Anna Louise, "and it seemed so funny that we couldn't help laughing."

Magnolia hung her head, twisting a corner of her apron in

her fat little fingers, and wishing that the earth would open and swallow her. She had seen the amusement in the Little Colonel's face, and it hurt worse than the ridicule of all the others combined. She felt that she must die of shame.

"That's nothing to laugh at," said Betty, seeing the distress in her face, and divining what the child was suffering. "I used to have lovely times in the old graveyard at the Cuckoo's Nest. Don't you remember how peaceful and sweet it was, Lloyd?" she asked, turning to the Little Colonel, who nodded assent. "Davy and I used to walk up there every afternoon in summer to smell the pinks and the lilies, and read what was carved on the old stones. And we'd sit there in the grass and listen to the redbirds in the cedars, and make up stories about all the people lying there asleep. And Davy learned most of his letters there."

"That's the way it was at Loretta, wasn't it, Maggie!" exclaimed Elise, encouragingly. "Tell them about it."

But Maggie hung her head and twisted the toes of her stubby shoes around in the dust, unable to say a word.

"I'll tell them, then," said Elise, turning to the larger girls. "They used to live near the convent at Loretta, and one of their neighbours, a girl lots older than Maggie, used to take her up to the graveyard nearly every day. There wasn't any place else to go, you know, and it was lonesome out there in the country. This girl was named Corono, after one of the Sisters who was dead. She had been awfully good to both their families, when they were sick, and Corono and Maggie used to make daisy-chains and

crowns out of the honeysuckles and roses, 'cause Corono means crown, and put them on her grave. And every time they would go, Maggie would learn a new letter off one of the tombstones, and after awhile she got so she could read."

"How interesting!" exclaimed Lloyd, all unconscious of the way her words set Maggie's heart to beating with pleasure. Elise turned toward her with a motherly air that seemed very funny considering that she was smaller than the child whom she was championing so valiantly. "I'm going to ask them about that album right now, Maggie. You run back to school and get it."

Glad of any excuse to make her escape, Maggie started off to the house as fast as her fat little legs would carry her. Deprived of their sport, the smaller girls returned to their playhouses and the older ones strolled leisurely back toward the seminary. Elise tagged along beside Lloyd and Allison.

"Maggie has gone to get her autograph-album," she explained. "It used to be her mother's when she went to school at the convent, but now it's Maggie's. Not more than half the leaves are written on, and her mother said she could use it if she'd be very careful. She wants you girls to write in it. She has had it in her desk for two weeks, trying to get up her courage to ask you, Lloyd, but she was afraid you would laugh. I told her I wasn't afraid. *I'd* ask you. She wants all the big girls to write in it, but she said 'specially '*The Princess*.'"

"The Princess!" echoed Lloyd, in surprise.

"Yes, that's what she calls you all the time. 'Cause you were

that in the play, I suppose. She thinks you are the loveliest person she ever saw, and says if she could just look like you and be like you for one day, she'd die happy. And once" – Elise lowered her voice confidentially – "she told me that when she says her prayers every night, she always prays that some day she'll grow nice enough for you to like her."

"The poor little thing!" cried Lloyd, much touched. "To think of her caring like that! You tell her, Elise, that of co'se we'll all write in it. I shall be glad to."

Elise ran on after Maggie, happy in the accomplishment of her kindly assumed mission, and presently came back with the book which she left in Lloyd's hands.

"Look, girls, what a funny old-fashioned thing it is!" cried Lloyd, turning to Katie Mallard, who with Betty and Kitty were just behind them. All the others came crowding around also.

"Heah is 'Album of the Heart' in gilt lettahs on the back, with such funny plump little cupids sitting in the rose-wreath around it."

"And, oh, see!" cried Betty, glancing over her shoulder at the delicately traced names of the gentle nuns, and the girls who had been playmates of Maggie's mother in a far-away past. "They are all dated over forty years ago."

"Of course," answered Katie. "Nobody is old-fashioned enough nowadays to have an autograph-album. They are *so* old-timey and out of date."

"Wait a minute, please," said Betty, as Lloyd slowly turned

the leaves. "What is that verse signed Sister Corono? Oh, it is an acrostic. See? The initial letters of each line, read downward, spell Martha. That must be Mrs. Budine's name."

Several voices read the verse in unison:

*"May thy life be ever led
Along the path of duty,
Rich in deeds of helpfulness,
That fill sad hearts with beauty.
Happiness shall then attend thee,
And all the blessed saints befriend thee."*

"Isn't that sweet?" cried Betty. "I'm going to write one for Magnolia. There's something pathetic about that child to me. She looks so wistful sometimes. She's dreadfully odd, but it's mean of the girls to laugh at her."

"I'll do something extra nice, too," said Lloyd. "I can't write poetry, but I'll copy a bar of music from one of the Princess Winsome songs. I think notes look so pretty copied in pen and ink."

"I'll paint a magnolia blossom in water-colours," said Allison, not to be outdone by the others.

"And I – oh, I'll draw a kitten for her to remember my name by," said Kitty, laughing.

As both Allison and Kitty had real talent for drawing, the girls who saw the pages they decorated were moved to envy; and when Betty added an acrostic on the name Magnolia, nobody

had a word of ridicule for the little Album of the Heart, that was serving two generations as a storehouse of sentiment. Betty's verse was passed around the school:

*"May our friendship be as sweet
As the flower whose name you bear.
Girlhood days are fleet.
No others are half so fair.
O like a violet pressed,
Let my name on this page long dwell,
In after years to recall
A schoolmate who wished you well."*

When the girls read that, an autograph-album fever broke out in the school. Every one came to Betty for an acrostic. She spent all her playtime writing them. She ate all her meals struggling inwardly with the hard initials in such names as Pinkie, Ursula, and Vashti. She even dreamed rhymes in her sleep.

Lloyd copied music until her fingers ached, for everybody requested a verse of a Princess Winsome song. Kitty drew whole colonies of kittens, and Allison, finding it impossible to paint a flower typical of each name presented, took to painting a single forget-me-not above her name.

The teachers, too, suffered from the epidemic, and even people outside the school, until the principal found twenty-three letters in the mail-bag one morning, all addressed to a well-known writer of juvenile stories, whose books were the most

popular in the school. An investigation proved that because one girl had received his autograph, twenty-three had followed her example in requesting it, and not one of them had enclosed a stamp; nor had it occurred to them that an author's time is too valuable to spend in answering questions, merely to satisfy the idle curiosity of his readers.

"One stamp is of little value," said the principal, "but multiply it by the hundreds he would have to use in a year in answering the letters of thoughtless strangers, who have no claim on him in any way." Twenty-three girls filed out into the hall after the principal's little talk that followed, and slipped their letters from the mail-bag. Ten of them threw theirs into the waste-basket. The others, who had asked no questions and were more desirous of obtaining their favourite author's autograph, opened theirs to enclose an envelope, stamped and addressed; but few more letters of the kind went out from Lloydsboro Seminary after that.

Kitty, Katie, Allison, Betty, and Lloyd all pounced upon Miss Edith one morning before school, each with an album in her hand. Miss Edith clutched her hair in mock despair. "These make the seventh dozen I have been asked to write in this week," she declared. "Life is too short to hunt up a different sentiment for each one. I must use the same verse for everybody."

The girls perched on the desks around the rostrum, as she spread out the books before her and began to write. They always loved the few moments they could snatch in Miss Edith's room before school, and felt that her autograph would be one of the

most valuable in the collection.

"This is one of my favourite verses," said Miss Edith, as she passed the blotter over the last page, and read it aloud:

"This learned I from the shadow of a tree
That to and fro did sway upon the wall:
Our shadow-selves – our influence – may fall
Where we can never be."

"I want to tell you a little incident that fastened it in my memory. I have a friend teaching in one of the mountain schools of Kentucky, who told me of two girls who came to the door one day, asking to be admitted as students. Each carried a bundle of clothes wrapped in a newspaper. That was all they had – no money to pay their tuition, no way of paying their board unless they were allowed to work for it. They had walked forty miles to get to that school. Their home was twice the distance away, but their uncle, who was a tin pedlar, took them half-way in his wagon. They were a week on the road after they left him, where his route branched off from theirs. They stopped at night in some village or farmhouse to which he directed them.

"Nobody had the heart to tell them that there was no room for students who could not pay their way, neither could any one turn away such ambition. But the school was poor. It is kept up by donations from benevolent people, and it was only by great self-sacrifice that the teachers could take them at all.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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