

THE ADVENTURE LEAGUE

HILDA T. SKAE



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BY

HILDA T. SKAE

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Map of Erricha Island

THE ADVENTURE LEAGUE

CHAPTER I

WHAT HAPPENED IN ERRICHA.

It was very early on a bright summer morning. Rocks and heather and green fields lay bathed in sunshine; and round the shores of a small island on the west coast of Scotland the sea was dancing and splashing, while in the distance the Highland hills raised their bare crests towards a cloudless sky.

The sun had not long risen, and it seemed as though no one could be stirring at this early hour; yet there was an unusual commotion among the birds nesting on the ledges of a high cliff. The funny little puffins, with their red, parrot-like bills, were peering anxiously out of the crevices; while the curious little auks, standing erect in rows like black and white mannikins, were exceedingly perturbed; and the kittiwakes flew screaming from the rocky shelves, joining their voices to the hoarser cries of the guillemots and the booming of the waves among walls and pillars of rock.

The cause of the birds' agitation was not far to seek. Some figures, looking very small upon the huge cliff, were crawling on their hands and knees upon the ledges, gathering eggs. Two were boys; and the red cap and serge frock of another proclaimed her to be a girl. About fifty feet below, with nothing between him and the waves which looked small in the distance, a lad hung suspended by a rope, while the birds circled and screamed around him.

One of the boys came to where the ledge ended in a sheer drop down to the sea; and putting something very carefully in his pocket, he rose to his feet and began to climb upward.

Catching hold of the tufts of heather on the verge of the cliff, he swung himself on to firm ground, and proved to be a boy of about ten years of age; thin and wiry, with a dark face and bright twinkling eyes. His thin brown wrists had

grown a long way out of the sleeves of his jacket; and he had torn a hole in the knee of each knicker.

After rubbing his elbows, which he had grazed against the rocks, he turned to speak to a little girl who was sitting on a tuft of heather, looking somewhat forlorn. A handsome collie dog, yellow-brown with a white ruffle round his neck, was lying impatiently at her feet, every now and again glancing up at his mistress with bright, inquiring eyes.

'Well, Tricksy,' said the boy; 'tired of waiting, eh?'

'Yes,' replied his sister, 'you've been a long time, and I'm cold. I don't see why I shouldn't go down the cliffs with the rest of you. Laddie's tired of waiting too.'

The collie rose upon hearing his name mentioned, and thrust his nose into the boy's hand, wagging his tail and looking as though he would say, 'Come along now, do; and tell the others to come; you've played at that dangerous game long enough; let's all have a jolly scamper after rabbits!'

A red cap appeared over the edge of the cliff, followed immediately by a laughing face framed in a crop of fair curly hair; then a girl scrambled on to firm ground.

'Hulloa, Reggie! are you there already?' she said. 'How many have you got?'

'Five,' said Reggie, displaying the contents of his pockets; 'an auk's, two puffin's, and two kittiwake's. Aren't they prettily marked?'

'Beauties,' replied the girl, examining the eggs. 'Better get Neil to blow them for you; he always does it the best. I have only two, and another broke as I was getting it out; but oh, it was glorious down on these ledges! I'd like to have a scramble like this every morning!'

'I daresay,' broke in an exasperated little voice; 'fine fun for you others to get up at four in the morning when the steamer isn't expected until six, and go scrambling about on the rocks, getting sea-birds' eggs, saying that you'll only be five minutes, and then stay an hour!'

The child spoke in little rushes and gushes, and her eyes twinkled and looked pathetic by turns in her little dark, round face.

'An hour, Tricksy! It can't have been so long as that!'

'Indeed it was, Marjorie, because I have Reggie's watch; he left it with me, and it has been rather tiresome waiting here, when you know I mayn't climb the rocks as you do.'

'Poor Tricksy, what a shame! It's too bad of us, leaving you alone all that time. Just wait until you are a year or two older, and then your mother will let you climb like the rest of us. Who would have thought that we had been away so long! Time *does* go so quickly when you're scrambling about for eggs!'

She looked around with bright, fearless blue eyes; a tall, slight girl of fifteen, with a face so tanned by sun and wind as almost to have lost its extreme fairness, and with the quick, free movements which speak of perfect health and an open-air life.

'Hulloa,' said Reggie suddenly; 'there's the steamer!'

'Where?' asked both the girls eagerly.

'Over there, just rounding the headland, quite in the distance; you can see the trail of smoke, She won't be in for some time yet.'

For a minute or two the young people stood watching the grey line upon the horizon; then Marjorie said—

'She's coming along pretty quickly. Hadn't we better call the others and let them know?'

'Yes, do,' said Reggie; and hollowing their hands, they shouted, 'Neil!—Hamish!—hulloa!—the steamer!'

Their voices were blown back to them by the wind; but the lad on the rope happening to look up, the others pointed energetically out to sea, where the hull of the steamer was now becoming visible.

The boy glanced round; then climbed quickly hand over hand up the rope, and joined the others.

'The steamer at last,' said Reggie. 'See, she is just rounding Erricha Point

now; she won't be long in coming in. Isn't it jolly about the measles, Neil?

'Jolly for those who didn't happen to take them,' suggested Marjorie.

'Allan's holidays began six weeks sooner than they would have done if the boys hadn't all been sent home,' continued Reggie.

'He is coming just when we're having the best fun,' said Marjorie, watching the steamer with thoughtful eyes; 'what jolly times we'll have now. That was an awfully good idea of yours, Neil.'

The tall lad looked gratified. He was a handsome youth of about seventeen, dressed in the rough clothes of a fisherman, but refined in appearance, with a straight nose, dark blue eyes, and curly black hair.

'I will be thinking that you and the others had as much to do with it as I had, Miss Marjorie,' he replied.

'Not at all, old fellow,' said Reggie, who always spoke to his friend as though he were a boy of his own age; 'not at all; we never could have made the place what it is if it hadn't been for you. Hulloo, Hamish, old chap,' he added good-humouredly, as a somewhat sleepy-looking, fair-haired boy joined the group—'reached the top?'

Marjorie looked angry, as she always did when Reggie Stewart assumed patronising airs towards her brother.

'Yes,' replied Hamish simply; 'I thought there was no hurry, as the steamer won't be in for a while, and I was trying to reach down for these little things. Look, Tricksy, I thought you might like to have them—two young puffins, not long hatched.'

'O Hamish, what *lovely* little things!' cried Tricksy, her eyes growing large and her little round face dimpling with pleasure; 'it *was* good of you to get them for me.'

At this moment Laddie, who had been standing impatiently beside the group, pricked up his ears with a growl, looking at something a short distance away.

'What's the matter with you, Laddie?' said Reggie.

'He's looking at that man over there,' said Marjorie; 'who is it? He seems to want to speak to you, Neil.'

Neil looked round and then reddened slightly.

'It will be that poor fellow Gibbie Mackerrach, one of the band of gipsies who are staying here just now,' he said. 'Go away, Gibbie,' he added in Gaelic, shaking his head, since it was unlikely that the gipsy would be able to hear distinctly where he stood; 'I can't come.'

'It's the lad who isn't quite right in his mind, isn't it?' said Marjorie; 'the one whom you helped when his boat was upset on the loch?'

'Yes, it will be the poor fellow who had the ducking,' replied Neil. 'He will be quite harmless, only a little odd. You will never be seeing him with the others; he will always be wandering about by himself, and sleeping in all kinds of places. Och! but this will not do though; he is meddling with our coats that we took off when we were going to climb. Hi, Gibbie! you must not be touching these things.'

The lad's handsome, foolish face became overspread with a smile as Neil came towards him.

'Good Neil—kind Neil,' he said, patting him on the arm.

'Now go away, Gibbie; there's a good lad,' said Neil. 'I will have no time to be talking to you just now, and you must not be touching our things. You had better go home, Gibbie; they will be looking for you.'

'Be quiet, Laddie,' said Reggie authoritatively to the dog, who was still growling; 'he is not doing any harm.'

Laddie's remonstrances died away in a disapproving grumble, as though he were saying that he wasn't satisfied yet, and would renew the subject upon some future occasion.

'If you don't mind,' said Neil, who had been watching the retreating form of the gipsy, 'I will be going a bit of the way with him. He is trying to cross the Shaking Bog now, and he might be coming to harm in it.'

'All right, Neil; see you again later,' said the others.

'Tricksy, what's the matter with you?' cried Marjorie; 'you are trembling like anything, and your teeth are chattering in your head.'

'Cold,' said the little girl, whose small dark face was beginning to look pinched and unhappy; 'and I'm a little hungry too; we hadn't time to get anything to eat when you and Hamish came for us so early.'

'Comes of leaving you up there so long,' said Marjorie; 'how careless we were. Whatever will your mother say if you get ill.'

'Here, Tricksy,' said Hamish, 'take this coat, I don't want it; and look, the steamer is not far from the pier; she is coming in at a rate. We'll have to run if we want to get in as soon as she does. Take my hand, and I'll help you along, and you'll be warm in half a jiff.'

Tricksy smiled in a consoled way as she put her hand into the big outstretched one of the boy; and the whole party set off to race along the top of the cliff and down to where the pier jutted out from a small village nestled in a low part of the shore.

Laddie gave an excited bark and scampered beside the others, wondering what was going to happen.

The steamer was coming in pretty fast, and the pier being encumbered with nets and with crans of newly caught fish, they reached the mooring-place just as the hawser was being thrown ashore.

A bright-looking boy of about fourteen years of age was standing on deck with his hands in his pockets and a tweed cap on the back of his head, and a tall, sunburnt gentleman was beside him.

'Hulloa, father! hulloa, Allan!' said Tricksy, dimpling and smiling.

Laddie looked up for a minute; then burst into a joyous barking, and sprang several feet off the ground, turning round in the air before once more alighting upon his paws; then he tore up and down the pier like a dog out of his senses.

In the midst of his excitement the gangway was thrown across, and the sailors

stood aside to let the laird and his son leave the vessel.

Immediately Laddie bounded forward and danced around them, barking until the rocks echoed, and waving his bushy tail in an ecstasy of welcome.

'Down, Laddie, down,' said Mr. Stewart sternly; and Laddie, after looking up pathetically for a minute or two, contented himself with following Allan as closely as he could.

'How do you do, Marjorie?' said Allan. 'Hulloa, Hamish; glad to see you! Hulloa, Reggie!—Tricksy, why don't you keep your dog in better order?'

Tricksy looked hurt.

'He's a very well-trained dog,' she declared. 'He only barks because he is glad to see you.'

'Tricksy thinks she owns a dog,' said her father, smiling down at the little girl, 'but in reality the dog owns her.'

'Daddy, you are always teasing me,' said Laddie's eight-year-old mistress; 'he's a *most* obedient dog.—Laddie, come here.'

Laddie glanced at her and then looked up adoringly at Allan without stirring from his side.

'That is so like a dog,' observed Marjorie; 'they always make more fuss about a boy, even if he hardly notices them, than over a girl who is always petting them. It's too bad.'

Tricksy looked mortified.

'It's because he's so glad that Allan has come home,' she said. 'Just wait, Daddy; he'll obey me sometime.'

Mr. Stewart and Hamish smiled; but the others were clustering round Allan, asking questions.

'Had you a good journey, Allan? The steamer's very late. How are the measles? Are many of the boys ill? Lucky you didn't take it.'

'It's very jolly that you've got such long holidays, Allan,' said Tricksy, who was walking on her tip-toes with pleasurable anticipation. 'We've got such a jolly game at present; and Neil's helping us.'

'How is old Neil?' asked Allan.

'First-rate,' said Reggie. 'He was with us this morning, gathering eggs.'

'Gathering eggs!' said Allan; 'you've been up very early.'

'Yes,' replied Marjorie; 'Reggie and Tricksy heard that you were expected at six in the morning, so they rode over to ask us to be sure to come and meet you at the steamer. We got up ever so early—I don't know when; and what do you think? After we'd come all that long way those lazy people were still asleep!'

'Yes,' piped Tricksy; 'at four in the morning we were wakened by having pebbles thrown up at our windows, and we had to get up and dress in a brace of shakes.' (Reggie's face darkened. Tricksy was fond of using slang picked up from her brothers, and he felt it his duty to disapprove.) 'Then we didn't know what to do to fill up the time, so we went to Neil's mother's cottage, and Reggie knocked at Neil's window, so that he came out to see what was the matter; and we all went egg-gathering on the rocks.'

'Where's father?' said Allan suddenly; he has been left behind.'

'Go on—all of you!' called Mr. Stewart, who was engaged in talking to a respectably dressed man on the pier; 'don't wait for me.—Take Hamish and Marjorie home, Allan, and give them some breakfast, and tell your mother I shan't be long.'

'I wonder who that is with father,' said Reggie; 'I can't see his face. He looks like a stranger. Father is always having people coming to talk to him now that he has been made a J.P.'

'Allan,' said Marjorie, 'before we go to your house, I think we had better go into Mrs. MacAlister's and get a scone or a piece of oat-cake for Tricksy. She has gone far too long without food. You're hungry, aren't you, Tricksy?'

Tricksy nodded. Her little dark face was very pale, and she was struggling with a vexatious desire to cry.

'She always *will* insist upon doing what the rest of us do, that child,' said Marjorie in an undertone to Hamish; and Hamish looked kindly at the youngest member of the band.

'She has no end of pluck, the little kid,' he aid.

'We'll go to Mrs. MacAlister's shop,' said Marjorie. 'I am sure she must be up by now, and we'll be able to get something.'

The young folks pattered along the unevenly paved streets of the little village, which had the sea on one side and grassy cliffs on the other.

'It's curious what a lot of people are about so early,' said Marjorie, as they passed some knots of men and women standing in corners and talking. 'I wonder whether there is anything unusual going on.'

The party stopped at the door of a small shop which had some cakes and jars of sweets in the window, and a post-box let into the wall.

'Here's Mrs. MacAlister's,' said Marjorie; 'she has her shop open very early.'

The little place was in confusion. The shutters were down, but the shop had not been tidied, and Mrs. MacAlister herself, when she came forward to serve her customers, was pale and had red eyes.

'Is anything the matter, Mrs. MacAlister?' asked Marjorie, while the others looked at the untidy shop in surprise.

'Indeed, Miss Marjorie, I will just be having my shop broken into this night; and they will be opening the post-box and taking away a lot of the letters,' and the woman threw herself into a chair and began talking and lamenting in Gaelic, while the children crowded together open-eyed.

'No, Master Reggie—no, Miss Marjorie; do not be touching anything,' said Mrs. MacAlister hurriedly, as they approached the shattered letter-box; 'it hass all to remain as it iss until the chief constable and the laird hev seen it; and they will be bringing the Sheriff from Stornwell; it iss an unlucky day for a poor woman like me, whateffer.'

'It's a dreadful thing,' said Marjorie; 'I hope they'll catch the thief, Mrs.'

MacAlister.'

Mr. Stewart, accompanied by the stranger and the island constable, was approaching the door, so the young people trooped out into the street, feeling greatly excited.

'Who do you think has done it, Allan?' asked Tricksy in an awestruck voice.

Allan did not answer, and Reggie said, 'How can he tell, Tricksy?' somewhat curtly.

Tricksy subsided, and a cart laden with peats coming by, Allan stopped the driver and asked him to give them a 'lift.'

The man helped Tricksy into the cart, and the others scrambled in the best way they could, and settled themselves among the peats.

'It's a dreadful business this,' said Marjorie, her eyes shining brighter and bluer with excitement.

'I don't believe such a thing has ever happened with us before,' said Allan; 'our people have always had the credit of being very honest.'

'Who can it have been?' said Hamish, after considering for a minute. 'I can't believe that any of our people would have done it.'

'There will be no end of a row,' said Reggie, speaking for the first time. 'Father will have his work cut out for him, as he is a J.P. now.'

'Yes, and the Sheriff coming here, and everything,' said Marjorie. 'How will you like to meet your friend the Sheriff again, Tricksy?'

There was no reply.

Tricksy had fallen asleep among the peats, her head pillowed upon her arm, and her soft, dark waves of hair falling over her face.

The others began to realise how sleepy they were, after having risen before sunrise and spent several hours in the strong sea air, and in spite of excitement, conversation languished while the cart jolted along and finally halted at the gates

of Ardnavaire, the manor-house of the island of Inchkerra.

CHAPTER II

THE PIRATES' DEN

'Neil, old fellow,' Allan was saying, 'I wonder how much longer these people are going to keep us waiting.'

The two were in a boat that was bobbing up and down upon the waves. The shore close by was low and sandy, with some seaweed-covered stones forming a convenient landing-place. On one side the bay swept round in a curve ending in a rocky headland; and on the other arose low cliffs with brambles and sea-pinks growing in the crevices. A breeze was blowing shoreward; and the waves curled and broke upon the beach with a pleasant sound.

'Nothing more found out about the robbery yet, I suppose?' said Allan, after they had waited a little longer.

'Nothing at all,' said Neil. 'It iss a most extraordinary affair, for there iss not a man on the island one could effer be suspecting of doing such a thing; and if it wass a stranger, the wonder iss how he will be managing to come and go without being seen. The letter-box wass broken into from inside the house, and whoever will be doing it must have got in after MacAlister and his wife wass gone to bed. It iss a wonder they will not have been hearing anything.'

'There's the MacGregors' pony-cart at last,' said Allan, 'with Marjorie and Hamish in it. Let's bring the boat to the landing-stones. They will leave the trap at Mrs. MacMurdoch's cottage until we come back.'

A man came out of the cottage and held the little shaggy pony while Marjorie and her brother took a variety of miscellaneous articles out of the cart.

'Hulloa, Allan! hulloa, Neil!' they cried; 'where are the others?'

'Don't know,' said Allan, 'they are dawdling somewhere, and we'll never get off at this rate. What's all this that you've got with you?'

'Things for the hiding-place,' said Marjorie; 'and a nice lot of trouble we've had to bring them all this way without breaking any of them. The pony was particularly tricky, not having been exercised. You'll get a basket of crockery, Allan, if you'll go and take it out of the trap. Hamish is carrying some provisions and a tablecloth, and I've got some knives and forks, and just look at this!—It's a girdle for making scones with.'

'All right,' said Allan; 'chuck them into the boat, and get in yourself. But won't it be a little too civilised, bringing all these things with you?'

'Not at all,' said Marjorie; 'wait till we show you what a jolly place we're making. We can spend whole days there without ever coming home, and we must be able to cook dinner and tea for ourselves. We've had no end of trouble to get all these things out of the kitchen without Elspeth seeing us. She's so mean, you know, about letting us carry away anything that doesn't belong to us.'

'All right,' said Allan; 'but when are Reggie and Tricksy going to turn up? It would serve them jolly well right if we went off without them.'

'There they are in the distance,' said Hamish; 'at least, these seem to be the dogs.'

'That's certainly Laddie,' said Allan, standing up and looking, 'and that little black speck seems to be Carlo; but surely those can't be Reggie and Tricksy with them?'

All stared at two curious figures that looked like animated bundles of hay coming along the road.

'It is Reggie and Tricksy,' said Neil, whose sailor's sight enabled him to see farthest; 'and they're carrying something.'

'Carrying *what?*' said Allan, more and more puzzled.

'Perhaps they're bringing straw for bedding,' suggested Marjorie.

'Then if they are, they're not going to fill up the boat with it on this trip,' said

Allan decidedly. 'We shall be heavily enough loaded already, with all of ourselves; and they're bringing both the dogs.'

As they came nearer the two walking bundles proved to be indeed Reggie and Tricksy, carrying enormous bundles of ferns. Reggie's face peeped, hot and perspiring, round one side of his bundle, which he clasped with the utmost extent of his arms; and Tricksy, with a smaller burden, looked with a long-suffering expression over the fronds which tickled her little nose. Beside them Laddie stepped lightly along, his tail curling over his back; while in the rear a small King Charles spaniel waddled painfully along upon his little short legs; his tongue hanging out, and his long ears sweeping the dust of the road.

'Well,' said Allan; 'whatever are they up to now?'

Reggie came down to the shore, picking his way cautiously over the stepping-stones.

'You might hold the boat steady for me,' he said in a half-stifled voice; then, stepping on to the thwarts, he lost his footing and fell forward, load and all, into the boat.

Promptly he struggled to his feet and wiped his forehead, looking around with a self-congratulatory smile.

'There,' he said, 'these will be a great improvement to the place. Got them up, roots and all.'

Meanwhile Hamish had relieved Tricksy of her load, and Neil was helping the little girl over the stones.

'Why, Tricksy,' said Marjorie, as the little girl took her seat, 'you *have* got yourself into a state!'

'I know, but I couldn't help it,' said Tricksy, looking ruefully down at her little black hands and muddy frock. 'Reggie wanted the ferns for our garden, and we've been digging away with pieces of wood in the banks of the burn. Some of them had roots ever so deep down, and we couldn't help making ourselves muddy. I'll wash my face and hands in the sea.'

'Why ever did you bring *that* thing with you?' said Allan in disgust, pointing

to the little dog who was standing on the shore. Already Laddie had sprung on board and was lying curled up on the stern seat, confident of his welcome. 'We'll have to leave him in one of the cottages until we come back.'

'No, no!' cried Marjorie and Tricksy; 'Carlo must come too.'

'Let him come,' said Hamish; 'he won't be in the way.'

The little dog, who had been frisking about and wagging his tail, sat up and begged, looking from one to the other of the young people with a beseeching whine.

'You darling,' cried both the girls; and Tricksy sprang out of the boat and lifted him in.

Allan looked contemptuous as he pushed off; but Laddie gave a little yelp of satisfaction, and the little spaniel curled himself cosily in Tricksy's lap, while Marjorie leaned over and petted him when the boys were not looking.

The steady strokes of the rowers brought the boat rapidly through the water, while the herring gulls flew screaming around, and a small island in the middle of the firth came nearer and nearer.

Presently the sea became shallower, and the boat shot up on the beach.

'Here we are,' said Marjorie, springing out first; 'now you must see what we've made of the place, Allan. Haul up the boat, Hamish; and Reggie, you might hand out some of these things. Take care you don't drop any of them. Every one take something, and let's come.'

Laddie waited impatiently while the articles were distributed among the party, and then followed his young friends with an anticipatory bark. Carlo was lifted out by Hamish, and immediately set off to chase a gull which sailed majestically out to sea, and left him barking on the shore.

'Now, Allan,' said Reggie, his dark eyes twinkling; 'you are going to see what we've been about.'

The island consisted of a beach, rocky on the one side, sandy on the other, enclosing a stretch of grass and heather. A tiny hill rose by a deserted shepherd's

hut, and a miniature burn trickled down to the sea. The place had once been used as a grazing ground for a few sheep, but of late years had been entirely uninhabited.

'Now look, Allan,' said Reggie, as they stood by the bit of dyke which protected the windy side of the cottage.

'Wh-e-ew,' said Allan; 'you have made a jolly place of it!'

'Rebuilt the cottage, which had been falling to ruins,' said Reggie. 'That was mostly Neil's doing, and Hamish and I helped. Filled up the holes in the thatch with fresh heather. We all worked at that part of it. Then you see we've made a bit of a garden and thrown up the turf for a dyke on the side where the stone one was broken down. The shells on the path were brought up from the beach of this very island. Isn't it jolly?'

'Awfully fine,' said Allan. 'Have you given the place a name yet?'

'Why,' said Marjorie, 'it's our Pirates' Den, and we mean to have all kinds of fun in it all through the summer. The boat is called the *Pirates' Craft* now, and we are going to have no end of fine doings, particularly if Neil has time to join us.'

Allan shoved his cap to the back of his head, and looked about him again with brightening eyes.

'Awfully jolly,' was all that he could say. 'Neil, you *are* a fellow for hitting upon good ideas.'

'Now come along and see the inside,' said Reggie, leading the way.

'This fine strong door was made by Neil,' said Marjorie; 'a fine time we had getting it over in the boat. We haven't got glass for the windows yet, and I don't suppose we ever shall; but it doesn't matter. What do you think of our kitchen?'

Hamish pushed open the door, and they all crowded in to see how Allan would look.

'Well,' said Allan, 'you *have* done a lot to the place!'

The clay floor had been swept dean and had been repaired in places; the hearth had been cleared out, and a kettle hung from a hook in the wide chimney. Some gaily-coloured pictures had been nailed up over the damp stains on the walls, and there were some rough chairs and a somewhat rickety table. Altogether it was a fairly comfortable little cottage.

'You must have worked very hard at this,' said Allan.

'Indeed we have,' said Marjorie. 'We've been gardening, and hammering, and carpentering all our spare time since you left; Tricksy and all of us. We'd never have stuck to it as we did if it hadn't been for Neil.'

'Good old Neil,' said Allan, giving the elder lad a friendly pat on the shoulder. 'Well, I must say it's an awfully jolly place, and I wish I'd been here while you were working on it.'

'There's plenty to do yet,' said Marjorie; 'we are going to make all kinds of improvements. Mother and Mrs. Stewart can't make out how we manage to spend so much time by ourselves and never come to any harm.'

They stood looking around for a few minutes and then Tricksy's voice broke in, with a little laugh in it, 'Yes, these are very nice chairs, and it's a very nice table; but are we going to get anything to put on it?'

All the others laughed.

'Well,' said Allan, 'now I come to think of it, I *am* a bit peckish. What do you say, Hamish?'

'Yes,' said Marjorie energetically; 'bustle about, all of you, and we'll have some dinner before we do anything else. Get some peats, will you, Reggie; some of the shepherd's peat-stack is still there, and it comes in very usefully for us.'

A fire was soon burning on the hearth, and Marjorie suggested that the boys should go to the rocks on the farther side of the island and try to catch a few fish while she and Tricksy made scones and boiled the kettle.

The boys scrambled out as far as they could and threw out their lines; and when half-a-dozen rock-cod had been caught they returned to find Marjorie and Tricksy very busy over the fire, while a pile of hot bannocks smoked beside

them.

'Take the dishes and set the table,' said Marjorie, rubbing her eyes, which smarted a little with 'peat reek,' for the chimney did not vent very well.

'Where shall we set it?' asked Reggie.

'Outside, of course; what's the good of being in a house when it isn't raining? Besides, it's smoky here.'

A tablecloth was spread on a sheltered piece of turf, and secured at the corners with stones to keep it from blowing away; then the dishes were set out upon it.

'What are the dogs about?' asked Marjorie, coming out of the cottage with a plate of smoking fish.

'Rabbiting, I bet,' said Reggie, and began shouting, 'Laddie! Carlo!'

In a few minutes there was a scamper, and Laddie's head appeared above a ridge, waiting with pricked-up ears to know what was required of him.

'Dinner, Lad!' said Reggie.

Laddie gave a yelp, sprang up and turned a somersault in the air and came running, followed by Carlo, who yapped with excitement, his ears flying behind him and his curly black coat covered with earth and stalks from burrowing in the rabbit-holes.

'Trust, Laddie,' said Tricksy; and the collie lay down obediently with his nose on his paws. Carlo stretched himself beside him, but was unable to restrain his impatience, and sat up more than once and begged, undeterred by warnings from Laddie, who feared that his little friend's disobedience might get him into trouble.

'Isn't it awfully jolly having dinner out-of-doors?' said Marjorie, whose short curly hair was blowing about her face and glistening in the sun, while her blue eyes danced with merriment.

'Much nicer than indoors,' said Tricksy. 'I wish we could live here altogether.'

'Jolly tired you'd get of it,' growled Reggie; 'wait till it rains, and you find yourself shut up with half-a-dozen other people, and both the dogs, in one little smoky room. You'd tell another tale then.'

'What I will be wondering, Miss Marjorie,' said Neil; 'iss why you will all be taking so much trouble to keep every one but ourselves from knowing that you have this place?'

'It is only for a little while,' replied Marjorie. 'Of course we will bring father and mother over here for a picnic some day and give them a surprise.'

'And *my* father and mother too,' piped Tricksy; 'we wouldn't want to keep a thing from Mummie, except just for a little while, for fun.'

'Then how iss it that you will be finding so much pleasure in having a secret just now?'

Marjorie looked out to sea with a puzzled expression.

'I don't know,' she said at last, with a little laugh; 'except that it's such fun knowing that we've got a secret!'

'I've been thinking,' said Allan, who was lying full length upon a ridge and looking towards Inchkerra, 'while we are having such a jolly time of it over here, what must be the feelings of the man who stole those letters, now he knows that the police are after him!'

The others all looked towards the island, where they could see the low, grey cottages of the little village.

'It seems strange that they haven't got him yet,' observed Marjorie.

'I met MacLean the constable from Stornwell this morning,' said Hamish, 'and he told me that they had no trace as yet, and that they believed it must have been done by some stranger who came over from the mainland, and got away immediately after the robbery.'

'I hope so,' said Allan; 'it isn't nice to think of any of our people being dishonest.'

'If it was a stranger,' said Reggie; 'they may never catch him.'

'I heard father say that he would be traced by the money-orders,' replied Allan. 'It seems that there were several post-office orders in a registered letter addressed to father, and that is one of the letters that is missing. Father says that the thief is sure to try to make use of the orders sooner or later, and they have sent the numbers to every post-office in the kingdom.'

'And then the man will be caught!' said Tricksy in an awestruck tone.

'That will be the best chance of getting him,' replied Allan.

'The fellow will find himself in the wrong box then, won't he, Neil?'

'I suppose he will,' replied Neil, rather absently.

'I hope it won't turn out to have been some one on the island,' said Reggie.

'I hope not,' said Marjorie, looking over to the green fields and brown heather moors of Inchkerra. 'Isn't it dreadful to think that it may have been some one whom we know; some one we have spoken to quite lately?'

'Well, Miss Marjorie,' said Neil, 'do you not think we had better be getting the table cleared and the things put away? We have plenty of work before us, if we are to plant all Reggie's ferns; and we must not stay too late, for it is anxious about you that Mrs. Stewart and Mrs. MacGregor will be.'

'Not they,' said Tricksy; 'no one is anxious when they know that you are with us, Neil.'

Neil looked gratified, and the young people began to collect the dishes.

'Now, don't you bother about this piece of work,' said Marjorie, when the boys had carried the plates into the cottage; 'you go and amuse yourselves out-of-doors while Tricksy and I wash the dishes.'

'I wonder why you don't let them do their share of the disagreeable work, Marjorie,' said Tricksy a little discontentedly, when the boys had vanished.

'Pooh,' said Marjorie, with her arms in the hot water; 'what's the good? They'd

only hate it, and besides, boys always do these things badly.'

When the dishes and cooking utensils had been arranged upon the shelves, Marjorie and Tricksy went out into the garden, their eyes somewhat dim with peat smoke.

'Come along and help, you two,' cried Reggie; 'must get these things in this afternoon, or they'll be dead before we come back again. Bother it, though; we haven't enough tools to go round.'

'Here, Miss Tricksy,' interposed Neil; 'you take this little spade. This sharp piece of wood will be doing just as well for me.'

'And I've got a pointed piece of slate; I can scrape holes with that,' said Allan. 'Take this old trowel, Marjorie; it hasn't a handle, but I don't suppose you'll mind.'

For a long time the young people worked with a will. The sun beat down upon the unshaded island, and the breeze blew in from the sea, bringing a salt taste to the lips and blowing the girls' hair about. The waves babbled round the shore, and the gulls sailed overhead and screamed.

When the sun's rays began to slant, and the pile of ferns was diminishing, Neil kept glancing over his shoulder to watch the tide.

'There now, that's done,' said Reggie, pressing the earth round the roots of the last fern and then rising; 'it's a jolly long time it has taken us. What shall we do next?'

'I think we ought to go now,' said Hamish. 'What do you say, Neil?'

'It is high time we wass making a start,' said Neil. 'The tide iss rising fast, and the beach iss half covered already.'

'What a pity,' said Tricksy regretfully; 'we've had such a jolly day of it, haven't we, Marjorie?'

'Awfully jolly,' replied Marjorie; 'but we'll come again soon.—You'll come too, won't you, Neil?'

'I will be coming as soon as I can be sparing the time, you may be sure of that, Miss Marjorie,' replied the lad with a smile.

The dogs were recalled from the rabbit-holes and came, their faces covered with sand, and the boat was pushed off from the shore.

Half-way across the firth, Marjorie turned and looked back regretfully.

'What a pity we have to go home,' she said. 'It would be awfully jolly to spend all night in the cottage.'

'Look to your oar, Marjorie,' sang out Allan, for the boat was beginning to turn round.

In a short time they reached the landing-stones, of which the lower ones were already submerged.

'Won't you all look in and see Mother before you go home?' suggested Neil, after the boat had been drawn up and secured to the mooring-chain. 'She'd be pleased if you'd come and say good evening to her; and Miss Tricksy, you would be seeing the little puffins that Hamish gave you; Mother tells me that they're coming along finely.'

Mrs. Macdonnell's cottage was not far distant, and the young people accepted Neil's invitation.

'I'll just tell Mother that you're here,' said Neil, lifting the latch and vanishing in the interior of the cottage.

'I wonder who Mrs. Macdonnell has with her,' said Allan, in an undertone. 'I hear voices inside. Perhaps we had better not go in this evening.'

They waited for some time; but still no one came to bid them enter.

'This is strange,' said Marjorie. 'I wonder whether Neil has forgotten us.'

CHAPTER III

A SURPRISE

'Allan,' said Mrs. Stewart, coming downstairs, 'your father has to go to Stornwell and will not be back until to-morrow, so there will be no cricket match this afternoon. I have a note from Mrs. MacGregor, asking you all to spend the day at Corranmore instead.'

'All right, Mother,' replied Allan; 'when are we to be there?'

'Mrs. MacGregor asks you to come early,' said Mrs. Stewart, consulting the letter; 'I had better send you in the dog-cart, as it's rather far to walk. Duncan is driving your father to the steamer, but he won't be long.'

'Don't bother about the dog-cart, Mother,' said Allan; 'it would be much jollier to walk; and we'd like to look in at Mrs. Macdonnell's cottage on the way and ask what's the matter with Neil. We haven't seen him for a day or two.'

'I wouldn't go there to-day, I think,' interposed Mrs. Stewart hurriedly. 'I don't think Neil will be at home. I'm afraid the walk would be too much for Tricksy,' she went on quickly, for the young people were looking surprised.

'Not if we start now, I think, Mother, and give Tricksy a rest now and again. What do you say, Tricksy?'

'Of course I can walk,' said Tricksy. 'I shan't be a bit tired, Mother.'

Mrs. Stewart looked at her little daughter with a smile.

'I am afraid of your overdoing it, Tricksy; she said. 'You are always trying to do as much as the others, who are so much older than yourself. Well, do as you like; I leave you in Allan's charge, and he will see that you are not made to walk too fast.'

'All right, Mother,' said Reggie; 'but won't you come a bit of the way with us?'

'Not this morning, dear. I will come with you some other time.'

'All right, Mother,' said Reggie; 'but it's a long time since you've gone anywhere with us. Cut away upstairs, Tricksy, and get your hat; it's time we started if we are to take rests on the way.'

'Don't you think Mother is very quiet?' observed Tricksy, as the three young people, accompanied by Laddie, were crossing the moor. 'I wonder whether she's sorry about something?'

'I did not notice anything,' said Allan.

Tricksy had almost said, 'No, boys never do, but checked herself in time.

The road between Ardnavaire and Corranmore led across the northern part of the island, through fields and moorland. All the turnings of the way brought into view fascinating glimpses of the sea, running inland between brown rocks. Fishing-boats with white and russet sails lay upon water turned to a sheet of silver by the sunlight, and grey and white gulls floated about and screamed.

The breeze was blowing shoreward, tempering the warmth of the sun and bringing brine and the odour of seaweed to mingle with the perfume of bell-heather from the moors.

Laddie stepped lightly beside his young friends, waving his tail in the air, and now and again pausing to investigate a rabbit-burrow or an interesting tuft of heather or cotton-grass.

'Well, Tricksy, getting tired yet?' said Allan to his little sister after they had walked between three and four miles.

'Not a bit,' replied Tricksy, trudging along determinedly, but with a little roll in her gait which betrayed that she *was*.

'I think we'll rest awhile,' said Allan, and the three young folk sat down upon a patch of fragrant, springy heather, while Laddie, after looking at them for a minute, surprised at such an early halt, curled himself up beside them.

'I wish Father would get the yacht out soon,' said Allan, watching the sea and the fishing-boats.

'Yes,' said Reggie; 'he is very late this year.'

'He won't be long now,' said Allan. 'We are going to have visitors soon. Father has written to ask Graham major and Graham minor and their Pater to come and stay with us as they have such long holidays this year, owing to the measles.'

'Who are they?' inquired Reggie.

'Fellows from my school. Did you never hear me speak of them?'

'I didn't,' said Tricksy. 'Are they nice boys?'

'Decent enough.'

'Big or little?'

'One's a small fellow; only been at school one term. The other's bigger; not more than eleven, though; more of an age for Reggie than for me.'

Reggie looked indignant, but said nothing. There was nothing that annoyed him so much as to be reminded that he was not yet a very big boy.

'Well,' said Allan, 'perhaps we had better be going, if you have rested enough, Tricksy. Hulloo, there's Euan Macdonnell, the coastguard, Neil's cousin; we'll stop and ask him if he can come out fishing with us some day soon.'

'Good day, Euan,' said the young people, pausing to speak, but the coastguard only saluted and passed on as though he were in a hurry.

Reggie looked at Allan in surprise.

'Been sent on a message, I suppose,' said Allan, 'and hasn't time to talk. The whole island seems to be upset by this affair at the post-office. I wish they'd hurry up and catch the fellow and be done with it. What's the matter with Laddie now?'

The collie, who had been sniffing about, following up a scent, had suddenly given a bark and sprang over a dyke, and was now yelping and baying excitedly as he jumped about on the other side.

'Hamish and Marjorie, I bet,' said Allan; and sure enough, two heads appeared above the dyke, a good-natured one and a mischievous one, the latter

crowned by a scarlet cap on the top of a mass of fair curly hair.

'We thought we'd give you a surprise,' they said, 'but Laddie spoilt it for us. Good dog, Laddie, lie down,' for Laddie's manifestations of delight were taking the form of a loud baying which drowned all attempts at conversation.

'Trust, Laddie!' said Tricksy in her little soft voice; but Laddie took no notice.

'Laddie, trust!' said Reggie severely; and Laddie subsided at once, surprised that his attentions should be so little appreciated.

Tricksy uttered a reproachful sigh, caused by her dog's inattention to her commands.

'When does your mother expect us?' inquired Allan.

'Any time before dinner,' said Hamish. 'That's half-past one, and it's only eleven now. We've got any amount of time. What do you say to coming and looking at the gipsy encampment in the Corrie Wood? They're breaking up camp and leaving the island to-morrow, so we may not have another chance of seeing them.'

'All right,' said the others, and they trooped off to the tiny wood nestling in a hollow through which a burn trickled, and from whence a trail of smoke came blowing across the fresh green foliage of the trees.

All was bustle and stir in the gipsy encampment. Two carts were standing at the entrance to the hollow, and upon these the gipsies were piling their household goods—iron pots and kettles, bundles of rags, some gaudy crockery, and a variety of miscellaneous articles whose use it would be hard to determine.

At the sight of the young people the gipsies smiled a welcome, and the men took off their hats. Some small black-eyed children toddled forward, and stood staring, with their fingers in their mouths.

'Trust, Laddie!' said Allan; for two mongrel curs had rushed out and barked, whereupon Laddie had stiffened his back and was growling defiance.

Laddie was obliged to content himself with glaring at the other dogs and making a few remarks to express his contempt for gipsy dogs, and his view of

their impertinence in presuming to look at his young ladies and gentlemen.

'Tell your fortune, pretty lady,' said a woman to Marjorie, with a smile which displayed her white teeth; but Marjorie shook her head.

'You are leaving Inchkerra?' said Allan to one of the men.

'Yes, sir. We start for Ireland to-morrow, in a sailing boat.'

'You haven't stayed very long,' observed Marjorie.

'Three months, lady. A long time for the gipsies.'

'Will you ever come back again?' inquired Marjorie.

The man shook his head.

'Can't say, lady. Maybe yes, maybe no. We never can tell. Thanks, master; good luck to you,' he said, touching his straggling forelock as Allan slipped a few coins into his hand.

'Good-bye, masters; good-bye, pretty ladies,' cried the gipsies in farewell.

Some distance from the hollow, a tall, loosely-made youth rose unexpectedly from where he had been basking in the sun, by the side of a dyke which screened him from the cold wind.

In the weak, handsome face and roving eyes the young people recognised Gibbie, the half-witted gipsy lad. An expression of disappointment crossed his face as he looked over the group and seemed to miss some one.

'Neil no with you,' he murmured. 'Want to see Neil. Was not at home.'

'Can we give him any message from you?' inquired Allan.

'Tell Neil, Gibbie go away. Long way; want to see Neil to say good-bye.'

'Very well,' said Allan. 'When we see him, we'll tell him.'

A crafty smile flitted over the lad's face, and he lowered his voice to a mysterious whisper.

'Neil will be pleased soon,' he said. 'Good Neil, good Neil. Neil will be very rich, richer than the Gorjos; has a piece of paper worth hundreds of pounds. Tell him to look for it. Gibbie go long way off.'

'Poor fellow,' observed Allan to Hamish, as the gipsy returned to his lazy basking on the heather; 'he is quite crazy; can't speak connectedly for two minutes at a time.'

'There is one good point in Gibbie's character,' said Hamish; 'he knows that Neil saved his life, and he is grateful. I think the island won't be sorry to see the last of him, though. He hasn't lived with his tribe for weeks. He had a den of his own in the banks of the burn that flows past our house; a queer place, far up in the hills.'

'Look,' said Reggie, 'that must be the gipsies' boat over there, off the south side of the island; and a little boat is going out to it with some of their things.'

'And there are the carts going down,' said Allan; 'it won't be long before the camp is broken up.'

'Pity we couldn't go gipsying for a little while,' observed Marjorie; 'just for the summer. It would be such fun wandering about from place to place. But look at the tide coming up in Ceteran Bay; the waves are dashing on the shore and making the most beautiful foam. Would there be time for us to go down to the beach for a little while?'

'Plenty,' said Hamish; 'Mother doesn't expect us before one o'clock.'

'Come along, then,' said Marjorie; 'let's run;' and they all raced down to the shore, Laddie with them, the dog jumping with all four paws off the ground, and barking in anticipation of sport.

Breeze and tide together were flinging up little breakers which curled on the shore and then retreated, only to be sent up again by the next roller. A fascinating game was to run down to the very edge of a retreating wave, with one's toes almost within the line of foam; to wait until it gathered itself up again, and then fly to avoid being overtaken by the water which came hissing and bubbling over the pebbles.

Laddie, after watching the fun for a minute or two, suddenly rushed off with a

bark, and returned dragging a huge flat stone which he deposited at Allan's feet; then he stood eagerly waiting, making a variety of signs to show Allan that he expected him to do something with it.

'Fetch, Laddie!' said Allan, throwing the stone as far as he could.

Laddie uttered a joyful yelp and sprang after it, returning with it in his mouth to ask Allan to throw it again.

'Laddie, fetch!' cried Allan, throwing it into the sea this time, and Laddie plunged into the water and came back dripping.

He laid down the stone and shook himself, to the great inconvenience of Marjorie; then he jumped about, baying for Allan to throw the stone once more.

The shouts and laughter and Laddie's barking were making a tumult which vied with the noise of wind and waves, when Hamish touched Allan's arm and pointed to the sky.

'Oh, I say,' said Allan, 'we really ought to go; it's going to pour like anything, and the girls will get wet.'

'I'm wet enough already, I think, especially about the feet,' murmured Tricksy; while Marjorie's lips tightened. She did not like the boys to show that they thought her less hardy than themselves.

Some large drops on the stones warned them to hasten; and they reached the doctor's house just as the storm burst.

Mrs. MacGregor, a pretty, young-looking lady, ran down into the hall to meet them.

'My dear Tricksy,' she cried, as she took the little girl's wet, cold hand, 'you are soaking! Your feet are drenched!'

'It's all right, Mrs. MacGregor,' piped Tricksy; 'we've been having a fine game. Hamish, you've let Laddie in, and his feet are making wet marks all over the floor!'

'Never mind Laddie,' said Mrs. MacGregor; 'take her upstairs and give her

dry shoes and stockings, Marjorie, and then come to dinner, all of you.'

'You know, Marjorie,' observed Tricksy, as the elder girl somewhat anxiously assisted her to pull off her wet stockings; 'you know you are always telling me that we must be plucky and do all the things they want us to do when we play with boys, or else they think we're a bore.'

'That's all very well, Tricksy,' replied Marjorie, 'but what shall we do if you get ill? Your mother would stop your playing with us altogether if that happened.'

'I get ill with playing out of doors and having fun,' returned Tricksy scornfully; 'I'm not such a duffer, Marjorie.'

Just before dinner Dr. MacGregor came in, 'such a dear of a man,' as Tricksy had once described him, with bright blue eyes and curly hair like Marjorie, and a kind expression like Hamish.

'How do you do, Reggie?' he said. 'How do you do, Allan? Do you like school as much as ever? My dear,' turning to his wife, 'I shall have to start immediately after lunch, and here is a note asking you to——'

The remainder of the sentence was lost, but the boys could see that both Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor were looking very grave.

'I am sorry that Mrs. MacGregor and I must leave you,' said the doctor while the meal was in progress, 'but I daresay you will manage to amuse yourselves without getting into mischief; eh, Marjorie?' smiling at his daughter, whose eyes flashed a saucy answer. 'You can have the boat down if the rain keeps off.'

But the rain showed no disposition to keep off, despite the anxious glances which were directed towards the window. When the clouds gathered once more in threatening masses, and the rain came lashing the panes, Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor took their departure in a closed carriage, warning Hamish that the boat was not to be used unless the sea went down.

'Bother!' said Tricksy, looking at the waves, which were tumbling over each other and whitening with foam; 'what are we to do while it rains?'

'Sit round the nursery fire, of course, and talk,' said Marjorie.

An immense pile of peats was built up on the hearth of the cosy, untidy room which had been the MacGregors' nursery; and the young folk sat round the 'ingle-neuk' and discussed matters dear to the heart of gamesome youth.

Suddenly Marjorie looked up and said, 'Hurrah! the rain's stopped. What shall we do?'

'Too stormy to get the boat out,' said Hamish, rising and going to the window; 'it's still very rough, and there will be another squall soon.'

'I know,' said Marjorie; 'let's play hide-and-peek. No, not a rubbishy game in the house,' she said, meeting Allan's look of disapproval; 'a real good game out of doors, in the garden and the sheds and the ruins. The rain will only make it jollier, and those who mind getting wet are funks.'

With the wind blowing in gusts, and sudden showers splashing down from all the roofs, the game promised some fun. Dr. MacGregor's was a first-rate place for hide-and-peek, with a number of outhouses built round a paved court, and the ruins of an old castle overlooking the garden.

Marjorie and Reggie stayed at 'home' in the front lobby, where they could hear calls both from out of doors or within; and the hiders dispersed themselves quickly.

Soon three shouts were heard, coming from different directions; and the pursuers ran out into the rain, which was beginning to fall again.

Hamish was quickly discovered in a window of the old ruin, for he could not resist the temptation of grinning good-naturedly down from his perch; but he escaped along the broken flooring while they were waiting at the foot of a stairway, and reached 'home' before they were aware.

'You didn't give us enough of a chase,' cried Marjorie to him through the streaming pane; then she went off, rather annoyed, to look for the others.

They hunted for some time among the outhouses, getting shower-baths of drops from the eaves; but no one was to be found. At last they saw a movement among some straw in the byre, and Marjorie made a dash forward, just too late to catch Allan, who slipped out and made for the door.

Reggie barred his passage.

'Unfair—different directions!' cried Allan; for it was the rule among the Stewarts and MacGregors that when two were chasing one they must both keep to the same route; and Reggie stood aside.

They were pretty fairly matched, pursuers and pursued; and for a long time Allan led the two others a chase among the maze of buildings; but at last, his foot slipping upon the wet paving-stones, he was captured by a bold dash from Marjorie.

'Only Tricksy now,' gasped Marjorie, pushing back her wet hair, which was clinging about her face; 'we haven't seen a sign of her; where can she be?'

'You have run enough,' suggested Allan; 'go in and let one of us take your place.'

Marjorie flashed a glance of indignation at him, annoyed that he should suppose that she was not going to see the thing out, and after drawing a few long breaths she and Reggie started off again.

By this time the rain had ceased, and a pleasant smell was rising from the damp earth and dripping trees.

No little footprints were to be seen in the garden; and it was impossible that Tricksy could have escaped observation had she been in the ruins or in any of the outhouses.

They hunted all over the house, then went into the field, and even climbed the dyke which separated the doctor's grounds from the moorland; but no Tricksy was to be seen.

'I believe she has gone beyond bounds,' said Allan, who, with Hamish, had grown tired of waiting and had wandered out to see what was going on; 'we said the garden and the field, you know.'

'Not she,' declared Reggie, perched outside upon the dyke, with the wind drying his wet face and clothing; 'we have taught her to play fair. She is only lying low in some place that we haven't thought of. Let's shout to her to call "cuckoo."'

They raised their voices and cried, 'Call cuckoo, Tricksy;' and Laddie, who had been shut in the house to keep him from spoiling sport, but who had made good his escape behind the boys, pricked up his ears and resolved to be useful.

A muffled voice was heard in response, and Laddie, with a bark, sprang towards the peat-stack and stood before it, wagging his tail and trying to make an entrance with nose and paws.

Some of the peats were tumbled aside, and Tricksy emerged, looking very indignant.

'A nice way to play,' she said, 'setting Laddie on to me when you couldn't find me yourselves.'

They tried to explain, but Tricksy's eyes were full of contempt, and her small figure seemed to grow taller with offended dignity.

'Such a nice hiding-place,' she said; 'and now you've gone and spoilt it all.'

'Don't be a little silly, Tricksy,' said Reggie to her in an undertone; and Tricksy allowed her dignity to subside.

Fresh hiding-places were chosen; and when at last the young people were so tired as to be disinclined to run any more, Marjorie suggested going indoors to see whether tea were ready.

The dining-room table was bare, and all faces fell.

'I'll just go into the kitchen and see what Elspeth is about,' said Marjorie; 'perhaps the servants are forgetting us.'

In the stone-floored kitchen, whither they all trooped after Marjorie, Elspeth was sitting knitting by the fireside.

'Elspeth, when is tea going to be ready?' inquired Marjorie, rather impatiently.

The girl looked up at her, then down again at her knitting with pretended indifference.

'Tea, Miss Marjorie? I was thinking you would not be wanting any tea to-

day.'

Marjorie's lips tightened, but she kept down the rising temper with an effort.

'Why not?' she asked. 'Here are Allan and Reggie and Tricksy from Ardnavaire; and we want our tea, please.'

Elsbeth looked up, and seemed to see the others for the first time.

'Would you ask the young ladies and gentle men to wipe their feet on the rug, Miss Marjorie if you please? They are spoiling my kitchen floor.'

This request made the whole troop feel uncomfortable, and they began shifting from one foot to the other, conscious that they must have brought more mud into the house than the authorities were at all likely to approve of.

'All right,' said Marjorie impatiently; 'we are not coming in any further; but will you please get tea ready for us as soon as you can?'

'Get tea ready! And how am I to do that, Miss Marjorie, if you please, when the girdle has been taken away out of the kitchen? I cannot be making scones on the open fire.'

Marjorie turned red and bit her lip.

'Oh, never mind the girdle,' she said. 'We'll do without scones for one day.'

'Indeed, Miss Marjorie, I never saw tea without scones. That may be the way in foreign parts, but there never was tea in the West Highlands without scones; and I will be thinking you will have to wait till the girdle comes home again.'

A flash darted out of Marjorie's eyes; and she remained rooted to the spot for a minute. Then she took a sudden resolve and turned away, elbowing the others out of the room.

'Cat!' she muttered; 'I'll be even with her yet. Never mind, people; if she won't give us our tea we can get it for ourselves. Get cups and things out of the pantry, Hamish; and Reggie, you come with me.'

The larder window was rather high up from the ground and was secured by several iron bars.

With some difficulty they pushed up the lower sash a little way; and through the opening thus made Reggie contrived to wriggle his slight, thin body.

'Is there anything there worth carrying away?' said Marjorie, standing on tip-toe and peering in.

'Here's a cake,' said Reggie; 'and there are several pots of jam.'

'All right, hand them out. There's a pie; we might as well have that; serve Elspeth right for getting into a temper. Now let's come in with what we've got.'

Reggie squeezed himself through the opening, feet foremost, and dropped to the ground.

'Here—Hamish—Allan;' said Marjorie, entering the house; 'take these things to the dining-room. Have you any plates? No. I'll get them out of the pantry; and

knives and spoons too. Bother, she's got the teapot in the kitchen; I'll have to go in and get it.'

She strode into the kitchen with flashing eyes and a haughty step; then stopped short in amazement.

'Elsbeth!' she exclaimed; 'whatever are you crying for?'

There was no answer.

'Is it because of the girdle?'

The girl shook her head; the tears falling upon the knitting which she was holding with trembling hands.

'Is it because we are taking the things out of the larder?'

'Not that, Miss Marjorie.'

'Then whatever is the matter?'

By this time all the others had crowded in, looking very much astonished.

'Elsbeth, are you ill?' asked Tricksy, her large dark eyes growing very round in her little face.

'No, Miss Tricksy; no, Miss Marjorie; it will be none of that; it will be Neil.'

'Neil!' exclaimed Marjorie, while the others looked more and more amazed. 'What's the matter with him? Neil is Elsbeth's cousin, you know,' she explained.

'Neil, poor lad; he will hev been arrested, Miss Marjorie. They will hev taken him up for robbing the post-office! Eh, Miss Marjorie, your mother said you weren't to know, and it iss me that will hev been telling you. Och! the disgrace to an honest family!' and the girl threw her apron over her head and moaned and lamented to herself in Gaelic, while they all stood around her, speechless.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMPACT

'Neil!' said Reggie; 'it's impossible.'

Marjorie had become deadly white, and Allan pushed the hair back from his forehead and stood staring, his hands in his pockets. Reggie pranced backwards and forwards, in uncontrollable excitement, while Tricksy's dark eyes were growing as large as saucers in her little face.

'Elsbeth,' said Marjorie sharply; 'you're talking nonsense, it can't be true.'

'Indeed, Miss Marjorie, it's the truth I will be telling you; the police came and arrested him before his mother's eyes that very day just after he had been out with you on the boat, and he's before the Sheriff in Stornwell this very day!'

'But, Elspeth, he did not do it! Nobody could believe that old Neil would do such a thing!'

'Indeed, Master Allan, there are those that do, although Neil, poor laddie, would no more do such a thing than the laird himsel, or the king upon his throne! Appearances are against him, poor lad; and it's for appearances that they've arrested him.'

'What appearances, Elspeth? Tell us about it?'

'Well, Miss Marjorie, it's just this; one of the money orders that was stolen was sent back from Edinburgh Post Office; and it was Neil who had sent it away in a letter. It's from that they make out that it was Neil who stole it.'

'Neil couldn't have done such a thing,' broke in Reggie, with signs of a storm in his voice.

'Does Mother know? and Father?' asked Tricksy breathlessly.

'Indeed, Miss Tricksy, the laird's away at the trial, and Mrs. Stewart too, to be with Mrs. Macdonnell, poor soul; and Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor went away this afternoon. The whole island's away, except just those whose work obliges them

to stay; and it's a sore disgrace to a respectable family, whateffer.'

'That's all right then, if father's there,' said Reggie confidently. 'He knows Neil far too well to believe such a thing of him, no matter what may have happened.'

'The laird can't help him much if the case goes against him, Master Reggie. It's an awful thing that the money order should have come out of the poor lad's letter; and it looks very bad.'

'But Neil couldn't have taken it,' protested Reggie; 'no matter where the order came from, it wasn't Neil who stole it.'

'Well, anyhow,' said Tricksy, 'I'll never speak to the Sheriff again, no matter what he does, if he lets Neil be put in prison.'

'The Sheriff only has to do his duty, Miss Tricksy; and if things go against poor Neil he can't help him.'

'Well, we'll stand up for him, no matter who doesn't,' declared Allan; 'and we'll write and tell him so.'

'Of course we shall,' joined in the others.

'It's very kind of you, I'm sure,' said Elspeth, wiping her eyes; 'we must just hope for the best. And now, young ladies and gentlemen, you must have your tea and not think too much about it; and Miss Marjorie, I'm thinking I must just make you a few scones!'

Little appetite was left to the young folks for the meal; and the half-hearted clatter of knives and plates soon died away.

'We'll stand up for old Neil, no matter what happens,' was the upshot of their deliberations; and Elspeth, coming in and out, dried her tears furtively with the corner of her apron.

Later in the evening a dog-cart drove up; and Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor alighted.

Marjorie ran down into the hall, while the others all clustered about the

banisters and looked down.

'Mother,' said Marjorie, with a set face, 'we know about Neil; tell us how things have gone for him to-day.'

'The case is against him, so far,' replied Mrs. MacGregor.

A groan burst from upstairs, and Marjorie set her lips tightly.

'What will be done to him?' inquired Tricksy piteously.

'Nothing yet, dear; the case is not finished. He has to go to Edinburgh to be tried; and we hope that something else may be found out before that time.'

'Shall we see him before he goes?'

'No, he will not come back before then.'

'Where is he?' demanded Allan.

'At present he is in the—in the County Jail,' faltered Mrs. MacGregor.

'Poor Neil,' burst from the children.

'He will be kindly treated,' interposed the doctor; 'and it is only until the case comes up in Edinburgh.'

The tears rolled over Tricksy's cheeks; and Marjorie turned away and looked out of the window.

'And now,' said the doctor cheerily, 'you must not take the matter tragically yet. We must hope for the best. Neil must stand his trial like a man, and it isn't often that a miscarriage of justice takes place. He will have the very best advice, your father and I will see to that; and you may depend upon it that some fresh evidence will turn up before then, which will show matters in an altogether different light. In the meanwhile you must not go about looking doleful, as though you had made up your minds already that Neil would not be able to show a good case for himself.'

It was hard to be cheerful; and the young folk clustered about in melancholy

groups until the dog-cart arrived, when the Stewarts unwillingly took their leave, with many promises on both sides to communicate whatever might come to light in the meanwhile.

'Now, Duncan,' said Allan, after the dog-cart had started; 'tell us what has happened?'

'Indeed, Master Allan; it iss ahl ferry unlucky indeed; and it iss ferry sorry I will be for puir Neil and for Mrs. Macdonnell. You will be knowing the night before the robbery was committed Neil will have been spending the evening with the MacAlisters. He wass expecting a letter; and it will be a stormy evening and the mail steamer will not be coming in till ferry late so that the letters wass not sent away that night, but Neil wass allowed to look among them for his own. There wass a registered letter for the laird; and it come out in the evidence that Neil would see it, and that no one else but only Mr. and Mrs. MacAlister and Neil himself could have peen knowing that it wass there.'

'But what could make them think that Neil would break into the post-office and steal a letter? Neil, of all people!'

'Well then, the ferry next day Neil will pe sending away a letter, and in that letter wass one of the ferry orders that had been in the laird's letter.'

'But how do they know that it wass the same order; and how can they be certain that it wass Neil who sent it away. There must have been a great many orders presented in the Edinburgh Post Office that day.'

'They know that it wass the laird's order, Master Allan, because the gentleman who had sent away the orders had kept the number of them all; and they know that Neil had sent it away because the man he sent it to took it out of the envelope in ta post-office, and there wass a letter with it signed clearly in his own handwriting; "Neil Macdonnell."'

Allan sat up and pushed his cap to the back of his head.

'It's very strange,' he said; 'there must be some mistake!'

'How did poor old Neil take it, when he was arrested and all that?' asked Reggie.

'Neil was ferry much astonished, Master Reggie, and could not pelieve it at ahl. He said the order he had sent away was not the laird's but another one ahltogether. Afterwards he was ferry angry; and in court he stood up as prave as a lion and said he had neffer seen the order and that he had neffer sent it away whateffer, and that it was all lies. They will be showing him his name written on the order; and he had to own that it was his handwriting, but he will not be knowing how it had come on the order. Then when some of the people didn't seem to pelieve him, he was ferry angry again, was Neil; and when the Sheriff said he was to go and pe tried at Edinburgh he went out of the court in a terrible rage and a fury; and he said to us ahl that he would not go to Edinburgh, because if ta people here who was his friends didn't peliefe him, they would not pe peliefing him neither in Edinburgh where they was ahl strangers to him, and that he would be finding some way of escaping pefore he was sent there and not be pringing disgrace upon an honest family. He will be saying a lot of foolish things, will Neil, puir lad.'

Mr. and Mrs. Stewart were in the hall when their children arrived. Tricksy flew into her mother's arms and burst into tears; Allan turned a grave, concerned face towards his parents; and Reggie looked inquiringly at his father without speaking.

'I see that you have been told about Neil,' said the laird in his kind voice. 'We had been hoping that the matter might have been cleared up without delay, and that it would be unnecessary that you should be informed of it. However, you need not despair; Neil is not the lad to have committed a dishonest action, and I am convinced that we shall find some evidence that will clear him.'

'And now,' said Mrs. Stewart, 'you must all go to bed, Allan as well as the others. It is late, and Tricksy is quite exhausted. Sleep well; you don't know what news may come in the morning! Something may be found out by that time.'

'I am sure,' said Tricksy still tearfully to Reggie as he said good-night to her in her little bed; 'I don't know what I should do if I hadn't a mother! It's great fun running about with you and the others, and staying out-of-doors for whole days at a time; but when we get hurt or sorry, it's Mummie that we want!'

Little sleep came to the boys that night. Each turned and tossed uneasily upon his bed, trying not to disturb the other; falling into broken dreams of being with Neil on the rocks in their own island, and awakening to a sense of the reality.

Early in the morning it became useless to keep up the pretence any longer. They rose and dressed and went out-of-doors.

By the garden gate two shaggy ponies were standing; and the boys were not at all surprised to see Marjorie and Hamish, who turned anxious faces towards them.

'Well,' said Marjorie, 'anything new?'

'Nothing since we saw you.'

'There hasn't been time, of course,' said Marjorie. 'We couldn't rest, so we came along to see you.'

'Let's go down to the shore,' said Allan. 'Can't talk here.'

A window was thrown open on the upper story of the house, and a little voice cried, 'Wait a minute, people! don't go away! I'm coming too.'

'Tricksy awake already!' said Marjorie; 'that child will make herself ill.'

In a few minutes a little figure emerged from the front door, and Tricksy ran towards them.

'What are you going to do?' she said. 'Is there any news?'

'Nothing at all, Tricksy,' said Marjorie; 'we were only going down to the shore to talk.'

The little girl slipped her hand confidingly into Allan's and walked beside him, trying to accommodate her steps to his long stride.

'Hullo, there's Euan Macdonnell,' said Allan. 'He was at the trial yesterday; let's ask him about it.'

The fine frank-faced young coastguard touched his cap to the girls and waited to be spoken to.

'Euan,' said Allan abruptly; speaking in Gaelic, which was always most convenient for the islanders if a conversation was likely to be long; 'we know

about Neil. You were there; tell us about the trial.'

'Well, Mr. Allan, it was a very bad business, and we none of us expected it to go as it did. Poor Neil was most frightfully cut up about it, and no wonder, poor fellow. What he felt most was that some of the people were against him when he thought they would be quite sure to believe in his honesty, no matter what might have happened.'

'So they ought,' declared Allan. 'Any one who knows Neil in the least would know that whether he sent away that order or not, he would never have stolen it, and that there must have been a mistake.'

'Of course there must have been,' said Euan, 'and I'm glad to hear you say so, Mr. Allan.'

'Suppose things were to go wrongly,' said Marjorie; 'I mean, supposing that nothing is found out that will help to clear Neil when he comes before the Edinburgh court, what will he have to expect?'

Tricksy's eyes were growing wider, and the pink in Marjorie's cheeks became deeper.

'I am afraid the penalty for the poor lad would be two or three years in prison, Miss Marjorie. It's a serious crime, you know; house-breaking, and robbing his Majesty's mails. We can only hope it won't come to that.'

The hearers all drew a long breath, like a gasp.

'Let's go down and sit on the rocks,' said Marjorie abruptly. 'Now, Euan, tell us how you think it happened.'

'Well,' said Euan, 'the only explanation is, that that order came into Neil's possession without his knowing it.'

Allan nodded.

'You see, Miss Marjorie,' continued Euan, 'Neil made no secret of having sent off a post-office order that day. He had got one on the evening before, when he was at the MacAlisters', and he put it in the pocket of his reefer jacket. You know that new churn he got for his mother? Well, he was paying for that by

instalments and this was one of the payments. The day after the robbery, he went into the post-office, got the order, put it into an envelope containing a note to say that he hoped to send the last instalment next week, and sent it away. But the order that came out of the letter was not the one that he bought at Mrs. MacAlister's that night; and the curious thing is, that he found the order that he believed he had sent away, still in his coat pocket when he went to look. At least that's the story he tells, poor lad.'

'Then,' said Allan, 'how do you account for the wrong order being in the letter?'

Euan pondered a minute, and then said, 'Mr. Allan, there's only one explanation of it, so far as I can see. Some person must have been trying to screen himself by throwing suspicion on to Neil. You say that there was more than one order in the laird's letter?'

'Yes,' replied Allan, 'and they don't seem to have heard anything about the others yet.'

'They will turn up some day, no doubt, and then the whole matter may be cleared up; but in the meanwhile there's nothing to go by to help the poor lad. Perhaps they may be traced before the case comes up in Edinburgh.'

'Oh, I hope so,' cried the girls, 'and then they'll get their finger on the real culprit?'

'The person who did it must have put the order into Neil's pocket,' said Allan. 'How could they have managed it and what would make them think of Neil?'

'Well, Mr. Allan; you know how these country post-offices are kept. The letter-box is in the MacAlisters' kitchen, which is at the same time their shop, and where every one goes in and out. The box is never locked; and after the letters are sorted they often lie on the table for hours, waiting until the postman comes to take them away. Any one who was not honest could easily slip into the kitchen when Mrs. MacAlister's back was turned and do what they liked with the letters; but such a thing has never happened before. Now, whoever committed the robbery has seen that Neil was in the post-office that evening, turning over the letters; and he saw that Neil got a money order to send away. All this made him think that Neil was the one to fasten the guilt on to, so after breaking into the post-office that night he slipped into the house, unknown to Neil or his

mother, and put the order where Neil was likely to take it for his own.'

Allan nodded approvingly when the coastguard paused in what was an unusually long effort for him.

'There's something in that,' he said. 'But who would have done such a thing?'

'There is one man on the island who might have done it, and that man has had every opportunity.'

'Who is that?'

'Do you know a lad called Andrew MacPeters? He works for the MacAlisters sometimes.'

'I know him,' said Reggie, who had been listening but saying little. 'A red-headed man with foxy eyes.'

'The same,' said Euan. 'He is always in and out of the house; and most likely he was there that night and saw everything that went on. He has always hated Neil since he was a lad, and got a beating from Neil, who was much smaller than himself. He would only be too pleased to do him an ill turn. It shows a nasty, mean disposition that he should have taken the trouble to break open the box and throw the letters all about the shop when he only had to open it and take out what he wanted. Keep a look-out on that man, young ladies and gentlemen, if you want to find out what is at the bottom of the whole affair.'

'We will,' they all said.

'And if you could find out anything before the case comes up,' said Euan, 'you might be the means of saving the lad and his mother too; for she will be heart-broken if her son is not cleared, and that quickly.'

'We'll do all we can,' said Marjorie.

'Yes,' said Allan slowly and deliberately; 'I vote we all make up our minds not to rest until we find out who did it and get Neil cleared.'

'We will, we will,' cried all the others in a chorus.

'How are we going to manage it?' asked Tricksy, with eyes and mouth open.

The others did not reply.

'We will make a compact,' cried Marjorie, rising with sparkling eyes, 'and we'll all sign an agreement; something like this: "We hereby promise never to rest until we find out who committed the robbery and show that Neil didn't do it."'

'Yes,' said Tricksy; 'let's write it at once.'

'No pens or paper here,' said Marjorie; 'we'll write it down when we get into the house. Euan, you must join the compact too; we'll send you a copy for yourself. Each of us shall have his or her own copy to carry about wherever we go; and each copy shall be signed by every member of the compact. We'll form ourselves into a Society to prove that Neil is innocent.'

'So we shall,' said Allan; 'good idea that of yours, Marjorie.'

'That's all right,' said the youngest member of the Society; 'now, when are we going to begin?'

'You must give us time, Tricksy,' said Allan; 'it won't be so very easy;' but all the faces wore a more cheerful expression.

'There's a telegraph boy,' said Marjorie suddenly, 'do you see him?—just going in at the gates of Ardnavoir. Perhaps it's some news of Neil.'

'Run, Reggie,' said Allan, 'you are the best runner; and see whether it's anything of that kind.'

Reggie started off, and after an interval he came speeding back again.

It's something to do with Neil,' he said; 'come quickly.'

CHAPTER V

SUSPENSE

All crowded into the hall, where Mr. Stewart was standing with an open telegram in his hand.

The laird was looking very grave.

'Most unfortunate,' he said. 'Neil has done a very foolish thing. He has broken out of the County Gaol and disappeared. I regret extremely that it should have happened. It will prejudice many people against him.'

Mrs. Stewart was looking extremely concerned; and the young people crowded together in speechless dismay.

'Puir Neil,' said Duncan in the background, 'he said he would not go to Edinburgh to bring disgrace on his family whateffer.'

'He would have done far better to have gone up for his trial,' said Mr. Stewart. —'Good morning, Dr. MacGregor'—for the doctor had come in to hear the news, having been summoned from a visit in the neighbourhood—'unfortunate affair this; it's a pity Neil couldn't have been more patient.'

The doctor read the telegram and looked extremely disappointed.

'Foolish fellow!' he exclaimed. 'If the lad was innocent he should have stayed to see the thing out; he has only made things a dozen times worse for himself by doing this.'

'But, Father,' said Marjorie, 'Neil couldn't have taken the letters; they are sure to find out that he is innocent.'

The doctor was looking angry.

'He has made it far more difficult for his friends to see him through,' he declared. 'Foolish, foolish lad; I have no patience with him;' and the doctor strode out of the hall and away to his gig with a disappointed expression of countenance.

Mrs. Stewart looked kindly at the dismayed faces of the young people.

'I am sure,' she said, 'that Neil did not realise what he was doing,' and here she looked at her husband; 'he was hurt and disappointed at finding that some of the people were able to believe that he could have done such a thing, and that made him think that he might not get justice. It is a great pity, but those who have known Neil all his life would never believe him capable of dishonesty.'

'Of course not,' said the laird kindly, 'and I only regret that Neil did not wait to see the thing out, as I am convinced that some evidence would have turned up which would have {74} enabled us to prove his innocence. As it is, he remains under a cloud, and it will be a great grief to his mother.'

The young people went out, feeling very much discouraged, and wandered down to the seashore, Laddie following with drooping ears and tail. Mechanically they seated themselves upon the beach to discuss the position of affairs, but no one seemed to have anything to suggest.

'Well,' said Marjorie at last, digging holes in the sand with a sharp-pointed shell; 'what are we to do now?'

Allan pushed his cap on to the back of his head, and Reggie looked thoughtful; but they did not reply.

It was a beautiful morning, and the distant hills showed the first flush of heather where the light fell upon them. Right in front the waves were glancing like silver, and beyond the ripples the island of the Den stood out invitingly clear.

Tricksy, who had been gazing wistfully across the water, suddenly melted into tears.

'All our fun spoilt,' she said, with the big drops rolling down her face; 'what a horrid, horrid summer we are going to have, and poor Neil——'

'Buck up, Tricksy,' said Allan; 'the bottom hasn't tumbled out of the Universe yet.'

Laddie, who had been looking with a concerned expression at his young friends, rose up and thrust his nose under Tricksy's hand, wagging his tail in an encouraging manner.

'Good old dog, good Laddie,' said Allan, patting the dog's rough coat; 'he is telling us that we must not give in.'

Laddie pricked up his ears, and went from one to another of the group, endeavouring to rouse them from their despondency.

'Poor Laddie, good Laddie,' said Marjorie, caressing him and feeling a lump in her throat.

'Laddie, dear, don't lick me in the face—you're knocking me over, Laddie!' cried Tricksy, as her big pet became more demonstrative.

When Laddie had been induced to sit down, which he did with the expression of a dog convinced that his endeavours had been crowned with success, Allan resumed: 'Well, we must remember that we've made a compact, and we've got to stick to it and help Neil somehow, although it looks pretty difficult at present.'

A murmur of approval went round the group.

'Yes,' said Tricksy, sitting with knitted brows; 'but we don't seem to be doing anything.'

The others were silent.

'What would you have us do, Tricksy?' inquired Allan.

'Do? I'd do something.'

'Well?'

Tricksy's face puckered again.

'I'd catch some of the people.'

'Well, Tricksy, and how?'

'I'd dig holes for them to fall into.'

Reggie uttered a contemptuous 'humph.'

'You'd dig holes for them, would you, Tricksy, said Allan; 'how could you tell

whether you had caught the right one?'

'I'd catch them all until I came to the right one. I'd make them tell me what they'd been doing, and then let the wrong one go.'

No one had any reply to make.

Tricksy looked extremely mortified.

'Well, anyhow,' said Allan, springing to his feet, 'we aren't doing Neil any good by sitting here; let's go to Rob MacLean's cottage and see whether he can help us.'

Rob MacLean was Neil's second cousin, and the proposition met with approval.

The short, black-haired Highlander was working in his garden, and came forward to greet his visitors with true Gaelic courtesy.

'How do you do, young ladies and gentlemen?' he said; 'it iss ferry proud to see you that I am. Come in, and it is ferry pleased that Mistress MacLean will pe.'

In the dark, smoky hut the party were accommodated with seats, and Mrs. MacLean went to fetch milk and oat-cakes according to Highland ideas of hospitality.

'You will pe out early,' said Rob MacLean. 'Ferry fine day this, and exercise iss good for the health.'

'Yes, Mr. MacLean,' said Allan abruptly; 'we came to speak to you about Neil.'

Instantly the Highlander's countenance underwent a change.

'You hev?' he said. 'Poor Neil, it iss a ferry bad business whateffer; a ferry bad business for the puir lad.'

'Yes,' replied Allan, 'of course we don't believe that Neil had anything to do with robbing the post-office.'

'That iss right, Master Allan; that is right,' said the Highlander. 'No, puir lad; no one who will pe knowing him will hev been believing that of him; and it wass ferry hard that efferything went against him at the trial, whateffer.'

'Well, Mr. MacLean, we came to see whether you could help us,' said Allan; 'we have made a compact, and promised not to rest until we have found out that Neil didn't really do it, and have him brought home again.'

'Proud to hear you say so, Mr. Allan;' broke out the Highlander; 'and hev you ahl made a compact, the young ladies too?'

'Yes,' replied Tricksy, dimpling; 'we are all in it; Marjorie and I, and even Laddie.—Down, Laddie; don't jump up on me,' as the collie, who had been sitting with an amiable expression in the centre of the group, sprang up and put one paw on her knee.

'Ferry proud indeed that you should hev done so,' repeated Mr. MacLean. —'My tear,' he added, turning to his wife, who had re-entered the cottage with a pitcher of milk; 'these young ladies and gentlemen will hev been making a compact that they will help Neil, and prove that he hass not committed the robbery.'

The woman, who knew very little English, replied in Gaelic, and the young folk took up that language, somewhat to the relief of MacLean, who prided himself on his knowledge of the Saxon tongue but found it easier to sustain a conversation in his own.

'That would be a great comfort to Neil, did he only know of it, and to his mother too,' he said. 'Poor lad, I wish we could send him a message.'

'Does any one know where he has gone?' inquired Reggie.

'Some one must know, Master Reggie, since he could hardly have got clear away without help; but we do not know how he managed his escape. Some say that he went away with the gipsies that left Inchkerra the day of the trial, for they put in at Stornwell harbour that same night; and others think that it was smugglers who helped him. He will no doubt try to escape to America; but the poor lad stands a thousand chances of being caught before he gets there.'

'Oh, I hope not,' cried the girls.

'I don't know, young ladies. If there was any chance of his being cleared, it might be better for him to stand his trial. It is a very strange thing indeed, how everything seemed to point to his being guilty.'

'Then do you think some one has been trying to make him appear so?'

'I don't know, Master Reggie. It is very mysterious indeed who can have done it. The police made an inspection of the gipsy camp, but there seemed to be no evidence against them. Well, we are all very pleased that you are so kindly disposed towards Neil, and we can only hope that you or some one else may be able to find out who really did it. If you must go, young ladies and gentlemen, will you not look in at Mrs. Macdonnell's cottage and tell her that you have resolved to help Neil? Poor soul, she is very sorrowful, and it might comfort her to know what true friends her son has.'

'Do you think she would care to be disturbed to-day?' said Marjorie, somewhat doubtfully.

'I think she would be very glad to see you, Miss Marjorie, when you come on such an errand.'

Mrs. MacLean said nothing; but she filled the young people's pockets with oat-cakes, and stood watching them as they walked soberly along the path.

'It's too late to go to Mrs. Macdonnell before dinner-time,' said Allan, who seemed to be glad of an excuse to postpone so trying an interview. 'You'd better come with us, Hamish and Marjorie; it's half-past twelve now; much too late for you to go home.'

Places were found for the MacGregors at the hospitable table of Ardnavaire; and after dinner, Tricksy drew her mother aside, while Marjorie lingered to hear what Mrs. Stewart would say.

'Mummie,' said Tricksy, 'Rob MacLean wants us to go and see Mrs. Macdonnell and tell her that we don't believe that Neil stole the letters. Do you think we can go?'

'Perhaps you might, as Rob wishes you to do so,' replied her mother. 'Don't stay long, and don't talk much, for, poor woman, this has been a terrible blow to her. Give her your message, and then say good-bye.'

'Do you think we need to go too?' said Allan, as the young people were discussing their intention.

'Of course we must all be there,' declared Marjorie; 'it will encourage her when she sees that we have all joined the compact.'

'Whatever are you doing that for?' asked Allan, when he saw his little sister gathering flowers in the garden.

'They are for Mrs. Macdonnell,' said Tricksy, looking up with her soft, dark eyes; 'I think she would be glad if we brought her some.'

Allan said nothing, and Reggie's dark face looked approving.

A walk of a mile or two brought the young folk to the heather-roofed cottage where Mrs. Macdonnell lived. A dog rushed out and barked, but wagged his tail when he saw who the visitors were.

'Neil's dog,' said Allan; 'look how he speaks to Laddie. Poor Jock; poor old fellow; come here.'

'Where's your master, Jock; where's Neil?' said Reggie in a low voice, as the dog came up to be petted.

They knocked at the outer door, but there was no answer. After a moment's hesitation, they pushed it open and knocked at the door of the kitchen.

'Come in,' said a faint voice; and they entered.

A woman was sitting by the peat fire, with her neglected spinning-wheel beside her. She was strikingly handsome, in spite of her mournful expression and dejected attitude. Her black hair, as yet only slightly touched with grey waved on either side of a broad low forehead, and she had a straight nose like Neil's and a beautifully shaped face; but the eyes which she raised at the children's entrance were full of sorrow.

The boys hung about the doorway, and Marjorie felt a lump in her throat; but Tricksy advanced courageously.

'How do you do, Mrs. Macdonnell?' she said, with a little gurgle in her voice,

that expressed more than she had the power to say in words. 'Mother said we might come and see you; and we thought you might like some flowers.'

'Eh, Miss Tricksy, what a pretty posy! It wass ferry good of you to come. Tek a seat, Miss Marjorie. Will you be finding places, young gentlemen?'

'I hope you are pretty well, Mrs. Macdonnell?' said Marjorie, in a voice which she could not keep from trembling a little.

'Pretty fair, thank you, Miss Marjorie,' replied Mrs. Macdonnell, while Reggie and Hamish sat very stiffly upon their chairs, and Allan had much ado to keep from fidgeting.

'We thought you would like to know, Mrs. Macdonnell,' began Tricksy; 'Bob MacLean said we might tell you; we wanted to say—Allan does, and we all do—that we *know* Neil couldn't have done such a thing, and we have made a compact, all of us—Marjorie and Hamish and Euan Macdonnell too—that we will never rest until we find out that he didn't do it, and bring him home again. I thought you would be glad, Mrs. Macdonnell; for Allan and Hamish are going to try very hard, and Euan will do his best to help us.'

Mrs. Macdonnell's eyes glistened.

'It iss ferry good of you ahl, I am sure,' she said; then after a pause she added, 'Indeed it is proud I am to know that my puir laddie——'

Her voice became husky and then failed; and feeling that the interview had lasted long enough, the girls kissed her and they all took leave, wondering whether they had done harm or good by their visit.

'One thing we might do,' said Allan, after they had trudged for awhile in a somewhat uncomfortable silence, 'we might take a look at Andrew MacPeters.'

'Yes, let's get something done,' said Reggie; 'where do you think we shall find him?'

'I heard that he was cutting peats on the hillside,' said Allan; 'isn't that a cart over there, and two men stacking peats?'

'Yes, that is Andrew MacPeters,' said Reggie, when they had advanced a little

nearer; 'the red-headed man on this side.'

'Fine day, young ladies and gentlemen,' said the farther-away man; but Andrew only gave them a sidelong look out of his red-lidded eyes.

'Fine day,' replied Allan civilly; then they all stood still and looked at Andrew, who went on stolidly with his work.

'Let's come to the post-office now,' said Allan, and they all trudged away.

'Eh, young ladies and gentlemen, pleased to see you,' said Mrs. MacAlister in her lilting Gaelic; 'eh, but it's been a weary business since you were here last! Poor Neil, poor laddie!'

'Yes, Mrs. MacAlister,' said Marjorie; 'and of course we are all quite sure that Neil had nothing to do with it.'

'So are we all, Miss Marjorie; but the hard thing is to prove it. Things looked very black against him when the order came out of the poor lad's very letter, and he the only person who had been in the house that night. Wait a bit, young ladies and gentlemen, and I'll fetch my husband; he's been bad with the rheumatism but he's working in the garden now,' and the good woman departed, leaving the field clear for the young people.

'Look,' said Allan, 'there are the letters lying on the table. They've been taken out of the box, and they're waiting now until Mrs. MacAlister is ready to stamp them. The door's open, and any one can come in and out. It wouldn't be difficult to rob a post-office like this!'

Just then the door opened, and Andrew MacPeters came slouching in, looking very awkward when he saw who were in the shop. The visitors all watched him as he made his way clumsily across the room to fetch something that he wanted; and when he came near the table Reggie said suddenly, 'Been taking anything from here lately, Andrew?'

The man looked at him with a surly gleam in his eyes but did not answer. After a minute or two he went out, all eyes following him curiously.

'There,' said Reggie triumphantly, 'did you see what a bad conscience he has?' and they all looked at each other in silent assent.

Declining Mrs. MacAlister's invitation to stay to tea, they trooped out of the post-office.

'We'll watch that man,' said Reggie, and Tricksy began to walk on the tips of her toes in anticipation.

'Hulloa, young people, glad I've overtaken you,' said the doctor's voice behind them. 'It's just going to pour with rain, and you're due at my house to tea, I believe. It's lucky I have the closed carriage; jump in as many of you as it will hold, and the rest of you can sit on the box.'

By the time the doctor's house was reached the rain had stopped, and the sun was peeping out again. A scrap of white paper fluttering on the ruins attracted Reggie's attention, and he ran across the garden, climbed the wall, and captured it.

After looking at it he gave a violent start, then ran towards the house.

'It's a postal order,' he said, giving it to the doctor; 'what's the meaning of this?'

All clustered round, and the doctor took the piece of paper and examined it.

'Strange thing,' he exclaimed; 'this order bears the number of one of those that went missing on the night of the robbery. How did it come there? It's wet with the rain, but not very dirty; probably hasn't been there long. This ought to shed some fresh light upon the case. I'll have the police to make a thorough search of the ruins.'

CHAPTER VI

A DISCOVERY

'Reggie,' said Allan, 'there they are at last.'

Reggie slid down from the garden wall, looked towards the road, and said, 'Where?'

'They're behind that hill now. They'll be here in no time. You'd better call Tricksy, and tell her to be ready.'

Reggie went into the house, and called, standing at the foot of the staircase, 'Tricksy, it's Graham major and Graham minor with their Pater; and they're almost here.'

Tricksy came downstairs and waited in the hall, somewhat shyly, beside her brothers.

'Oh, I do hope they will be nice,' she whispered apprehensively to Reggie, as the dog-cart drew up at the door.

A tall pleasant-faced gentleman was beside the driver, and two boys were on the back seat wrapped in Inverness capes, and with caps drawn over their brows as a protection against the wind.

As Mr. and Mrs. Stewart were receiving their guests in the hall, Reggie and Tricksy had an opportunity of observing the boys. One was dark, about twelve years of age; thin, alert, with bright, restless hazel eyes; and the other was about as old as Reggie, with blue eyes and reddish-golden hair; almost too pretty to be a boy, Reggie thought; while Tricksy said to herself that he looked rather "nice."

After greeting the grown-up folk, the new-comers turned to encounter Tricksy's solemn, dark eyes and Reggie's bright, twinkling ones. Tricksy shook hands very shyly, and Reggie a little stiffly; then the visitors were taken upstairs to prepare for lunch.

Tricksy turned to Reggie, whose countenance wore a non-committal expression; then she looked at Allan and heaved a little sigh.

'What do you think of them, Tricksy?' inquired Allan.

'Well, I think the little one looks rather nice, but the other is a little proud.'

'Do you think they'd care about our Pirates' Island, and all that?' asked Reggie doubtfully.

'Of course they would. They're no end of a good sort. Hush, they're coming downstairs again.'

'Are you tired after the steamer?' Allan asked his guest during lunch.

'A bit, not very,' replied the elder lad, whose name was Harry. 'Feel a bit as though the floor was rocking.'

'You'll feel like that until you've had a night's rest, anyway,' said Allan. 'Are you too tired to do anything this afternoon?'

'Not at all,' answered his friend. 'Gerald, you're game to do something after lunch, aren't you?'

His brother, who had been trying to make a conversation with Reggie, while Tricksy sat shyly on his other side, looked up with a smile.

'The steamer went close under some fine rocks, not far from the village,' he said; 'very high ones, with birds sitting in rows, all the way up, and making an awful screaming.'

'Yes,' said Allan, 'those are the Skegness Cliffs, a great nesting-place of the birds. We'll take you there after lunch, if it's not too far.'

The boys looked pleased, and as soon as freed from the restraint of their elders' presence they ran to fetch their caps and demanded to be taken to the rocks.

'We had better not go so soon, I think,' said Allan. 'We are expecting Hamish and Marjorie, our friends from Corranmore, and we'll ask them to go with us. There's a jolly burn that runs quite near the house; suppose we go and fish in it until they come.'

Fishing-tackle was found for the entire party, and they proceeded to the banks of the burn, which trickled down the hill-side and across a meadow, widening into little pools fringed with ragged-robin and queen o' the meadow; and finally falling in a little cascade down to the shore.

'What a fine dog this is of yours,' observed Gerald, caressing Laddie, who had been fawning upon the new-comers, and now ended by sitting down between

Gerald and Tricksy.

Tricksy looked gratified.

'He's my dog,' she said. 'He likes you, I think.'

Gerald stroked Laddie's head and his white ruffle, and the dog made a little sound to express gratification.

'Tricksy, keep your dog quiet, he'll frighten away the trout,' sang out Allan warningly; and Tricksy requested Laddie to 'trust.'

The sun shone down upon green grass and brown pools, and drew out the perfume of the flowers and heather. Not far distant was the pleasant noise of the sea, and the calling of the gulls answered the plaintive cry of the plovers which fluttered about the moor and the meadows.

The day was too bright, and the trout which could be seen at the bottom of the pools refused to take. After a little while the strong fresh air and sun began to have a drowsy effect upon the anglers.

Gerald rubbed his eyes once or twice, and stifled a yawn; and Tricksy found that he was disinclined for conversation.

'Hulloa!' cried a voice from the top of a ridge; and Marjorie and Hamish came racing down. Laddie's welcoming bark roused Gerald, who jumped into a sitting posture, and looked about him in a surprised way.

'Hulloa, Marjorie,' said Allan; 'glad you've come. This is Harry Graham, and this is Gerald.'

Marjorie looked at the new-comers with approval, and Hamish shook hands good-naturedly.

'Are we going to fish all afternoon,' said Marjorie, 'or shall we take a scramble?'

'A scramble,' replied Reggie; 'they want to see the rocks.'

'If Gerald isn't too tired,' put in Tricksy considerately; 'he was asleep a minute

ago.'

'No,' protested Gerald, flushing and looking very much vexed; 'I wasn't. I'm quite ready for a walk.'

'Suppose we take them to the Smugglers' Caves,' suggested Marjorie. 'They're the finest sight in the island, I think.'

At the mention of smugglers Harry's eyes began to sparkle, and Gerald's blue ones opened very wide.

'Are there—are there any smugglers there now?' asked Harry.

'Sometimes there are,' replied Marjorie, 'but I don't expect we shall meet any. Smuggling isn't what it used to be,' she added somewhat regretfully.

'What luck if we could only come across some,' said Harry. 'Let's go and see the caves anyhow.'

'It's a long walk, across moors and bogs, and steep hills,' said Marjorie; 'but if you're game, come along.'

Harry, walking beside Reggie, looked at the girl's slight, erect figure as she went in front with Gerald.

'Does she always do what you fellows do?' he inquired, rather doubtfully.

'Of course she does,' replied Reggie; 'she's fifteen years old, you know; a year older than Allan.'

Harry looked at her again, and considered.

'Bit of a tomboy, isn't she?' he inquired again.

'An awful tomboy. We've got her into the way of doing all kinds of things. She couldn't be much jollier if she was a boy.'

Harry took another look at her.

'Has she a bit of a temper?' he asked unexpectedly.

'A bit,' acknowledged Reggie, somewhat disconcerted, 'when she's roused, you know. She's fond of her own way; and she and Allan used to quarrel a good deal at one time; but they seem to have made it up now.'

Reggie added to himself that there was no time to quarrel, now that every one's thoughts were occupied with Neil.

Harry looked at Marjorie again.

'Does she ever quarrel with you?' he asked.

'N—no, not much,' he replied, his face darkening slightly.

Harry looked at Marjorie's tall young figure, and then at Reggie's smaller and slighter one, and arrived at the conclusion which particularly annoyed Reggie; that the girl disdained to quarrel with a boy so much younger than herself.

Marjorie turned her bright face towards them.

'Find it tiring, walking on the heather?' she said. 'It's very fatiguing when you're not accustomed to it. We might take a rest after we've climbed this hill; there's a beautiful view from the top.'

It was a steep climb, and when they reached the summit, all the young folk were glad to fling themselves down on the short, fragrant heather.

The breeze came laden with the scent of wild thyme and heather and salt from the sea; and the only live creatures save themselves were the mountain sheep and the crested plovers, and grey gulls which wheeled above the heads of the wayfarers.

Harry looked about him with brightening eyes.

'What an awfully jolly place this is of yours,' he said. 'I say, you *do* see a lot from the top of this hill.'

He was right. The hill crest commanded a view of nearly the whole island, with green fields and moors, and the white roads stretching across them; houses and cottages in their little gardens; and the village with the pier jutting out into the sea. One or two larger islands were in the distance; brown rocks and skerries

lying like dots upon the blue water; and away to the east the Highland hills rose among the clouds.

'It must be awfully jolly, having an island all to yourselves,' continued Harry.

'Yes,' replied Marjorie, perched on a boulder, 'and it's jollier still to have an island of your very own, where no one comes but ourselves, and we can do exactly as we like.'

'Where's that?' inquired Harry.

'I may tell them, mayn't I?' asked Marjorie of the others.

'Of course you may,' replied Allan; 'we must take them there some day soon.'

Marjorie slipped down from her perch.

'Do you see the little island over there?' she said, pointing southwards; 'a little black dot on the water, with some bright green in the middle of it? Well, that's our *own* island which we have all to ourselves, and we've made a place in it that we call our secret hiding-place or Pirates' Den. We must show it to you some day.'

The boys stood up and gazed out to sea, their eyes widening and brightening.

'I say, this is jolly,' they murmured, rather than said to any one in particular.

'Hamish,' said Allan, who had been looking at some object on the southern side of the island; 'is that your father's gig, that has just stopped before Mrs. Macdonnell's cottage?'

Hamish looked in the direction indicated.

'Yes, I believe it is,' he said. 'It must be true then, what we heard Duncan say, that Mrs. Macdonnell is very ill.'

Such a grieved silence fell upon the island young people that the Grahams looked at them inquiringly.

'They said that she would fall ill,' said Marjorie in a low voice, 'if—if she

continued to fret so about——'

Allan pushed his cap to the back of his head, and Reggie looked hard in the direction of the cottage, where the black dot was still standing by the gate.

'Nothing else found in the ruins?' said Allan in an undertone.

'Nothing yet,' replied Hamish; 'the police are still trying to follow up the clue _____'

Marjorie's eyes encountered those of the guests, and she looked at Allan and Reggie.

'Are you going to let them know about it?' she asked. 'Might as well, you know; for they are sure to hear of it before long.'

Allan put his hands in his pockets and reflected; then he consulted Reggie with a look, after which he turned to Hamish. 'Perhaps we might as well tell them,' he said, and the others consented.

'Well, Graham major and Graham minor,' he began, to the boys who were waiting expectantly; 'we are very much bothered about a friend of ours;' and he told them about the robbery of the post-office and Neil's flight, while the boys listened with wide-open mouths, throwing themselves about and uttering exclamations of interest.

'You say that you are quite sure he couldn't have taken the letters?' asked Harry, drawing himself into an upright position on the heather.

'Perfectly certain,' replied Allan. 'He would no more have done it than you or I. No one who knows him would believe such a thing of Neil.'

'Oh!' interposed Tricksy, in a shocked tone, 'I think Dr. MacGregor believed it.'

Hamish became very red and Marjorie's lips tightened.

'And he's so awfully, awfully jolly,' pursued Harry.

'One of the very jolliest people we know,' answered Marjorie. 'Father doesn't

really believe it of him. He did everything for us, and was up to all kinds of inventions. We don't seem to have any fun at all without him.'

'It's a most extraordinary story,' said Harry, jerking himself into a fresh attitude; and both the new boys sat and pondered.

'What do you say to letting them both join the Compact?' suggested Reggie.

Marjorie's eyes said yes; and Hamish, whom Allan consulted with a look, gave a nod.

'What's that; a Compact?' inquired Harry eagerly.

'It's an agreement that we've all made,' said Allan, 'that we'll back Neil up, and show that he didn't commit the robbery.'

'Hooray, what fun,' said Harry; 'I'm game.'

'You might let Gerald join too,' cried Tricksy from where she sat beside her new friend; 'he's quite the right sort, and he only wants to learn a thing or two to be equal to any of us.'

Gerald wriggled, and blushed to the roots of his golden hair.

'Well, then, you must do all you can to help us,' said Allan, 'and see whether you can find out who really did it.'

'All right,' said Harry; 'I'll help you to catch the thief.'

'And you must sign an agreement like the rest of us, and you can each have a copy to carry about with you always, as we do. See, this is the principal copy, that I have to take care of.'

'You can write it out now, with Allan's new fountain pen,' cried Tricksy; 'this flat stone will do for a desk, and I've got some pieces of paper that I've been carrying in my pocket in case we might find any new people to join our Compact;' and she produced with great gravity some crumpled sheets of note-paper, much soiled at the edges.

'All right,' said Allan, 'this is the agreement; "We hereby promise never to rest

until we show that Neil is innocent and have him brought home again."

Reggie held the papers down to keep them from blowing away, while Allan made out fresh copies of the agreement; then all the documents received the signature of Harry, who wrote his name with much ceremony and handed the pen to Gerald.

'What an awful lark,' said Harry, who had clambered on to the boulder and sat swinging his legs; 'it will be fine fun tracking the thief.'

Allan began to whistle.

'We haven't found much to track yet,' he said; 'neither have the police, who have been at it nearly three weeks. The less you talk about it the better, except among ourselves, for it isn't a game, this.'

'Come along,' said Marjorie, springing up, as Harry looked somewhat crestfallen, 'we've dawdled long enough; let's run down the side of the hill, and then we shan't take long to get to the cliffs.'

'All right,' said Harry briskly, 'let's go to the Smugglers' Caves; oh, I say, what a jolly island this is!'

All started to run down the steep descent, bounding from one tuft of heather to the other, their speed increasing as they neared the bottom.

Allan, Marjorie, and Reggie reached level ground at about the same time; then they turned to look at Harry and Gerald, who arrived next, looking somewhat shaken, and Hamish, who had stopped to help Tricksy.

'Not far now to the caves,' said Marjorie encouragingly. 'Do you see that headland, stretching far out into the sea? They are on the side farthest away from us. Tired, Tricksy?'

'Not at all,' protested the child, stepping alone and trying to hide a little roll in her gait, although her small face was beginning to look pale.

Reggie glanced at her approvingly as Tricksy toiled along beside Hamish, hoping that no one observed that she was hanging on to big hand.

'Oh, what a height from the ground,' said Gerald in an awed tone of voice, as the moor ended abruptly and they found themselves gazing down from the crest of what seemed a sheer precipice, with long lines of breakers falling upon the strip of sand at the foot. 'What a disturbance the birds are making, and what strange noises there are.'

'It's the waves echoing among the rocks,' said Marjorie. 'You must come here some stormy day when the tide is up; the caves get flooded and the noise is just like thunder.'

'If you'll come a little further along,' said Allan, 'there's a break in the cliffs where we can get down pretty easily. The tide is out, so we have lots of time.'

'Can we really climb down there,' said Harry, as they came to where a chasm opened in the line of cliff, with rough steps and ledges of rock standing out in the riven walls. Not a bird was to be seen in the gloomy crevasse; although the skuas and black-backed gulls were flying about and clamouring before the face of the cliff.

'Come along,' said Allan on the first step. 'Are you a good climber, Harry?'

'Pretty fair,' replied Harry, with a rather wild look in his eyes. Gerald said nothing, but swung himself down with a serious countenance.

'If any one wants help, just sing out,' cried Allan, descending by the rocky steps. 'Don't look down, and you'll be all right.'

'Take my hand, Gerald,' said Tricksy graciously to Gerald, who hesitated at a perilous-looking gap.

Gerald flushed pink, and pretended not to have heard the offer of assistance; and the two strangers braced themselves to their unaccustomed feat.

The way led round the chasm and downward, sometimes approaching the face of the cliff, where the inquisitive eyes and red bills of the puffins peered out of the crevices, and whole rows of auks and kittiwakes were thrown into violent agitation by the sight of the intruders; and sometimes leading back to the dark interior of the chasm. The place was full of echoes; the hollow boom of the breakers, the swirling of water round half-submerged rocks, the hoarse cries of the gulls and the shrill scream of the smaller sea-birds joining in an uproar which

made the air tremble. Many a time, during the descent, it cost the new-comers an effort to avoid being overcome by dizziness.

At last Allan reached the last ledge, and swung himself to the ground; Reggie and Marjorie followed; Tricksy came last, and the Grahams dropped down with an air of relief.

'Well done for you,' said Allan approvingly; 'it's your first climb of the kind, and you haven't shown an atom of funk.'

Gerald's cheeks became a little redder, and Harry bore himself with greater self-consciousness.

'Only Hamish now,' said Allan, looking up at the cliff; 'how cautiously the old fellow is coming down; he has the steadiest head of the lot of us although he is so slow.'

"Sleepy Hamish," remarked Harry to Gerald in an aside, repeating a nickname which he had heard Allan use. Low as the words were spoken, Marjorie heard them, and turned upon the boy like a flash.

'Some people have more in them than they make a show of,' she said. 'Perhaps you don't understand that kind of thing, though.'

Harry did not chance to have a reply ready, but he observed to Reggie afterwards that it was a pity Marjorie seemed to be a quick-tempered kind of a girl.

'Here we are,' said Allan, pausing beneath a great overhanging archway, and speaking loudly so as to be heard above the din; for the waves and the clamouring of the birds made a noise which was almost deafening.

'Can we go in?' asked Gerald.

'Of course we can. There's no danger except in a westerly gale. It's dark after you get in a little way.'

The young people scrambled and slipped over the sea-weed at the mouth of the cave, and presently found themselves standing on a floor of light-coloured sand, strewn with shells and sea-drift. The sides of the cave were black and shiny

with wet, and water dripped slowly from the roof.

'Is this where the smugglers used to come?' asked Gerald in an awed tone.

'Yes,' replied Allan; 'the schooners used to sail under the rocks on moonlight nights when the tide was high, and the cargo was stored in the caves until the people came secretly to take it away. It was very dangerous work sometimes, for if a storm comes from the west the caves are often flooded.'

The light which glimmered under the archway did not penetrate far, and the young people were soon in total darkness. The air was damp and chilly. Strange draughts crossed each other from unexpected quarters, and the water dripping from overhead, awoke weird echoes which seemed to be repeated among far-reaching clefts and passages.

'Strike a light, Hamish,' said Allan, 'and let them see what kind of a place they're in.'

The match spluttered and blazed, revealing dark rocks gleaming with wet and the black openings to what appeared to be a series of underground passages branching off from the main one.

'The caves are all connected with one another,' explained Allan, 'and have separate openings to the sea. Light up again, Hamish; strike two this time, and they'll get a better idea.'

Again there was a splutter, and the flare revealed strange shifting shadows among the rocks, and a circle of faces that looked unnaturally white in the surrounding darkness.

Reggie's eyes were the sharpest.

'Hullo!' he exclaimed, 'there's something in that passage. What can it be?'

All crowded to examine the mysterious object, and the light flickered upon a pile of kegs and bales lying half-concealed behind a corner of rock.

'Smugglers!' declared Marjorie.

'Looks like it,' said Allan, as Hamish struck fresh matches and the others

crowded round, giving utterance to ohs! and ahs! of excitement.

'They're at their old trade again,' said Allan, examining the barrels; 'I wonder what Pater will say to this?'

'That's the last match, Allan,' said Hamish, as the light flickered out.

The darkness seemed to come down like a weight, and the young people found themselves groping for each other's hands.

'We had better make the best of our way out of this,' said Allan. 'Try to move quietly, for we don't know who might be about. Help Tricksy, Hamish; I think she's by you, and here, Tricksy, give me your other hand.'

They groped their way towards the entrance, and soon were in the strong sunshine at the mouth of the caves.

'Well,' said Allan, 'that was an adventure;' and they looked at one another with varying expressions.

'Do you think they may have had anything to do with the robbery?' said Marjorie.

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied Allan. 'Anyhow, we'll see what Pater says.'

'In the meanwhile,' said Marjorie, 'we had better be quick; the breakers are close under the rocks, and we're almost cut off already.'

A stream of foaming, angry-looking water was running up into a hollow on the shore, and the young folk could only escape by jumping on to a stone in the middle of the flood, and from thence to the other side.

'Jump, Tricksy,' cried Reggie half impatiently, as his little sister hesitated.

Tricksy, who was pale and overwrought, sprang, but fell short and plunged overhead in the water.

Instantly two or three were in the flood, trying to prevent her being swept out to sea.

Allan secured her; and gasping, struggling, with water running over her face, Tricksy was pulled on to dry land.

'It isn't so very bad, is it, Tricksy?' inquired Reggie, in a tone of somewhat forced cheerfulness; 'what a thing to do, to jump in when you're told to jump over!'

Tricksy tried to smile; a miserable attempt, for her teeth chattered and her lips were blue with the cold.

'Run to Rob MacLean's cottage, Reggie,' said Hamish, throwing off his coat and wrapping it round Tricksy; 'ask him to lend us his pony, and we'll take Tricksy to Corranmore; it's nearer than your house.'

With Hamish running by her side and holding her on to the pony, Tricksy was not long in reaching Corranmore, and when the others arrived she was already in bed, with Mrs. MacGregor beside her; the little girl drinking hot milk and trying to restrain the tears that *would* roll down her cheeks, even when she forced herself to laugh.

'Feeling better, Tricksy?' asked Reggie apprehensively.

'She has had a nasty fall,' said Mrs. MacGregor somewhat reproachfully, 'and we may be thankful it is not any worse. She can't possibly go home to-night; you had better tell your parents that she is safe with us.'

A look of relief overspread Tricksy's tired features.

'Oh, you *are* a dear,' she exclaimed, springing up and throwing her arms round Mrs. MacGregor's neck, forgetting that the lady had once said that Tricksy Stewart was a spoilt little girl. 'Hooray, I'll sleep with Marjorie and we can talk about what we have seen to-day!'

CHAPTER VII

THE SIEGE

'No, Mr. Allan,' Duncan was declaring, 'if I wass you, I would not pe telling the laird whateffer; it can do no good pringing honest folk into trouble.'

'But they are not honest folk if they're smugglers,' interposed Reggie, who had been listening to the conversation without joining in.

A peculiar expression flitted across Duncan's face.

'Well, but, Mr. Allan,' he maintained; 'I'm just telling you, that it will pe petter if you will not pe telling the laird; you will only pe meking trouble in the island and will pe doing no good at ahl, at ahl.'

'But what if it was they who robbed the post-office?' said Allan.

'Robbed the post-office, Mr. Allan!' cried Duncan; 'what will they pe doing that for? Not them, Mr. Allan! So do not pe meking trouble by telling the laird _____'

'But we *have* told him,' said Reggie.

'Dear, dear, Mr. Allan and Master Reggie,' said Duncan with a vexed face; 'what will you haf peen doing that for? That wass a treatful thing to do, to pe tale-bearers. Tear me; and what iss to pe done now?'

'But, Duncan, smuggling is against the law, and it will be their own fault——'

'Well, but, Mr. Allan, you will pe for punishing folks that iss not deserving to pe punished if you do such a foolish thing ass to pring the police to them, and—och! Mr. Allan, Mr. Allan, why can't young folks hev some sense! What iss to pe done now, after all you young ladies and gentlemen hev tone such a senseless thing!'

Duncan's evident excitement showed that argument was in vain; and there was something in his manner that tended to convince the boys, against their

better judgment, that they had done wrong in speaking of their discovery. They wandered down to the cricket-field, where the Grahams were indulging in a solitary practice.

'We'd better go and play with these fellows,' said Allan; 'we can't leave them to amuse themselves all the time.'

Presently the sound of wheels caused them to look round, and they saw the doctor's gig turning in at the gate, with Tricksy on the front seat beside Dr. MacGregor, and Marjorie and Hamish behind.

'Brought you back the missing one,' cried the doctor to Mrs. Stewart, who had come to the door to meet them; 'none the worse for her bath;' and Tricksy jumped down and ran into the playing field followed more slowly by the other two.

'Come along and have a game,' cried Reggie; but the new-comers appeared to have something on their minds. They stood eyeing one another in an embarrassed way; Hamish looking sheepish and Marjorie mischievous; while Tricksy's little flushed face was breaking into dimples, and both girls displayed an inclination to giggle.

'Wait a minute,' whispered Tricksy, as Allan came towards them, and Marjorie said to her in a sharp undertone, 'Go on, can't you, and don't be silly.'

Thus admonished, Tricksy composed herself into gravity and produced a large piece of cardboard with ornamental lettering from which she read the following:—

PROCLAMATION

TO THE BOYS OP ARDNAVOIR

We, the undersigned, hereby declare war against you. We challenge you to open combat at our Fort. You must give us warning at what date and time you will attack us. Any advantage gained in not attending to these rules will be considered unfair. Any weapons allowed except stones.

(Signed) 'HAMISH MACGREGOR,
'MARJORIE,
'TRICKSY.'

'Our Fort is the hut, of course, in you-know-where,' added Marjorie; 'and the challenging party have the right to choose whether they will be besiegers or defenders, advantages to be as equal as possible. That's all,' she concluded, with a sudden lapse into her usual manner.

The two new boys had been listening with all their might.

'Whatever does she mean?' they asked in an aside, turning to Reggie.

'It's a challenge,' said Reggie. 'Let's hear what Allan says.'

Allan was considering.

'Shall we accept now, Reggie?' he asked.

Reggie thought the combat might as well take place without delay; and Allan replied to the Proclamation in these terms:

'The Challenge is accepted. We will meet you at the Fort. You will be the garrison, as there are fewer of you, and we'll attack.—Come along.'

'Call the dogs, Reggie,' said Marjorie. 'Do you like sieges?' she asked Gerald, as they were on their way to the shore.

'Awful fun,' replied the fair-haired boy, whose pink and white face was fast becoming tanned by wind and sun.

'What weapons are to be used?' asked Marjorie, turning quickly to the others.

'Turfs,' replied Allan, 'and lumps of wet sea-weed if you like.'

Marjorie gave a little jump as though she were pleased.

The boat was launched, and cut swiftly through the transparent water, while the new boys looked around with expectant faces.

'What an awfully jolly place,' they said, as they sprang out on the beach. 'Awful fun, having an island of your own to do as you like with.'

'Half-an-hour allowed for gathering ammunition,' called out Marjorie. 'We'll show Harry and Gerald over the place when we've had our fight. We had better defend from the roof of the cottage, for we might pull down the walls if we defended from the inside.'

Some time was spent in digging clods of turf, a quantity of which was piled on the roof of the hut for the defenders, while the attackers disposed theirs in little heaps at a short distance from the fort.

'Now for the sea-weed,' cried Marjorie; 'nothing like getting a heap of wet tang thrown in your face when you're fighting.'

The tide was far out, and quantities of wet sea-weed lay exposed on the rocks.

'No stones to be taken,' said Allan, sawing through the tough, thick stalks with a large pocket-knife.

'How do you like our way of playing?' asked Marjorie of Harry, as she passed him, grasping in each hand a mass of wet sea-weed which dripped down on her frock and shoes.

'Awful fun,' replied the boy, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

'Come along then, I think we've got enough.'

She swung herself nimbly on to the roof, followed by Hamish and Tricksy. The wind was freshening, and sang in their ears, making them feel excited and eager for the fray.

'It's rather stormy,' said Harry; 'do you think we'll get back?'

'Of course,' said Marjorie; 'why, this is nothing! We like it to be a little stormy, it's better fun. Call the others,' and they shouted for the rest of the attacking party, who came hurrying, armed with missiles. Laddie and Carlo followed in the rear, suspending their operations among the rabbit burrows to see what was going to happen.

'To your post, Gerald,' shouted Allan; and Gerald made a dart towards the besiegers, just in time to avoid being caught in a rain of clods which hurtled through the air.

Allan and Reggie showed great dexterity in avoiding the missiles, but Harry and Gerald, not having had so much practice in this kind of warfare, acted the part of unwilling targets, and their neat suits were soon bespattered with mud.

'All in the day's work, eh?' said Allan, as he hurried past Gerald, who was somewhat ruefully wiping the dirt off his cheek with one hand; 'Awful fun, isn't it?'

'Awfully jolly,' assented Gerald, trying not to think that in the bottom of his heart there was a doubt.

A fresh shower of sods came from the cottage, accompanied by shouts both from besiegers and besieged; and Laddie, who had been looking on with a puzzled face and trying to make out what was the matter, came to the conclusion that his young friends were engaged in deadly warfare, and rushed between the opposing sides with a bark and a wagging tail, bent upon making peace.

'Down, Laddie, down,' shouted Allan, as the dog jumped up to lick his face, after running frenziedly from one side to the other; 'trust, sir! Go and lie down;' and Laddie, looking heart-broken, retired to the turf dyke and lay watching the fray in consternation.

The battle raged long and furiously, neither side appearing to gain the advantage.

The attacking party pressed round the walls of the cottage, only to be beaten back by the projectiles which were showered upon them. Nerving themselves to fresh efforts, they rushed to the attack, Allan calm, Reggie intrepid, and the two Grahams animated by the wildest excitement.

Seeing one spot undefended, Gerald made a dash for it, and had already one foot on the wall, preparatory to scaling the cottage, when 'swish' came a lump of sea-weed in his face; and before he had recovered from the shock a pair of strong hands seized him and Marjorie's voice shouted, 'A prisoner!'

A wild rush was made to effect a rescue, but Hamish came to Marjorie's

assistance, and Gerald was pulled kicking and struggling up on the roof.

'Now you had better sit down quietly,' said Hamish; 'you can watch the fight from behind the chimney,' and Gerald was reluctantly obliged to remain inactive.

Furious at the loss of one of their number, the attacking party precipitated themselves against the walls of the fort and the battle became fiercer than ever. For some time the issue appeared doubtful, but gradually the besiegers gained a footing on the walls from which they could not be dislodged. Panting, buffeted, they forced their way upwards, while the defenders rained blows and clods upon them.

With a shout of victory, Allan had swung himself on to the roof, when a cry of dismay was raised.

'The roof is giving way!'

Hastily they all jumped, and not a minute too soon, for some gaping holes appeared in the thatch, and there was a rumble of falling stones.

'It's all right,' panted Marjorie; 'we can put that right in a morning's work. Oh, wasn't it a first-rate fight!'

'Capital,' agreed the others, and Tricksy's voice piped in. 'I fought very well too, didn't I, Marjorie?'

'Oh, very well,' replied Marjorie, who had been greatly hampered by Tricksy getting in her way at critical moments. 'But I think we all need a rest now, don't we?'

No second suggestion was needed; and they all flung themselves on the ground and lay where they were, letting the sea-breeze blow upon their heated faces.

'Awfully jolly,' murmured Gerald; 'I should like to have a fight like that every day.'

Harry lay stretched out with a restless face looking about him with eyes that sparkled notwithstanding his fatigue, and kicking his heels when he had the energy to do so. Had he been less completely exhausted, he would have got up

and explored the island, taking Gerald with him, but a cricket match and a siege in one afternoon, following a long walk in the morning, are as much as most boys are capable of.

Presently Reggie jumped up.

'Allan,' he said, 'don't you think we ought to be going?'

Allan looked at the waves which were beginning to jostle one another in mid-channel.

'Just about time,' he said.

'Couldn't we show them the inside of the house first,' said Marjorie; 'it won't take a minute.'

'All right,' said Allan, 'but we must be quick.'

'Is this where you stay when it is wet,' said Harry, as they pushed open the door of the cottage. 'What a jolly place. Can you light fires on the hearth?'

'Of course we can,' said Marjorie, 'and bake bannocks—why, Allan; some one has been here since we left!'

'Nonsense,' said Allan, looking about him. 'Why, I declare, some one has!'

'There has been a fresh fire lighted on the hearth,' said Marjorie, 'and the things are not as we left them. There are marks like footprints on the floor too.'

'What impudence,' said Reggie, with a darkening face. 'We must put up a notice board. No one has any business to come here except ourselves.'

Allan had been looking about him, and he suddenly darted forward and took possession of some object lying upon the floor. After a glance at it he turned white, gave an odd little gasp and slipped it into his pocket.

'What is it, Allan?' asked the others, crowding around.

'Nothing,' he said; 'nothing at all. I don't think any one has been here; it's all fancy.'

Reggie's eyes looked very much astonished at this change of front.

'Come along,' said Allan impatiently; 'it's time we went home,' and he swept them out of the cottage with so much decision that they obeyed, looking at him with puzzled faces.

'Hulloa!' cried Hamish; 'we had better be going.'

'Going?' echoed Allan; 'why, yes, we have no time to lose. Come along, all of you.'

'What's the matter?' asked Harry of Marjorie as they hurried towards the boat.

'It's a very high tide,' she said. 'Soon there will be a dangerous current flowing between the two islands, and if we get into it we might be swept out to sea. We are allowed to have the boat on condition that we watch the tide-ways; so we have to be careful.'

It took some hard rowing to gain the opposite shore; and when they had landed, Reggie turned to Hamish. 'A near thing that, eh, Hamish?' he said; and they all looked at the dark swift current which filled the channel.

'Ten minutes later, and we couldn't have crossed,' said Marjorie. 'What do you think, Allan?'

Despite the danger so recently escaped, Allan's thoughts were wandering. He looked round abstractedly, and slid into his pocket some object which he had been turning over unobserved; and Reggie fancied he caught a glimpse of a sailor's knife with some elaborate carving on the handle.

Reggie looked at his brother with a gleam of curiosity in his eyes.

'Come along,' said Allan authoritatively; 'don't let's stand dawdling about.'

CHAPTER VIII

A CRUISE IN THE 'HEROIC'

'I can't understand Allan at all,' declared Marjorie. She and Reggie, armed with large pocket-knives, were engaged in cutting heather on the moor, which stretched, a mass of purple, to the verge of the cliffs. A pile of heather lay beside them, the result of an hour's hard sawing of the wiry stems.

Marjorie's remark had interrupted a busy silence.

Reggie looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. He had been growing thinner and browner during the summer, and his wrists came further beyond the sleeves of his jacket.

'What's the matter with Allan?' he asked.

'Why,' said Marjorie impatiently, 'he is going on so oddly. First of all, he wasn't to be found when we came here this morning—had been away for hours—and he isn't usually in such a hurry to get up in the holidays. Then when he comes back we all have to go off and get heather to patch up the roof of the Pirates' Den. I can't make out why he has grown so particular all of a sudden.'

Reggie looked at her with a provoking smile.

'I thought it was you who wanted the place kept water-tight,' he suggested, 'in case we might be storm-stayed some evening and have to spend the night there _____'

'That's all very well,' interrupted Marjorie, 'but that's not what's making you and Allan so busy just now. Why did you go off together yesterday, and stay away for such a time, leaving us to entertain your guests? You're busy with something that you don't want us to know about and I'd just like to find out what it is. It always irritates me when people make mysteries out of nothing.'

Reggie was looking grave, and his dark eyes studied Marjorie intently.

'Hullo, you two,' said Allan, coming up; 'how are you getting on?'

Marjorie rose up from the ground, and seated herself upon the pile of cut heather.

'I've just been telling Reggie that I know that you and he have a secret between you,' she said, looking boldly at Allan. 'I'd just like to know what it is. Hardly fair, I call it; keeping something from the other members of the Compact _____'

She broke off upon seeing the grave, concerned expression in Allan's eyes.

'It's all right,' she said, looking fixedly out to sea; 'it's something that you know you ought to keep from me, and I'm not going to find out what it is.'

She had become flushed, and her heart was beating fast as a suspicion forced itself upon her. She turned, and stooping down, took up her armful of heather.

'I'm going to carry this to the boat,' she remarked, without looking round.

The boys looked after her retreating figure.

'H'm,' said Allan, 'not bad for a girl.'

Marjorie's reflections were interrupted by a shout, and Harry came running down the hill and caught her by the arm.

'Well, what's the matter?' she asked irritably.

'Look!' he panted, pulling her round. 'Look at that! Well, if you're so cross you needn't, but you must be a duffer if you don't care to see what's coming round that headland——'

Marjorie's eyes followed in the direction pointed out by his shaking finger, and her face cleared.

A large vessel was gliding into view.

Tricksy came running as fast as her little short legs would carry her, the two dogs barking in her wake.

'Marjorie,' she gasped, 'it's a man-o'-war; oh, don't you hope it's that nice one that came last year!'

By this time the vessel had been sighted by the others, who came down to

discuss the situation.

'Perhaps she's a stranger,' suggested Hamish, feeling that it might be better to prepare for a disappointment.

'She's a fine big vessel, whatever she is,' said Harry.

'She's like the one that was here last year,' said Marjorie.

'Oh, don't you hope she's the same,' sighed Tricksy.

'You are right, Marjorie,' said Reggie, whose eyes were the best; 'I'm certain it's the old *Heroic*.'

'What fun!' said Marjorie; while Tricksy sighed 'Oh, how nice!'

'I wonder whether the same men are on board,' said Reggie, whose serious expression had changed.

'Don't know,' said Allan briefly, looking out to sea with his hands in his pockets and a thoughtful face.

His lack of enthusiasm caused all the others to look at him, and Marjorie felt her fears revive.

The man-of-war came to a standstill in Ardnavor Bay and a boat put off from her side.

'Look, oh look,' cried Tricksy, 'they're coming on shore.'

'Do you think they'll speak to us if they meet us?' inquired Harry, whose eyes had never ceased to sparkle since the first discovery of the vessel.

'We'll go down to the landing-place as soon as the boat comes in,' said Allan.

'Can I go too?' asked Tricksy.

Allan looked at her.

'I think you two girls had better stay up here,' he said; and Tricksy's face showed her disappointment.

The boat was rapidly coming nearer, and soon she grounded near the spot where the Pirate Craft lay beached.

'There,' said Allan; 'there are three officers in the boat, and they're getting out.'

The young people clustered at the edge of the rocks and looked down.

'We had better wait until they are gone,' said Allan; 'don't let them see that we are watching them.'

'They are going in the direction of Ardnavaor,' said Marjorie; 'I believe they are going to call for your father and mother!'

'Oh,' sighed Tricksy after the breathless pause during which they were uncertain whether the officers were really going to enter the gate or would pass by; 'they've gone in. I saw that nice one who came here last year. Do you think they can be going to invite us to come on board?'

This question being rather difficult to answer, Allan suggested that the boys should go down to the shore and see if any of their old friends were in the boat.

'Marjorie,' said Tricksy, as the two girls remained looking down from above; 'do you think we should have better fun if we were boys?'

Marjorie's reply was forestalled by a shout from below; and the girls scrambled down to the beach.

'Come along, you two,' said Allan; 'here's Jim Macdonnell, Euan's twin brother, and a lot of the men who were here last year.'

Greetings were exchanged with the pleasant-faced young blue-jacket and his companions; and then the boys and girls sat down on the stones to talk with their friends.

The men could not come on shore, as no leave had yet been given, but they hoped to be allowed to land on the following day.

'You will be glad to see Euan,' said Marjorie to Jim Macdonnell.

'Yes, Miss Marjorie,' replied the lad, but his handsome face clouded; and Marjorie knew that he was thinking of his cousin Neil, once the favourite of the island.

'We were going to ask you, Mr. Allan,' he said, 'whether you young gentlemen would come and have tea on board this afternoon; just with us men, you know, sir.'

'Thank you very much,' replied Allan, while all the boys looked gratified; 'it would be no end jolly, and we'll come if Father will let us. I'm sure he will. May we bring our friends too, Harry and Gerald Graham?'

'To be sure, sir,' replied Jim; 'we'll be glad to see the young gentlemen. Are you fond of the sea, sir?' he inquired, turning to Harry.

Yes,' replied Harry, 'and I'm going into the navy.'

'That's good,' said Jim. 'Perhaps I'll see you as a midshipman next time we meet.'

'Perhaps,' said Harry; 'and I hope I'll be a captain before very long.'

'I hope you will be an admiral some day, sir, I'm sure,' answered Jim gravely.

'Thank you,' said Harry; 'yes, I daresay I shall be.'

Allan turned his head away, and a smile gleamed out for an instant upon Marjorie's face. Harry saw it and did not feel pleased, and he remarked to Gerald afterwards that he was afraid Marjorie thought a great deal too much of herself.

'And what are you going to be, air?' inquired another of the men, turning to Gerald, who was sitting by with a thoughtful face.

'I'm going into the army, I think,' answered Gerald; 'but I don't know if I can pass the exams. They're very difficult, but I'm going to try.'

'Here are the gentlemen coming back again,' said Jim.

'Then we'll leave you now,' said Allan; 'but we'll see you again in the afternoon.'

'Right you are, sir,' replied Jim; 'we'll send a boat to fetch you.'

'You are lucky,' said Marjorie to the boys. 'How I wish we could go too. Do you think they meant to invite us?'

Allan looked doubtful.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't think they thought of it. But I daresay they would be glad to see you if you came.'

'It's no good, I'm afraid,' answered Marjorie; 'I'd have to ask Mother and she'd be sure to say no. But there is the boat going away, and listen, isn't that the horn?'

They hearkened for a moment, and it was unmistakably the old ram's horn which was sounded at Ardnavor to summon those at a distance when any notable event was about to take place.

'I wonder what it can be,' said Tricksy, as they scampered in the direction of the mansion-house; 'do you think it can have anything to do with the *Heroic*, Allan?'

Mrs. Stewart was in the doorway.

'We are invited to luncheon on board the *Heroic*,' she announced. 'The officers have signalled to ask Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor to come too, and we have telephoned to say that Marjorie can get ready here, if Mrs. MacGregor will bring her things with her.'

The young people did not look so pleased as Mrs. Stewart had anticipated.

'How many of us are asked, Mummie?' inquired Tricksy.

'As many as care to come,' answered Mrs. Stewart. 'The boys may come too if they like.'

All the boys looked unwilling.

'Don't you want to go?' asked Mrs. Stewart in surprise.

'Yes, Mother,' answered Allan; 'but the men have invited us already.'

'And would you rather go with them?'

The boys' faces showed that they would, and Mrs. Stewart gave permission with a laugh.

Tricksy sidled up to her mother.

'Mummie, don't you think that Marjorie and I could go too?' she asked.

'No, I am quite sure that it wouldn't do,' replied Mrs. Stewart; and the girls looked disappointed.

'You had better go upstairs and begin to get ready,' said Mrs. Stewart. 'Marjorie can brush her hair'—looking dubiously at the tangled mass of curls, in which bits of grass and heather had become intermixed, 'and perhaps by that time her other frock and her hat will have arrived.'

The girls turned to go upstairs, but paused to look at Carlo, who came running down the steps, wriggling his small body, and whining as though he were in pain.

'What's the matter with the poor little dog?' they cried.

Every one turned round as Carlo landed on the rug, and stood yelping distressfully.

'Whatever is the little brute going on about?' said Reggie, looking at him with curiosity.

'Something is hurting him,' said Hamish.

'I never saw him go on like that before,' remarked Allan.

Laddie sprang forward, wagging his tail and running to every one in turn, trying to explain that his little friend needed help.

'Look how he bites his tail,' cried Mrs. Stewart, 'why do you do that, Carlo?'

'Hydrophobia, perhaps,' suggested Allan; and some of the bystanders edged a little farther away.

'Poor little dog,' said Gerald soothingly; 'tell us what's the matter with you.'

At the sound of the pitying voice the little dog gathered up his ears, then sat up and uttered a doleful howl, accompanied by agitated movements of his fore-paws.

'There's something clinging to his tail,' cried Reggie suddenly, pouncing upon him. 'Why, just look at this; it's a couple of small crabs!'

'Where can he have got them from?' asked Mrs. Stewart, looking bewildered; 'he came from upstairs.'

'Oh, it's—it's—I know,' stuttered Gerald, flushing deeply. 'It's—I'll put it all right, you needn't come.'

The remainder of the sentence was lost as he hurried upstairs.

'Whatever is he about?' said Marjorie; 'let's go and see.'

Gerald became very red again as he was discovered in the room which he shared with Harry, collecting some small objects from the floor.

'You needn't have come,' he said. 'It's—it's only my collection, and they've been escaping——'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Harry; 'it's those snails and things that he has been gathering on the beach, and they've crawled all over the place!'

Gerald stood, flushing to the roots of his hair, and shrinking from the mirth of the others.

His treasures had been trying to make themselves at home in their new quarters. The little crabs and lobsters had scattered in search of water, and the shell-fish had crawled over the floor or attached themselves to the wall, where they waited with tilted shells for the tide that failed to come.

'Never mind, Gerald,' said Marjorie, as tears began to start in the boy's eyes; 'it's very nice making a collection, and I've got a nice pail with a lid that I'll give you to keep the things in.'

'And now,' said Mrs. Stewart, 'I see the pony cart coming up the drive, with Mrs. MacGregor in it; run and get ready, girls, or we shall be late.'

After about a quarter of an hour's tidying, Marjorie was released from her mother's hands, dressed in a cream serge frock and a large hat, and with her hair brushed out and neatly arranged.

Feeling unlike herself and hardly satisfied with the change, she peeped in the glass as soon as her mother's back was turned.

Her own reflection caused her to start and colour with surprise.

Blue eyes, bright with suppressed excitement, a wild rose face framed in short fair curls and set off by the light colours of her attire, slender hands and neat ankles—'and that's me,' said Marjorie to herself in bewilderment.

Tricksy came into the room, wearing a white hanging frock with a big floppy white hat.

'Dear me,' said Marjorie to herself, taking another glance in the mirror, after the eyes of the two girls had met in silent approval of one another; 'curious that we've never thought of it before—perhaps it's because we so seldom have bothered to look in the glass—but it strikes me that we're actually a pair of very pretty girls—with our hair brushed and our faces washed!'

They went downstairs without speaking, and encountered the boys in the hall.

All eyes were attracted to them; then an approving expression came into the boys' faces, and as the girls passed they moved somewhat aside to look at them from another point of view.

Despite the anxiety which had brooded over her since morning, Marjorie began to feel her spirits rise.

'Marjorie,' said Tricksy solemnly, as Duncan was driving them to the landing-stage, 'which do you think is the best fun, being a boy or being a girl?'

Marjorie had been lost in thought, but at Tricksy's question her eyes began to dance.

'I think it's best of all to be a tomboy,' she said, 'and then you can be a bit of both!'

When the sailors had shipped their oars, and the boat glided under the side of the great war-vessel, first the ladies, and then the girls were assisted on deck and greeted by the captain, erect and broad-shouldered, and by the officers, the youngest of whom was Tricksy's friend of the year before. Dr. MacGregor and the laird and Mr. Graham were already on board.

'Hullo, Miss Tricksy, how do you do?' said a voice, and Tricksy looked up to see the Sheriff, who was smiling at her with outstretched hand.

Tricksy looked solemnly up in his face.

'Well, aren't you going to shake hands, Tricksy?' said the Sheriff.

'No,' said Tricksy deliberately.

The Sheriff's expression altered.

'And why not, Miss Tricksy, if I might inquire?' he said.

Tricksy met his grim smile with a solemn stare of disapproval.

'Because you let a great friend of ours be put in prison when he didn't deserve it,' she replied. 'That was why I sent back the big box of chocolates that you sent me by post. Mother did not know that it had come. We can't be friends until you've owned yourself in the wrong. We've all joined a Compact to get our friend back again and to show that it wasn't he who did it. I've got it with me,' and Tricksy began to fumble in her pocket.

The smile was beginning to twitch at the corners of the Sheriff's lips again when he was addressed by one of the officers. The little scene had passed unobserved by all save Marjorie, as the captain suggested that, the weather being fine and time at their disposal, the *Heroic* should take their visitors on a tour round Inchkerra.

'Certainly, certainly,' said the Sheriff at haphazard, and Tricksy slipped away.

'In the meanwhile I think lunch is ready,' said Captain Redwood, and each of

the officers took a lady downstairs, Tricksy falling to the share of the youngest.

'Dear me, this isn't half so exciting as I expected,' said Marjorie to herself. 'What stupid grown-up things they are talking about; I am sure they wouldn't be interested if I were to tell them about the things we do, riding bare-backed ponies, and about the Craft and the Den, and finding the smugglers; and I have nothing else to talk to them about. They haven't taken much notice of Tricksy and me after all; they weren't a bit surprised when they saw us; we're pretty, but not any prettier than lots of other girls, and it isn't enough to make a fuss about.'

She wondered what Tricksy was finding to say to Lieutenant Jones, the young officer by whose side she was sitting, and who appeared to be greatly entertained by the little girl.

After lunch they returned on deck to see a boat bring the boys on board; then the screw was set in motion and the water began to churn itself into foam round the vessel's sides.

'It isn't bad,' said Marjorie to herself as the *Heroic* ploughed her way past the well-known shores, 'but it's a bother not having anything to do. I've seen all this before, and it isn't as though we were rowing for all we were worth in the old *Mermaid*—I mean, the *Craft*—and in danger of getting into currents and being swept away to I don't know where. Now I have no doubt the boys are having no end of a good time, going into the engine-room and getting themselves dirty, and climbing all over the place, and listening to the sailors' yarns. Once I get out of this, catch me bother any more about looking nice, and being grown-up, and all the rest of it—it will be time enough when I'm so old that I get no fun out of being a tomboy any more.'

Lieutenant Jones left Tricksy and came to sit beside Marjorie for a turn.

'I suppose you are quite accustomed to sailing as you live in an island, Miss MacGregor?' he said.

'Yes,' replied Marjorie, 'we are all very fond of boating, the boys and Tricksy and I,' and after talking for a little while she began to think that a grown-up man was nearly as good company as a boy once you got him upon the right subject.

'Now,' said the Sheriff, coming up with his spy-glass, 'we are coming near the finest bit of rock scenery on the island; one of the finest, in my opinion, on this

part of the West Coast.'

The *Heroic* was just rounding the point which concealed the Smugglers' Caves from view.

'The Corrachin Crag,' continued the Sheriff; 'the caves are remarkably fine; interesting, too, as in former times they are said to have been used for smuggling purposes, and as hiding-places for pirates and other lawless characters——'

'Now!' burst from the lips of the gazers as the lofty cliffs came in view, with the waves tumbling at their base.

Captain Redwood had issued orders to slacken speed, and as the vessel steamed slowly past, a fine view was obtained of bold masses of rock and the black openings to the caves, with the startled birds rising in clouds and screaming.

'If all stories are true, the caves are still sometimes put to their old uses,' observed Mrs. MacGregor as the *Heroic's* engines throbbed through the smooth swell of the water; 'for all we know, the most thrilling adventures may be taking place there.'

'A score of men might lie in hiding without discovering one another's presence,' said the laird; 'the caves form a regular network, and stretch a long way underground. The entire headland is said to be honeycombed with them ——'

'Hullo, good people!' cried a soft little voice from overhead, followed by a triumphant laugh.

Every one looked round, and half-way up the mast Tricksy was discovered, who having become annoyed at her desertion by Lieutenant Jones, was indulging in an exploring expedition on her own account. Her little round face smiled mischievously from between a large white hat and tumbled frock, and she sat swinging her heels in perfect contentment.

Jim Macdonnell's duties having brought him to the quarter-deck at this moment, the captain made him a sign almost without pausing in the sentence which he was addressing to Mrs. Stewart.

The sailor climbed into the rigging and removed Tricksy very gently from her perch, tucked her under one arm with her head hanging in front and her heels behind, slid down the ropes and deposited the little girl on the deck.

Tricksy stood and looked at every one in speechless wrath. Her dignity, being as great as her anger, prevented her from giving way to an outburst before she should have discovered who deserved it most.

Lieutenant Jones crossed over to her.

'I suppose you have been round all this place before, Miss Tricksy,' he said in a conversational tone.

Tricksy looked at him with mistrust.

'I believe you are great explorers and rock-climbers, you and your brothers, Miss Tricksy,' continued the officer, as though being carried down from a mast before a crowd of people were a matter of everyday occurrence; 'I envy you your opportunities——'

This sounded quite like the way the other officers had been talking to the grown-up ladies, and Tricksy found her stiffness begin to forsake her.

The most important point was to discover whether the Sheriff had seen what had occurred. If he had not been a witness, Tricksy felt that she might allow herself to get over it.

Her eyes sought her enemy, but that magistrate was, or affected to be, engrossed in trying to bring his telescope to bear upon the caves, and the episode had apparently escaped him.

'Talking of people hiding in the caves,' he said suddenly; 'Mrs. MacGregor, do you see the figure of a man at the mouth of the one which we are now opposite? From his attitude he might be a fugitive from justice or any other of these interesting desperadoes about whom we have been talking——'

Marjorie's face flushed, and she began to tremble from head to foot.

'Wait a minute, Mrs. MacGregor,' said the Sheriff, 'I will get my glasses adjusted. Curious; there is something in the man's appearance which seems

familiar to me——'

He was about to take another look when the air was rent by the shrill whistle of a siren.

They all turned round in astonishment, and when they looked towards the rocks again the figure had disappeared.

The captain's face had become stern, but the culprit proved to be only a small boy in a jacket whose sleeves were too short for him.

Marjorie had seen more, however; she had seen that it was Jim Macdonnell who had made Reggie blow the siren.

During the rest of the afternoon things seemed to be swimming before Marjorie's eyes, and she heard only a confused murmur of voices.

When the voyage was over she went straight to Allan.

'Allan,' she said abruptly, 'I may as well tell you that I know your secret. Neil is in Inchkerra—and he is in hiding.'

CHAPTER IX

DISAPPOINTMENT

Allan looked at Marjorie with his hands in his pockets.

'It's all right,' said Marjorie hastily; 'I won't tell any one, but I couldn't help finding it out, for I saw Neil. Anyhow, I know so much already that I might as well know the rest. To begin with, it was Neil's knife that you picked up in the Den; I saw the letters on the handle.'

Allan watched Marjorie narrowly for a minute, and then he seemed to become reassured.

'Listen, Marjorie,' he said; 'mind you don't let out a word of this to any one. It would be an awful thing if Neil were taken now. He came back a few days ago, in a smuggling vessel, to see his mother. Mrs. Macdonnell is very ill, as you know'—Marjorie nodded, a lump being in her throat—'and she thinks she can't live long. Some one who knew where Neil was wrote and told him that she was always saying how much she wished she could see him before she died, and he came back at once, although the police may get him at any minute and he knows it. In the meanwhile she is much worse, and he refuses to go away until he sees whether she is going to recover. Mrs. Macdonnell keeps asking him to clear out, but he always says there is no hurry, and that he will wait until she is better. It's awfully senseless of him, for he might be seen any day; but Neil always was a bit obstinate once he takes a thing into his head. He hides most of the day and comes out when there isn't much chance of his meeting any one. But if he were found out he would be taken and sent to prison as sure as fate, so you must tell no one, Marjorie, not a soul. Reggie knows, but none of the others.'

Every particle of colour had left Marjorie's face, but her lips set themselves firmly.

'You needn't be afraid of me, Allan,' she said. 'We must get him persuaded to go away at once, for his mother would never get over it if he were caught.'

'Can't do anything just now,' said Allan; 'there is no way of getting him out of the island while the *Heroic* is here, and this afternoon the men were declaring that as soon as they got shore leave they would search the island for the man who they say is "skulking round." We can only hope that they won't go very far into the caves, or that the ship will soon be ordered north. But, Marjorie, don't go about with a face like that, whatever you do, or you'll show people that something's the matter. Remember that if either the Pater or your father were to find out that Neil is here, it would be their duty to let the police know, and they wouldn't like to have to do that.'

Marjorie drew herself together.

'You needn't be afraid of me, Allan,' she said, as she turned away. 'I can keep a secret as well as you and Reggie, and you know it.'

On the following morning Allan was hardly surprised to encounter Marjorie upon the little hill which commanded a view of the sea near Ardnavaire. Her pony

was beside her, and she had evidently risen with the dawn and ridden over the moors.

'Any news?' she inquired anxiously.

'Nothing at all,' he replied. 'The *Heroic* is quite quiet yet, as you see.'

They looked at the dark hull which was lying motionless upon the water.

'Duncan rode over to the caves last night to tell Neil to keep out of sight while the *Heroic* is here,' said Allan. 'The only fear is if the men should try exploring with torches. There are openings from the caves on to the moors, but if the island is swarming with men it wouldn't be much good trying to escape by them.'

'Oh,' cried Marjorie, looking at the *Heroic*, 'if only they would go away. Couldn't we invent some excuse for getting them out of the way while we get Neil into safety.'

'No good, I'm afraid,' said Allan. 'They have their orders from the Admiralty, and they wouldn't attend to anything else.'

Marjorie looked hopeless.

'I shall have to go home now,' she said; 'there's some one moving about in your garden, so it must be nearly breakfast-time. Let me know if there's any news.'

'Don't go yet,' said Allan decidedly. 'You must stay and have breakfast with us. I bet you didn't have anything before you left?'

'I had a crust of bread,' said Marjorie reluctantly. 'Elsbeth keeps everything locked up at night, and I couldn't wait.'

'Come along,' said Allan. 'You'll be in the best place for seeing what the *Heroic* is about.'

The argument was irresistible and Marjorie yielded.

'Never mind Cheeky,' said Allan; 'he won't wander far.'

The bridle was taken off the shaggy little pony whom Marjorie had not waited to saddle, and Marjorie and Allan went down the hill.

Reggie and Harry were already out of doors, Harry addressing himself with sparkling eyes to Reggie, who was unusually silent. When Allan came in view together with Marjorie, Reggie studied the pair inquiringly and received a reassuring nod from Allan.

'Seen the *Heroic*?' began Harry; 'I say, if the men get their leave to-day do you think they will let us come with them?'

'We might show them the interesting places on the island,' said Reggie, with a sidelong glance at Allan.

'Oh, I say, what fun,' exclaimed Harry; 'I'd take them to the Smugglers' Caves and let them explore.'

Reggie looked at Allan again.

'I wouldn't do that, if I were you, Harry,' said Allan. 'You don't know much about the caves yourself yet, you know, and they're most awfully dangerous; great holes full of water where you don't expect them, and rocks that might fall on the top of you and crush you to pieces; and then the smugglers might be lying in ambush round the corners, you know.'

Tricksy, who had come out to join the others, opened her eyes very widely at this account of the hidden perils of the caves.

'Look,' cried Reggie, 'they're signalling something from the *Heroic*.'

A string of flags had suddenly floated out from the *Heroic's* masthead.

'Wait, and I'll fetch a spy-glass,' said Allan, running towards the house.

'Something about telling something to Father,' he said, after studying the signals for awhile; 'I can't make out the rest.'

They looked at each other with frightened eyes.

'Here, Reggie,' said Allan, handing him the glass, 'you try.'

Reggie looked, then shook his head.

'Can't make anything of it,' he said.

'Perhaps they want us to come on board again,' said Harry. 'You might give me the glass for a minute, Reggie.'

'They can't have been exploring already?' suggested Marjorie, in a voice designed only for Allan's and Reggie's ears.

'Don't know,' said Allan. 'If only they hadn't gone and made Father a J.P.!' he added, with a judiciously suppressed groan.

'They're signalling from the coastguard station, do you see?' cried Tricksy.

'Where's Gerald?' said Harry; 'he ought to be here to see this. Lazy beggar, if I don't remember to wake him at four in the morning he always oversleeps.'

He flew into the house, and returned shortly, followed by Gerald, who came rubbing his eyes and trying to seem grateful to his brother for having roused him out of the first good sleep he had enjoyed for weeks.

'There's a coastguard just coming up the drive,' said Reggie.

'Perhaps all the men are going to ask us to a picnic or something,' suggested Harry; while Marjorie, Allan, and Reggie watched the messenger.

Nothing was to be gathered from the demeanour of the coastguard, and after he had gone down the avenue all the young people crowded into the hall.

'A letter,' said Allan, looking at an envelope lying on the hall table; 'Allan Stewart, Esq. that doesn't tell us much, and Father has gone out.'

'Perhaps it's for you,' suggested Tricksy.

'Not it,' said Allan unwillingly; 'they'd never address me as esquire, especially as Father is Allan too. Can't do anything until he comes back.'

'What do you think he can have gone out for?' inquired Marjorie, and the faces of the others were as anxious as her own.

'Now, young people,' cried Mrs. Stewart's voice, 'come to breakfast; the *Heroic* will wait while you have some food.'

Marjorie, Allan, and Reggie tore themselves unwillingly away from the letter.

'Mother,' said Allan persuasively, 'there's a letter for Father out there on the hall table; it's some message from the *Heroic*; don't you think you might open it and see what they say?'

Mrs. Stewart looked surprised.

'I can't open a letter addressed to your father,' she said. 'Have patience a little while; he may not be long.'

'But, Mother, perhaps it's something very important,' persisted Allan; 'they may be waiting for an answer, you know.'

'I don't think it can be so important as all that,' said Mrs. Stewart. 'Take your places, Allan and Reggie, everything is getting cold.'

The young people felt that their patience would give way in another minute.

'Come here, Gerald,' said Mrs. Stewart, 'beside Tricksy; and Harry, you can sit by Marjorie.'

Harry looked unwilling.

'Oh, Mother,' cried Tricksy, 'you are putting him with his back to the window!'

Mrs. Stewart looked mystified.

'He wants to see the *Heroic*,' explained Tricksy; 'we are watching to see when the boats leave.'

Mrs. Stewart gave Harry a seat on the other side of the table, an arrangement which placed Allan where he could not see what was going on. He and Marjorie and Reggie had to rest satisfied with the discovery that they were able to communicate by means of kicking one another's shins under the table, although this method of intelligence made them feel if possible more distracted than

before.

'Look how the men are running about on board,' said Tricksy. 'They look like little black ants! They must be going to launch the boats now.'

Harry's bright eyes did not leave the vessel for an instant. Of a sudden his jaw dropped and his face became blank.

'What's the matter?' cried every one.

'They're going away,' cried Harry.

Every one sprang from table and looked.

'They can't be going round to the caves,' said Marjorie. 'Oh, dear, how can we stop them. I'll take Cheeky and go and warn him.'

Fortunately this remark passed unnoticed amid the hubbub.

'They aren't going away altogether, are they?' asked Tricksy, her eyes becoming large with dismay.

Allan made a rush for the door, and ran up against his father, who was coming in.

'Hard luck,' said Mr. Stewart, holding out the letter; 'the *Heroic* has received unexpected orders, and they have to sail northward without delay. No shore leave, so they take this opportunity of saying good-bye.'

'Aw—w—w,' said Harry, Gerald, and Tricksy, while the others had difficulty in repressing an inclination to cheer.

'When are they coming back again?' asked Gerald.

'Next year, perhaps,' said Mr. Stewart, smiling.

The faces became if possible more blank than before.

'She's out of sight,' said Harry in a dejected tone, going to the window.

'Is she?' said Gerald, looking out too; 'why, so she is.'

'If you fellows want to see her,' said Allan, 'why don't you go to the top of the hill? You'll get a first-class view from there.'

Without a word the boys darted from the room and out at the front door, Harry with his bootlaces untied and flapping about his ankles, and Gerald without a hat. In scrambling over the wall Harry became caught, and fell sprawling on the ground, but picked himself up and ran on as if nothing had happened.

'Come, you two,' said Allan, 'now that we've got them safely out of the way we've got to do something.'

Marjorie ran for her bridle and put it on Cheeky, who was cropping grass by the stream.

'Go on,' shouted Allan; 'don't wait for us, we'll soon catch you up. Let's go and catch Dewdrop and Daisy, Reggie; bicycles are no good for the moors.'

In a short time Marjorie was overtaken by the two boys, perched upon bridleless, bare-backed ponies.

The wind whistled past as they galloped over the level ground, and they were almost too breathless to speak as they urged their ponies up the slopes of the hill.

'Oh, gee up, Daisy; gee-up!' cried Allan, 'we have no time to lose to-day!'

'Glad we got away all right,' he panted as they stood breathing their ponies on the summit; 'it would never do to have these two dragging about and asking questions. We've just got to get Neil out of there before anything more happens,' he continued. 'The boat is waiting about, watching for an opportunity to leave as soon as the *Heroic* goes; and we must make Neil promise to leave with her.'

The sturdy little ponies descended the slopes with the sure-footedness of cats; then sprang pluckily over the moss-hags which covered the greater part of the peninsula.

Suddenly, without warning, they became entangled in a treacherous piece of bog, from which they did not struggle into safety until Marjorie's pony had lost a shoe.

'Look out,' cried Allan, as they were about to spring forward once more; 'it's here that there are those holes that go down into the caves, and you don't see them until you've nearly fallen into them.'

Curbing their impatience, they dismounted and walked, leading the ponies by the bridle.

'There,' said Marjorie as they neared the cliff, 'the tide's rising, and they're shaking out the sails on the smugglers' vessel.'

'Shall we all go down?' asked Reggie.

'No,' said Allan, 'the fewer the better. You stay here with the ponies, and I'll go down with Marjorie.'

'Me?' said Marjorie, surprised.

'Yes, you. You've got to speak to him and get him to leave. Come along.'

They lowered themselves over the edge of the cliff, and clambered to the beach.

Two faces scowled at them over the bulwarks of the boat, and the captain waiting on the shore, a man of foreign appearance, with a shaggy black beard and a sou'-wester, glanced disapprovingly at Marjorie.

Somewhat alarmed, she turned and discovered Duncan standing beside her.

The butler was more disturbed at the encounter than seemed to Marjorie at all necessary, and her astonishment was completed when Rob MacLean and the lighthouse-keeper appeared, rolling a heavy barrel between them.

'Here, lend a hand,' they cried to Duncan; then they stopped short on observing Allan and Marjorie.

'Why, they are *all* smugglers!' Marjorie was on the point of exclaiming; but Allan seized her arm and gripped it warningly.

'We've come to see Neil, and to try to make him go with you,' he said, addressing himself to the men in a body.

Immediately the faces became less grim.

'That iss ahl right, Mr. Allan,' said Rob MacLean; 'you will pe finding him in a cave right opposite. Speak to him, Miss Marjorie; he iss ferry foolish and he will not pe wanting to come.'

Marjorie was still looking in a surprised way at Duncan, whom she hardly seemed to recognise in his new character of a smuggler; but Allan renewed his pressure upon her arm.

'Tell him he must go, Mr. Allan and Miss Marjorie,' said Duncan, 'and he must not be long, ta captain cannot be waiting or he will miss the tide. He iss a ferry impatient man iss ta captain, whateffer.'

All right,' said Allan; 'we'll talk to him. You go in first, Marjorie.'

A short way from the entrance Marjorie came upon Neil; but what a change in her old playmate! Pale, and looking still paler in the dim light; with worn and soiled clothing, and his former bright, pleasant expression changed into sullen despair.

Marjorie's heart sank.

'Neil,' she began, 'we've come to see you, Allan and I.'

'Indeed, Miss Marjorie, it is ferry good of you,' said the lad, rising and looking down upon her with a grateful expression, 'but wass it not ferry unwise of you to come? That sea-captain iss a rough character and he might——'

'Never mind us, Neil,' said Marjorie, 'we're all right. We only wanted to say that we are your friends, whatever happens, and we hope that things will come right for you. And now, Neil, you will go away for a little while, will you not? Don't stay here while you are in such danger of being found.'

Neil looked down upon her, and his face darkened again.

'I cannot be leaving Inchkerra just now, Miss Marjorie,' he said.

'Oh, Neil, do go away. Think what it would be to your mother if you were found—think what it would be to *all* of us, Neil——'

'Schooner's beginning to weigh anchor,' cried a gruff voice outside.

'Come, Neil, don't waste time,' said Marjorie.

Neil seated himself determinedly upon a fragment of rock.

'I will not be leaving the island just now, Miss Marjorie,' he said.

Marjorie looked at him, and noted the dulness of his eyes and the obstinate lines round his mouth.

'Neil, do, do go,' she said, clutching him by the arm. 'Come with me, Neil, and don't be foolish.'

'Are you ready, Neil?' said Allan, appearing inside the cave; 'the schooner can't wait much longer.'

Marjorie turned round in despair.

'Oh, this will never do,' said Allan. 'Come along, Neil, there's a good fellow, and don't keep them waiting.'

Neil remained firm and Marjorie felt that it was hopeless.

'Are you not for coming, Neil?' said Duncan, standing in the mouth of the cave; 'ta captain says he iss in a hurry to be gone.'

'Come, Neil,' said Rob MacLean persuasively, 'it will not pe meking Mistress Macdonnell any better, puir soul, for you to be waiting here with ta police, silly bodies, at your heels.'

Neil came forward, Marjorie and Allan following him anxiously.

'I will not pe going,' he said briefly.

'Of all ta fulish gomerals!' burst out Duncan, and clenched his fists and stormed in Gaelic to the lad, who remained unmoved.

'That will be a ferry foolish thing, Neil; gang wi ta captain,' said Bob soothingly.

'Go on board, Neil; it isn't too late yet,' implored Allan.

'Tide's on the turn,' shouted the gruff voice of the captain. 'Come if you're coming, and if not, don't keep honest folks waiting.'

Neil leaned against the cliff and looked stubbornly into vacancy. From his attitude it was plain that he was inflexible.

'Yo-ho!' sang out the sailors; 'heave-ho!' and the sails of the little vessel slowly filled as her bows swung round to the sea.

Marjorie made a bolt towards the cliff, and began to climb.

On the top she turned and looked at Allan, whose face was as white as her own.

'Can't be helped,' he said in a hard voice. 'Some ass went and told him that Mrs. Macdonnell was worse.'

'Hullo,' called out Reggie as they came within hearing, 'is he gone?'

'Gone!' echoed the others, and Marjorie sank down on the heather and gasped.

When she looked up the boys were sitting beside her.

'Well?' began Reggie sympathetically.

'He wouldn't go,' said Allan; 'we did all we could. Duncan and Rob are still storming at him down there.'

There was nothing to be said, and they all sat and reflected.

'The worst of it is,' said Marjorie in a trembling tearless voice, 'that in spite of our Compact and everything else, we haven't been able to do him a bit of good!'

The others assented by their silence.

'And I don't believe we ever shall,' continued Marjorie, 'we don't seem to have set about it the right way, somehow.'

The boys looked so downcast that Marjorie judged it inadvisable to pursue the subject further and they mounted their ponies and rode slowly in the direction of Ardnavaor.

Half-way down the hill they discovered Tricksy sitting on a clump of heather, with Hamish beside her and Laddie curled at her feet.

'You are nice, kind people,' said Tricksy reproachfully, 'going away like that and leaving me all alone!'

'Why, Tricksy,' began Marjorie, 'why didn't you go with the others?'

'Go with the others!' echoed Tricksy, 'do you think I could run up the hill as they did? If it hadn't been for Hamish I shouldn't have seen anything. Then leaving me all alone too.'

'But, Tricksy, where are Harry and Gerald?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. Gone off somewhere by themselves, and I came to meet you with Hamish. I think you might have let me come with you.'

'Don't be a little silly, Tricksy,' said Reggie irritably; 'you are too little to go all that distance.'

'Too little!' cried Tricksy, exasperated; 'I'm not too little to be sent messages for the others, and I'm not too little to dig in the garden and carry stones for the Pirates' Den; I'm only too little when it's a jolly piece of fun that you want to keep to yourselves. Oh, Laddie, dear,' to the dog who had jumped up and was licking her face, 'you are the only nice ones, you and Hamish'—and she threw her arms round the collie's neck to hide a tear. 'Don't lick my face though,' she added, with a change of manner that forced a laugh even from the tired and weary adventurers.

'You haven't shown them what you found, Tricksy,' said Hamish.

'No,' said Tricksy, 'neither I have,' and she fumbled in her pocket and drew out a crumpled paper which she gave to Allan.

Her brother looked at it.

'What's this?' he said. 'I don't understand.'

'Look at the number, Allan, and the date,' said Hamish.

Allan examined the paper; then flushed to the ears.

'Tricksy, you little owl,' he burst out; 'to think of you going on about your potty little feelings and wounded dignity and all that when you had *this* to show us.'

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH ALLAN IS VERY WISE

'I—I—I didn't know,' stammered poor Tricksy.

'What is it?' cried the others, pressing round to look.

'It's one of the orders that were stolen,' said Allan.

'Tell them where you found it, Tricksy,' said Hamish.

'It was in the box-room, where the spare coats and the fishing baskets are kept,' said Tricksy. 'I went to see if Reggie's knife was in the pocket of his old great-coat, and when I pulled it off the shelf this fluttered down.'

'Well,' said Allan, while the others were dumb with astonishment, 'this beats me altogether. It wasn't we who were the thieves!'

Every one looked at the order, and turned it round, and examined the back of it, but there was no clue to the mystery.

'Let's go and have a thorough search of the box-room,' said Marjorie; 'who knows what we may bring to light.'

'Take my pony, Tricksy,' said Reggie considerately. 'Those who haven't ponies will have to walk. Don't begin the search until we are all there!'

When the walkers reached Ardnavaor they found the others standing guard at the door of the box-room.

'Now!' said Marjorie, throwing open the door; and they all burst in.

All the garments were taken down from the shelves and unfolded and shaken, but nothing was to be found. Every pocket was turned out; but the contents were only pebbles, and bits of string, and pieces of dried seaweed.

All the fishing baskets were opened and peeped into, and turned upside down and shaken, but without result.

Afterwards they pulled out the boxes that were ranged against the wall, and looked behind them, but no postal orders were found.

'This box is unfastened,' cried Tricksy; 'let's look inside it.'

'Do you think we should do that,' demurred Hamish; 'Mrs. Stewart might object.'

'Can't stop to think of that in a case of necessity,' replied Reggie, and Marjorie's hands were soon in the trunk.

Furs smelling strongly of camphor, some old chair covers, then a quantity of frocks and boys' suits grown too small, and a layer of boots at the bottom.

'Nothing there,' said Marjorie, cramming the things into the box again.

'These other trunks are all locked,' said Reggie, trying them one after the other.

'They'll have to be opened when the police come,' observed Hamish.

Marjorie and Allan looked at each other.

'Do you think we ought to bring the police back at this time?' asked Marjorie in an undertone.

Allan sat down on a box, and the others all followed his example.

'We've got to consider what's to be done about this discovery,' began Allan. 'The first question is, have you showed the order to Pater or Mother already, Hamish?'

'Not yet,' said Hamish.

'Well, then,' said Allan, 'we've got to make up our minds whether we'd better do it or not.'

Hamish looked astonished.

'I don't see how there can be any doubt about that,' he began. 'Surely it's the very first——'

Marjorie, Allan, and Reggie were all looking at each other.

'We couldn't possibly keep back evidence like this,' pursued Hamish.

Marjorie's and Reggie's eyes were saying 'Don't tell them.'

Allan pushed his hair back from his forehead, thrust his hands into his pockets, and then turned to Hamish again.

'We've got to think of a lot of things in an affair like this,' he said. 'For instance——'

'It seems to me there's only one way of looking at it,' replied Hamish, his slow voice becoming steadier. 'You've got an important piece of evidence which may prove the turning-point of the case, and you don't even tell your father and mother.'

'I think Hamish is in the right,' broke in Tricksy's little voice.

A glance from Reggie caused her to quail and Allan turned upon Hamish.

'Now, Hamish, old fellow, don't you jolly well make an ass of yourself. We find ourselves in this predic.; either we've got to shut up about this valuable find, or have the police poking about the island when they're not wanted.'

'We've all three voted against you, so you are in a minority, Hamish,' broke in Marjorie, her voice sharp with vexation.

Hamish became very red, and looked at them steadily.

'I can't act contrary to the wishes of the majority,' he said, since we've made a Compact; but I wish to say that I think you are making a great mistake and that I think we shall all have cause to regret what you are doing.'

There was no reply since none could be made, and the meeting closed in an uncomfortable silence.

'Tear, tear,' they heard Duncan's voice saying in irritable tones outside the door; 'what will hev become of ahl ta young ladies and gentlemen? They will ahl pe away just at ta ferry time when they will be wanted. They will pe after some

nonsense. I will ahlways pe the mosst afraid when they are ferry quiet when Mr. Allan will pe with them. He iss so sensible and wiselike, iss Mr. Allan, that when he finds mischiefs for them to do they will ahlways pe the ferry worst kinds of mischief, whateffer.'

CHAPTER XI

A NEAR SHAVE

They all trooped out, and followed Duncan's retreating figure.

'Here we are, Duncan, what do you want us for?'

'Tear me, young ladies and gentlemen,' said Duncan, 'we will hev peen looking for you ahl over the house and grounds. The Sheriff iss here from Stornwell and the minister iss come to call, and the laird says as it iss such a ferry fine day he iss going to take effery one out for a sail in the yacht, and Dr. and Mrs. MacGregor iss come, and we are to hev lunch on board and go over to Alvasay, and afterwards if there iss time we will pe stopping at the Corrachin Caves, for Mr. Graham says he will pe liking to explore them; and here we will ahl pe waiting for you, young ladies and chentlemen.'

Marjorie's lips tightened.

'Look here, Duncan,' she said, after Hamish, followed consolingly by Tricksy, had passed out of hearing, 'we must make them too late for the caves.'

'Indeed, Miss Marjorie, we will hev to keep them out whateffer,' said Duncan, 'Mr. Graham's eyes will pe ferry sharp, he iss as bad as Mr. Harry, who is notticing efferything. But there iss ta laird, Miss Marjorie, he will pe calling to me to come with ta lunch baskets, I will hev to go.'

The hall was a scene of animation. The Sheriff was standing talking to Mrs. MacGregor and receiving defiant glances from Tricksy; the minister, an elderly man with white hair and stooping shoulders, stood somewhat apart; the other

gentlemen were collecting rugs and fishing tackle, and Harry and Gerald were jumping about, asking questions and getting in every one's way.

'Rob MacLean has come to say that the *Kelpie* is all ready, sir,' said Duncan, who among his other avocations sailed his master's yacht.

'Don't let us wait any longer then,' said the laird; 'we shall not have time to visit the caves this evening if we miss the tide.'

Two trips of the *Mermaid*—the Craft only when her young owners were by themselves—conveyed the entire party on board the *Kelpie*, whose crew, consisting of Rob MacLean and another crofter, were in readiness.

'We must manage not to go to the caves, Rob,' said Marjorie as she passed.

'Aye, Miss Marjorie, she will not be going to the caves to-day,' said the Highlander grimly.

It was a glorious day for a sail, and the young people's spirits rose in spite of themselves. There was enough wind to fill out the sails and make the vessel skim swiftly over the water, but not enough to make any one in the least uncomfortable, and the waves were dancing in the sunlight.

'Do you see that island over there?' said Marjorie to Harry, who was looking about him with sparkling eyes; 'that high one beyond all the little skerries? That's where we're going; it's an awfully jolly place, there's a fine loch with sea trout in it and a capital beach.'

Harry looked at the island, and then at the water tumbling and foaming in the vessel's wake; and then he began to look about for some more active occupation. The ladies were talking to their guests and pointing out the interesting places as they passed, and Gerald and Tricksy were sitting soberly in a corner by themselves. Mr. Stewart and Dr. MacGregor were busy with the sailing of the vessel, which seemed to require a great deal of management at this stage; and Harry's soul became filled with envy as he saw the other boys helping them dexterously as though they had passed their lives on board a ship.

Seeing Reggie perched half-way up the mast, helping to shake out a sail, Harry tried to scramble up after him, but Hamish ordered him down.

Harry turned and looked up with an indignant stare.

The elder boy, who seemed almost grown-up in his yachting suit, met the look with his usual good-natured smile, but did not seem disposed to be trifled with.

'You had better begin when the vessel's steady,' he said; 'it would never do to fall overboard while she's going along at this rate.'

'Why,' said Harry; 'couldn't you lower a boat?'

'It would not do you much good,' said Hamish. 'The current's flowing pretty rapidly one way, and the wind's driving us along at a fair speed in exactly the opposite direction; you might be carried miles out into the open before we could get a boat out.'

Harry went to the side and looked down at the water that was eddying past.

'It wouldn't be at all nice to fall overboard here, would it?' said Marjorie, who seemed to be blown along the deck, her hair flying in the wind. 'It will soon be over now, and see how near the island has been getting; we'll be there in no time.'

She hurried off to help in the coiling of the ropes, and in about half-an-hour the *Kelpie* was brought alongside the rude stone pier of Alvasay.

First came a walk to a wonderful rocky fiord, where the stones that were thrown down rebounded from side to side, and finally landed with a dull thud in some stagnant-looking water at the bottom. Afterwards, the day being hot, boys and girls scattered for a bathe.

'I can swim twice across the school swimming-bath,' said Harry, picking his way barefoot over the rocks and shivering a little, for although the sun was hot, the wind seemed cold when one had nothing on.

'You'll find it a bit rough with these waves against you,' said Reggie briefly.

'Far jollier,' said Harry, looking at the pebbles underneath the bright waves and the masses of seaweed swaying to and fro—'ugh, it is cold though!'

When his splash had subsided he saw the island boys swimming far ahead of him. In a little while he began to feel tired, and the waves seemed to be growing bigger and bigger, and stronger and stronger. When he was able to see over their crests he could make out the other two sitting upon a rock which raised its head out of the water, and waiting for him.

After considerable efforts he reached the islet, grasped a point of rock, and drew himself on to dry land.

The others looked at him approvingly. Gerald was still splashing in shallow water near the shore.

'Good for you,' said Reggie; 'it's a pretty stiff sea for a fellow who has only practised in a swimming-bath.'

Harry did not look quite pleased.

'I say,' began Allan, 'look at Gerald, he's actually trying to come out to us. He is a plucky little chap.'

'That he is,' said Hamish. 'I'll swim back and see if I can help him.'

He dropped into the water and swam to meet Gerald, who was struggling gallantly along, making very wry faces, and swallowing quantities of water. With the bigger boy swimming by his side and occasionally helping him Gerald got along fairly well, and in a little while clambered on to the rocks, looking exceedingly happy.

Diving from steep places and swimming until they were tired, then getting out and sunning themselves on the warm rocks or sand of the little islets, running races and pushing each other into the water, the time passed quickly, and they were all surprised when Duncan came in view signalling that tea was ready.

They had been in the water long enough, for their teeth were chattering and they could hardly get into their clothes for trembling.

'I say,' began Harry with chattering teeth, 'you fellows ought to learn to tread water and to swim on the side. They teach these things at the swimming-baths. The ordinary kind of swimming does well enough in a place like this——'

'It's the best way of getting along, I should say,' suggested Reggie.

'Yes,' said Harry rather contemptuously; 'getting along is all very well; but when you're swimming where a lot of people see you, you like to be able to do the fancy strokes. You need to have lessons for these things though.'

Reggie's dark, serious eyes exchanged a glance with Allan's amused ones.

'Good thing Marjorie isn't here,' observed Allan in an aside; and the other boys grinned as they thought of the way in which Marjorie always had a reply ready for Harry when he was caught boasting.

'What's that?' said Harry, his head popping out of the opening of his shirt.

Allan was saved from the necessity of replying by the reappearance of Duncan, to say that 'The young gentlemen wass to please mek haste and come at once, as effery one wass waiting for them.'

During the walk from the bathing-place Allan was very silent, and all tea-time he watched Reggie and Harry thoughtfully, and was evidently revolving something in his mind.

After tea he took an opportunity of saying to Marjorie, 'Now, Marjorie, remember that we've got to make the *Kelpie* late.'

'I'll try to get lost,' said Marjorie. 'I hope they won't go off without me though. You'd better lose yourself too, with one or two of the others; and they'll notice if so many are absent.'

'I'll do my best,' said Allan. 'I think we'll manage to keep them back an hour or so. You might come this way, Reggie, will you?'

Allan walked for some distance in silence, and Reggie began to wonder what was coming.

'Reggie,' began Allan, rather absently, 'have you been thinking that you're going to school next term?'

'Yes,' answered Reggie, wondering what this was going to lead to.

'Well,' resumed Allan, 'you'll need to have some fights, you know, almost as soon as you get there.'

'I suppose so,' said Reggie.

'I mean,' said Allan, 'even supposing that no one challenges you, you'll have to fight some of the fellows at the very commencement, don't you see, just to show that you're not the sort to be put upon.'

Reggie listened attentively, but said nothing.

'You haven't had much opportunity of practising yet, of course, and it won't do, if you want to make a position for yourself in the school, just to begin upon some of the new fellows, kids of your own size or a little bigger; any one can do that. What you want is to challenge some of the older fellows at the very beginning, and then, no one will try humbugging you, as they do with the new fellows.'

Reggie looked doubtful. The idea of making a position for himself was tempting, but if it was only to be carried into effect by fighting bigger boys he felt that the result might be failure.

'What you want is practice,' resumed Allan. 'Now it's no use your trying to fight me—I'm much too big and strong for you; nor Hamish, for he's far too good-natured and would never hit out at you enough; so it's awfully lucky we've got Harry here just now—he's just the very fellow.'

Reggie looked up in perplexity.

'But how can I fight Harry?' he said; 'I've never quarrelled with him.'

'You young duffer,' said Allan, 'you don't need to fight about anything in particular. It's only for practice. Then we've got to make the yacht late, you know, and this is no end of a good opportunity, as we can't be expected to stay where the grown-ups are likely to find us when we've got a fight on hand. Here's a nice quiet place, just behind these rocks, and there's Harry wading in that pool; you can just fight him at once, or I'll punch both your heads for you. Hullo, Harry! Come along! Reggie wants to fight you. Now, go it, you two, and I'll be umpire;' and before the younger boys knew what they were about they were sparring at each other like a couple of angry cocks.

'Straight, Reggie, you young duffer,' said Allan, settling himself to give professional advice. 'Give it to him from the shoulder.'

'I say, what's the row?' asked Hamish, who came strolling down to the scene; 'so these two have come to loggerheads, have they?'

'Not they,' replied Allan carelessly; 'it's only practice.'

Marjorie's curly head rose above a rock behind which she had been lying *perdu*; and when she saw what was going on she jumped up and scrambled to the other side.

'Whatever is the matter?' she cried. 'Can't you make them stop, Allan?'

'Practice-fight,' replied Allan; 'don't call out, Marjorie; you'll distract their attention.'

Reggie, unused to fighting, soon began to have the worst of it, but he struggled manfully until a well-planted blow from Harry knocked the breath out of him.

'That's enough for a beginning,' said Allan. 'You've done not so badly, Reggie, for the first time, and you'll get into it all right by practice.'

'But what did he go at me for?' cried Harry, with a blank expression of countenance. 'I didn't do anything to him.'

'Nobody said you did, you duffer,' replied Allan; 'Reggie only wants to be able to fight the fellows at school; and you and he can have a go at each other every day if you like.'

'Dear me,' said Mr. Matthews the minister, coming towards the group with a concerned face; 'I am sorry to see that some of you have been quarrelling. Pray, what has been the subject of dispute?'

'It's nothing,' said Allan, 'only practice. There's no quarrel at all.'

'What's this? what's this?' broke in the somewhat rasping voice of the Sheriff, who had followed Mr. Matthews, unobserved by the young people; 'it seems that half-a-dozen boys cannot be together without coming to blows.'

'They're not fighting seriously,' cried Marjorie; 'it's only fun.'

Mr. Matthews was looking both grieved and puzzled.

'Dear me,' he said, shaking his head, 'this is most distressing. To fight when you have not any ground for quarrelling. Why did you not endeavour to dissuade them, Miss Marjorie?'

'It's all right,' said Marjorie. 'What would be the good of interfering?'

The Sheriff said nothing, but he was looking so grimly amused that Marjorie added hastily, 'Why, it doesn't matter! Why shouldn't they fight if it amuses them? When once you learn to understand boys you know that it's no use being surprised at anything they do!'

'Allan! Reggie!' Mr. Stewart's voice was calling somewhat impatiently. 'Go and look for the young ladies and gentlemen, Duncan; quick, don't lose time, we're late already.'

'Tear me,' observed Duncan, looking at Harry's and Reggie's somewhat battered faces as they passed; 'so there hass been a fight between you two young gentlemen, and Mr. Allan hass been helping you. I wass thinking from Mr. Allan's looks these last days tat there would pe some mischief pefore ferry long! It iss ahl right, Miss Marjorie, it iss ahl right,' he said soothingly, in response to her glance; 'we hev made the *Kelpie* an hour and a quarter late, whateffer. That iss ferry good, although Rob says he will pe thinking it iss a pity that the sea will not pe going to pe at ahl rough.'

There was only enough breeze to fill the sails as the *Kelpie* glided gently towards the island of Erricha. The gulls sat balancing themselves on the smooth swell of the waves; and as the vessel passed a low rocky islet a number of seals flopped into the water and swam in her wake.

'It's awfully nice,' observed Gerald, his blue eyes shining with enjoyment.

'Yes,' replied Tricksy; 'we've had an awfully jolly day, but I've been thinking, that all this time we've been doing nothing for Neil. We ought to, you know, as we've made a compact.'

Allan produced a bit of stick and began whittling it.

'It would be nice if we could begin now,' observed Gerald.

'It's all very well,' said Harry disgustedly, 'but there seems to be nothing to do.'

'I heard the Sheriff saying to Mother that the gipsies had come back again,' said Tricksy.

Reggie's dark eyes looked at Allan, who stopped his whittling.

'Look!' said Marjorie abruptly, 'we're just rounding the headland.'

The Grahams wondered at the sudden silence which fell upon the group.

'We'll tack shore wards, Duncan,' announced Mr. Stewart. 'We would like to spend an hour or two at the caves.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' replied Duncan stiffly.

Allan and Reggie began to look intent.

'There's Rob coming forward,' said Marjorie softly.

The Highlander touched his cap respectfully.

'I do not think we can be landing at ta Corrachin Caves to-night, sir,' he said civilly but firmly; 'ta wind iss north-west and ta current iss running ferry strong, sir. We wass thinking it would be too dangerous.'

'Tut, tut,' said Mr. Stewart; 'we're not going to be so timid as all that, Rob. Just think of some of the days when we have landed, man.'

'But Duncan and I was thinking that it wass a ferry tangerous sea to-day, sir, ferry tangerous indeed, and we will be afraid for ta ladies, sir, and for ta young ladies and gentlemen.'

'Nonsense, man,' returned Mr. Stewart; 'call this a heavy sea? I never saw a better sea in my life. Tell Duncan to put her head south-east by south.'

But Duncan had taken the helm, and the vessel lay unexpectedly against the wind.

'It iss ta cross currents, sir,' said Rob. 'Yo-ho there! Slack the main-sheet!' and the boys were easing off the rope before they had realised what they were about.

The vessel gave a plunge or two and then steadied herself, Duncan standing with a grim face at the wheel.

'It iss ahl right now, sir,' said Rob composedly; 'but we cannot pe teking her back to catch a wind tat will tek her to Corrachin after this.'

Dr. MacGregor was looking surprised.

'I can't think what ails the men,' fumed Mr. Stewart. 'There is nothing unusual in the appearance of the sea so far as I can make out, and I ought to know as well as they can.'

'Successful mutiny,' muttered Marjorie; and the boys grinned.

Mr. Graham walked to the side and looked down at the water, but did not take it upon himself to express an opinion.

'It looks as though the fellows were keeping something back,' continued Mr. Stewart.

'Perhaps it's one of their Highland superstitions,' suggested Mrs. Stewart. 'I wouldn't take any more notice if I were you.'

Silence fell as the *Kelpie* glided past the caves. The vessel passed near enough for those on board to look into the yawning hollows beneath the overhanging cliffs, and to hear the thunder of the angry sea which always beat upon that shore.

Marjorie and the boys felt a lump rise in their throats as they thought of the comrade driven to seek refuge in that desolate spot.

CHAPTER XII

SURROUNDED

'Twelfth of August,' said Allan; 'Pater's out on the moors with Mr. Graham, slow day for us; suppose we take the boat and go fishing for crabs!'

'All right, let's,' said Marjorie; 'Harry's in a fidgety mood and will be quarrelling with some one presently if he has nothing to do.'

'I say, you fellows,' cried Allan, 'we're going crab fishing. Come along and let's rummage out the lines, Reggie. We must be sure and get enough for all. Tricksy, you might ask Duncan to put some provisions in a basket for us, as we shan't be home for tea or supper. Let's hurry up or we'll lose the best of the afternoon.'

The various belongings having been collected, the boys and girls trooped down to the cove and began loosening the Craft.

Laddie and Carlo, who had followed uninvited, came and stood by the boat, pricking up their ears.

'Can't take you, Laddie,' said Allan; 'we're going a long way and there's no room for you in the boat.'

Laddie smiled an intelligent dog smile and wagged his tail as though to say, 'I'll wait and see whether you won't change your mind, young sir.'

'Come now, a good shove all together,' said Allan; and the boat ran down to the water.

'All right; chuck in the things, Reggie; and now, girls, will you take your places.'

They all seated themselves and the Craft was pushed off.

'Go home, Laddie,' called out Reggie to the two dogs, who were standing side by side on the shore, looking pitifully disappointed.

The dogs remained looking after the boat for a minute or two; then they gave each other a resigned glance and turned tail and trotted off, having evidently made up their minds to seek consolation in some other form of amusement.

The boat was rowed to where a bottom of weedy stones showed through the water, then Allan began to explain to his guests the method of fishing.

'You see this weight on the end of the line,' he said, 'and there's a bit of scarlet cloth attached; well, you let down the line to the stones and then draw it up again like this, and keep doing so until the crabs come out to see what's the matter; then you dance it up and down in front of them until they get into a rage, and catch hold of it; then you draw it up on board and the silly asses are too angry to let go and you catch them, don't you see?'

'Jolly fun,' said Harry, and a smile overspread Gerald's features. 'I suppose you get a lot of them that way?'

'Yes,' said Marjorie, 'but don't jump about so, Harry; you're making the boat bob from side to side.'

Harry muttered something and drew back into the boat. All the lines were flung out, and every now and again an irate crab was drawn up, clinging obstinately to the string.

The sport proved most absorbing, but after a little, Tricksy happening to look towards the shore drew Marjorie's attention to two figures standing on the hillside.

'What's the matter, Marjorie?' said Reggie, as the girl changed colour.

Following the direction of her eyes his attitude stiffened, and Allan and Hamish looked to see what was the matter.

'It's Gibbie MacKerrach,' said Reggie, 'and he's talking to Andrew MacPeters.'

The combination had an ominous sound, and they all looked extremely concerned.

'What's the matter?' asked Harry.

'It's that gipsy lad who used to like Neil so much,' said Allan; 'the other is the fellow who we suspect may have been the thief. It's to be hoped that he is not making Gibbie tell him things that will do harm to Neil.'

'Which one is the gipsy?' asked Harry. 'I heard father say that they were camping on the moor not far from the Corrachin Caves.'

Marjorie, Allan, and Reggie looked at each other with startled eyes. Then Allan said, 'Pull away from here, will you, Reggie, and don't let them see us if you can help it. It would be better that Andrew should not know that we saw him with Gibbie.'

'Now,' said Allan, after the boat had been rowed out of sight. 'We can try some deep-sea fishing.'

Reggie caught a small haddock which was divided among the party for bait, and the lines were thrown out again.

In a little while Reggie drew in a small cod, and a minute afterwards a good-sized haddock was found to be on Harry's line.

'Gently, Harry, gently, you'll get the line broken,' said Hamish warningly as Harry sprang up and Gerald danced about in his seat, to the great discomfort of Tricksy.

'There you are!' cried Marjorie, as the fish was drawn leaping and struggling into the boat.

'Hullo!' said Harry triumphantly; 'it's a fine big one and no mistake!'

'It's a good size,' said Marjorie, 'but, Harry, *would* you mind not kicking my feet as you jump about.'

Harry muttered an apology, and just at that moment Hamish drew in a big cod, then two little haddocks were pulled up by Tricksy.

'Gerald, look at your line,' cried Harry, springing forward, and Gerald pulled in a haddock, while Allan and Hamish steadied the boat, which had been set rocking by Harry's sudden movement.

It was a beautiful evening, and the fish were taking well, but sport was spoiled by the incapacity of the Grahams to keep still. If Harry hooked a fish Gerald sprang up to look, and if any one else had a take Harry pranced backwards and forwards until it was drawn on board.

At last Hamish suggested that it was time to row to the Pirates' Island and have tea in the Den.

'Yes, I think so,' said Marjorie, somewhat irritably. 'I've had my ankles tripped over quite often enough as it is.'

'And I've been *trying* to keep my feet out of the way,' said Tricksy, rather dolefully, 'but one has to put them somewhere, you know.'

'Have you been so uncomfortable?' said Harry, looking round with serene unconsciousness; 'Hamish's boots *are* rather big.'

A smile travelled round the group as the lines were hastily wound up.

'You'll feel better after tea,' said Hamish soothingly.

The sun was already low when they landed, and Marjorie and Tricksy went into the cottage at once to get tea ready while Reggie fetched peats, and Allan and Hamish lingered behind to secure the Craft.

The Grahams, finding themselves with no special duties, wandered aimlessly about, getting into the way of the busy people.

'We've had a jolly fine take, haven't we?' said Harry, sauntering up to Reggie, who was busy at the peat-stack.

'Not bad,' said Reggie briefly. 'Here, take an armful of these, will you, and carry them into the house.'

Harry carried in the peats and set them down by the fire-place, where Marjorie was busy frying fish, while Tricksy was making bannocks at the table.

'I say, Marjorie,' began Harry, 'we've had fine sport, haven't we?'

'Yes,' replied Marjorie absently.

Harry looked at the two girls, who went on quietly and busily with their work.

'I caught as many as Allan, didn't I?' he began again.

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Marjorie indifferently. She was tired and the peat smoke was making her eyes smart, and it irritated her to see Harry doing nothing.

'But surely you kept count,' persisted Harry; 'I caught more than Hamish, anyhow.'

'I wasn't looking,' said Marjorie. 'If you caught more than Hamish to-day it was more than you do when you go trout fishing. I wish you would go away now, Harry, and not talk to me until tea is ready.'

'Let her alone, Harry,' remonstrated Gerald, who had followed his brother into the hut; but Harry was in a teasing mood and Marjorie's reply had stung him.

'Cross patch!' he muttered, giving her elbow a shove.

Marjorie had not been prepared for the movement, which jerked some of the fish into the fire. In an instant she turned round and pinned Harry against the wall, while her eyes blazed.

'Harry! you struck a lady!—Apologise!'

'No, I won't,' muttered Harry, struggling to free himself. His arms were held as in a vice.

'Are you going to apologise for having hit a lady?' reiterated Marjorie.

'No,' replied Harry, trying desperately to free himself, and becoming aware that the other boys were nearing the door of the hut.

The struggle was prolonged for a minute or two, and then, just as the boys, to Harry's unspeakable confusion, were on the point of coming in, Marjorie slowly relaxed her hold and let him go.

Harry left the cottage, followed by Gerald, and seated himself on the turf dyke with his chin resting on his hands. For a long time he gazed blankly in front of him, and neither boy spoke.

At last Harry began, 'I say, Gerald, do you think they saw?'

'Yes,' answered Gerald; 'I'm afraid they did.'

Harry dropped his chin on his hands again and reflected.

'Do you think it was because of that that they didn't come in at first?' he queried after awhile.

'I think so,' said Gerald; 'they didn't want to have to interfere.'

A long pause followed. Harry gazed seawards, absorbed in gloomy reflections.

'It was awfully stupid of you to go on teasing her,' said Gerald; 'any one could have seen that she was going to lose her temper. She's so strong too; always rowing and climbing, and doing things like a boy.'

'Don't tell the boys at school,' said Harry, after a long time; then he relapsed into silence again.

Suddenly he pulled himself together, and jumped off the dyke just as Marjorie was coming out of the hut.

'Look here,' he began, planting himself in front of her, with a flush rising to his face; 'I apologise! but it's because I shouldn't have hit you and not because you held me.'

'It's all right,' said Marjorie, who was sorry that she had lost her temper; 'don't let's think of it any more but come and have tea.'

The other boys tried to drown any lingering embarrassment by talking very fast, and the meal became an animated, if not a merry one.

'Hark,' said Reggie suddenly, 'what's that?'

They all became silent and listened, Allan standing up. A deep rushing noise was filling the cottage, and rapidly increasing in volume.

'It's the tide-way,' said Reggie; 'we've forgotten to keep a look-out.'

All trooped out of the cottage and looked at the angry current which was

sweeping past both shores of the island.

'Here's a jolly go,' said Allan; 'we shan't get home to-night.'

Tricksy looked frightened and Harry amazed, but Marjorie's face cleared and she jumped up and clapped her hands with glee.

'Oh, hooray, hooray,' she said; 'just what I always wanted. We'll have to spend the night in the cottage. Oh, what fun!'

'But won't Mrs. Stewart be frightened?' suggested Gerald, the thoughtful boy.

'Not she,' said Marjorie; 'she knows that we can take care of ourselves; besides, Father and Mr. Stewart made us promise that if we were surrounded by a tide-way we were not to try to come home, however long we might have to wait. It would be quite impossible for us to row across. We must make up our minds to spend the night here.'

They remained out of doors a little longer, discussing the situation, while the red turned to grey beyond the far-off islands; then they went indoors to make preparations for the night.

Fresh peats were cast on the fire, and the stores of cut heather were brought out and laid on the floor to serve as beds. Marjorie lighted the lamp which hung from the ceiling, and its smoky glare lighted up a circle of eager, wakeful faces.

The novelty of their surroundings, together with the voice of the current, which was running deep and swift round their tiny strip of an island, took from them all disposition to sleep during the early part of the night. It was not until the lamp had burnt out, and Tricksy's head had sunk heavily against Marjorie's knee that the rushing became fainter and finally died away, and one by one the listeners dropped to sleep upon their heather couches.

It was about midnight when Marjorie awoke, aroused by a slight noise, and the flames from the peats showed her Allan staring in front of him with wakeful eyes, and listening.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Hush, don't wake the others. There it is again—now, hark.'

Marjorie listened, and in the calm night she distinctly heard the grating of oars in rowlocks and the sound of a boat's bows dividing the water.

'It's some one coming for us,' she said.

'No, for they would have called out before they got so near.'

Marjorie jumped into a sitting posture and her eyes gleamed.

'What if it should be the smugglers?' she suggested.

She was not frightened, only excited, for the situation promised some adventure.

'It's more likely to be Neil,' said Allan. 'He comes here sometimes. Let's go out and see, but tread softly and don't disturb the youngsters.'

They threaded their way cautiously among the sleepers, shivering a little with the chilliness of the air and with excitement, and stood out of doors in the cool quiet night.

'Crouch down, Marjorie, and keep behind the dyke,' said Allan. 'Let's make certain that it *is* Neil before we show ourselves.'

By this time the boat was close to the shore, and its occupant sprang out.

The cloudy moonlight showed the face and figure to be those of Neil.

'Stand up, Marjorie; let him see it's a girl,' said Allan, 'and he'll know that he's safe.'

Marjorie stood up, and called 'Neil! Hist! Neil!'

The figure turned round.

'Who is that?' asked a voice in Gaelic.

'It's Marjorie, Neil; and Allan.'

Neil carefully secured the boat and came forward.

'What are you doing here, Miss Marjorie, at this time of night? and Allan too? Has anything happened?'

'We're shipwrecked, Neil; or rather we've been cut off by the tide-way,' said Marjorie.

'The others are here,' said Allan, 'in the cottage; you're quite safe. Come along.'

They entered very softly, Neil dragging his limbs as though he were fatigued.

'What's the row?' inquired Reggie, opening his eyes.

'Hush, don't wake the others,' said Marjorie; but already Harry had stirred on his heather couch.

'It's Neil,' said Allan, as the boy sprang up, wide awake. 'He's going to stay here till morning.'

'Neil?' repeated Harry. 'Oh, I say, what a lark. Gerald, wake up, you lazy beggar, here's Neil at last—Neil, I tell you; get up,' and he administered a shove to his sleeping brother.

By this time all the inmates of the cottage were awake, Hamish being the last to open a pair of bewildered, sleepy eyes. Room was made for Neil at the fire, the smouldering peats were roused to life, and the boys and girls clustered round, staring and asking questions, much too excited to think of sleep.

'How is your mother, Neil?' asked Tricksy, whose dark eyes looked bigger and darker than ever between surprise and sleepiness.

'She iss better, thank you, Miss Tricksy. I will have left her sleeping quietly, and I will pe coming here so that I can be going back early to see how she iss in the morning.'

Then after a little hesitation he added, 'She has made me promise that I'll go away now. Rob MacLean's boat goes to-morrow evening.'

'Oh, what a sell!' exclaimed Harry, who had been sitting cross-legged by his hero and looking up in his face with sparkling eyes. 'I mean,' he added,

somewhat confusedly, as he saw the faces of the others, 'I'm sorry you have to go; it would have been such fun if you could have stayed.'

They conversed a little longer, but quietly, for the darkness and silence which reigned outside their little shelter, and the monotonous lapping of the waves made them drowsy; and one by one they dropped to sleep.

Marjorie was the first to awaken. The clear morning light was already filling the hut, and the others were lying around and breathing heavily.

She rose and went out of doors.

The sun had not yet risen, but the clouds in the east were red. Some gulls were rising languidly above the shimmering water.

Marjorie stood looking about her for a minute or two; then she ran into the cottage.

'Allan,' she cried, 'wake up! There are some people standing on the shore; your father and Mr. Graham and some others and Laddie is with them. They are just going to launch the boat. Get up, quick; there's no time to lose!'

Neil was already on his feet, the events of the past few months having taught him to keep on the alert; and the others had begun to open their eyes and stretch themselves.

'Hullo,' said Reggie, grasping the situation, 'boat coming over here; that will never do.'

'Hurry up,' said Allan, 'or they'll be across before you know where you are.'

'You had better wait until we've gone,' said Marjorie to Neil. 'Stay in the cottage, or they may see you.'

Hastily saying good-bye they ran down to the shore, but stopped short in dismay.

The boat was gone.

'Comes of not having fastened her securely,' said Allan; 'the current has

carried her away.'

'What shall we do?' said Marjorie. 'We'll have every one coming to the island. Hide Neil; let's pile all the heather on the top of him——'

'What's the matter?' cried Neil from the hut. 'Why are you waiting?'

'The boat's gone,' they cried.

Neil came out.

'Mine's still there, on the other side,' he said. 'Take her, and some of you can come back for me.'

'Oh, Neil, we couldn't do that! What if any one were to come in the meanwhile?'

'We must risk it. It will be better than bringing the whole boat-load upon us. Quick, get in; they will be shoving down the boat.'

In another minute they had pushed off, leaving Neil behind.

When the boat left the island the figures on shore stood still and waited; and half-way across Marjorie waved her handkerchief.

'It's Father,' said Tricksy, 'with Mr. Graham and Duncan and a lot of others; and there's Laddie jumping about and barking.'

'Allan,' said Marjorie, touching his arm, 'there's Andrew MacPeters, do you see him? standing behind the others.'

The boat glided in beside the landing stones, while a row of anxious faces watched and waited.

'Down, Laddie,' said Mr. Stewart, as the collie rushed forward with a joyful welcome. 'So there you are,' he said to the young people. 'You are not cold, are you?'

'We're all right, Father,' said Allan. 'We landed on that island yesterday evening and we were surrounded by the tide-way so we could not return. I hope

Mother was not anxious. We thought you would rather we stayed there than tried to cross when the current was flowing.'

'You were quite right not to try to get back under these circumstances,' said Mr. Stewart gravely; and the young people knew that he had been anxious, although he did not wish to blame them.

Mr. Graham said nothing, but after his eyes had travelled over the group, and he had, as Tricksy afterwards expressed it, 'counted his boys,' he placed himself between them and set off in the direction of Ardnavaor, still without speaking except to ask them whether they had wet feet.

Reggie, as the quickest runner, was sent on ahead to tell his mother that they had returned, and a brisk walk brought them all to the house.

'By the way,' said Mr. Stewart as the young people were refreshing themselves with a good breakfast; 'what man was that who was with you on the island?'

A startled movement went round the group, and Allan looked at his father without replying.

'That man who helped you with the boat,' said Mr. Stewart; 'he stayed behind after you left; who was he?'

CHAPTER XIII

ANDREW MACPETERS

For a moment no one stirred; then Allan braced himself to meet the difficulty.

'I'm sorry, Father; but I can't tell you that,' he said.

Mr. Stewart looked at him in astonishment.

'You can't tell me? You mean you don't know?'

Allan was silent.

Mr. Stewart waited.

Tricksy crept closer to Marjorie and trembled with dismay.

'You associate with people that you cannot tell your parents about,' said Mr. Stewart in great displeasure; 'and you allow him to associate with your little sister and with Marjorie. I am sorry that I must forbid the use of the boat until you tell me who was with you this morning.'

Allan waited with a white face until his father had left the room; then he turned to the others.

'No one is to let out who it was,' he said. 'You have all signed the Compact, and any one breaking it will have me to reckon with.'

Reggie's brown face wore an expression which showed that he, at least, meant to be trustworthy; and Marjorie's lips set themselves firmly. The Grahams, major and minor, had said little, but now Harry's eyes sparkled, and Gerald flushed, as he always did when he was trying to be brave.

'But, Allan,' said Tricksy in a trembling voice, 'wouldn't it be better to tell Father about it and ask him to let us have the boat for Neil? We must get him away from the island, you know.'

'Can't tell Pater, Tricksy,' replied Allan. 'It would be all right if they hadn't made him a Justice of the Peace; that's some kind of a judge, you know. He couldn't help any one like Neil; indeed I'm not sure that he wouldn't have to telegraph for the Sheriff and let him know that Neil is here, and it would be a dreadful thing for Father to have to do that.'

'Then how are we going to get Neil away from the Den,' said Tricksy. 'They'll find him if he stays there.'

'Allan,' said Marjorie firmly, 'Hamish and I will go. We haven't been forbidden the use of the boat.'

'We'll go too,' said Harry. 'We aren't his children, and Mr. Stewart didn't say anything to us.'

'All right, Marjorie,' said Allan; 'you'd better all go, for Neil's old boat is pretty heavy to get through the water. Quick, there isn't a minute to lose.'

Little was said as the old herring-boat was pushed off and manned, for even Harry was feeling subdued.

'It's all right, Neil,' said Marjorie as the boat landed and Neil looked inquiringly for the others; 'they've been kept at home by their father. We'll land you at the Skegness Cliffs as there's least chance of being seen there.'

The passage was accomplished without incident, but as Neil stood up to spring ashore Hamish uttered an exclamation and pointed to the top of the cliff. All looked up. A man was standing on the verge, and looking down.

'It's Andrew MacPeters again,' said Hamish.

'Let's land somewhere else,' said Marjorie.

'No use, Miss Marjorie,' said Neil. 'If he means ill by me he will give the alarm; it will be better for me to be landing while there is still a chance. I'm not afraid if I only have him to deal with.'

He stood up once more, then turned to the others. 'Remember,' he said, 'whatever happens, my mother is to be told that I have left the island. Miss Marjorie, you promise?'

'I promise,' answered Marjorie; then Neil sprang on shore and vanished behind a mass of rock.

For a minute or two they remained looking up at the cliff, but nothing was to be seen of Andrew MacPeters; then they rowed slowly back to the place where the Craft had been moored.

'Well?' said Allan and Reggie, who met them half-way on the road to Ardnavaioir.

The others gave a brief account of what had taken place.

'Bad luck,' said Allan when they had described the encounter with Andrew MacPeters. 'I'd back Neil against Andrew any day; he won't interfere with Neil himself, but then the fellow's quite capable of giving the alarm to the police.'

They wandered disconsolately a little farther.

'It seems horrid to have to give Mrs. Macdonnell that message,' said Marjorie; 'but it will have to be done, I suppose, since we promised.'

'Yes, Marjorie,' said Hamish, 'it will have to be done. It would be enough to kill her if she knew that Neil was in danger.'

Who was to be entrusted with the message? Every one looked at Marjorie, who became red and looked unhappy as she realised what was expected of her.

'You will have to do it,' said Allan.

'Me?' said Marjorie; 'no, you go, Allan.'

'No,' said Allan decidedly; 'it's not the kind of thing for a fellow. It needs a girl, so it will have to be you.'

'Allan is quite right, Marjorie,' joined in Hamish; 'there is no one but you who can do it. Mind you don't let her see that you are not telling the truth.'

Marjorie looked very distressed, but saw she must make up her mind.

'Well, you come with me as far as the cottage,' she said; and the entire party set off.

Arrived at the gate, Allan threw it open, and Marjorie walked up the path and disappeared inside the cottage.

The others sat down on the heather and waited.

A long time seemed to pass, and then Marjorie reappeared looking very subdued.

'All right, Marjorie?' inquired Allan.

Marjorie nodded without speaking, and others judged it best to refrain from

asking questions.

For some time they walked in silence, and then Tricksy quietly slipped into the place next to Marjorie.

After a while, finding that the boys were out of earshot. Tricksy sidled closer, and ventured to ask Marjorie very gently how Mrs. Macdonnell had received the message.

'I—I—I—she was in bed,' said Marjorie, 'and I went to her, and it was rather dark, and after I had asked how she was and all that, I—I—I just told her. She never thought I was saying what wasn't true, for she said "Thank God for that."'

Marjorie ended with a little tearless sob, and neither of the girls could find anything to say for a little while.

When the boys came beside them again Tricksy walked on silently for a little way, then she suddenly burst out—

'I don't care, but what's the use of a Compact if we can't do anything to help Neil? There he is, in great danger, and Mrs. Macdonnell may hear of it any day, and if she does it will kill her; and we haven't done anything that's of any use.'

'What do you think we can do?' replied Reggie gruffly.

'Why, bustle about until we find out who stole the letters. Here we are, and we find little bits of paper which ought to tell us something if we had any sense, but we don't get further. Seven of us and we can't help poor Neil when he is in trouble.'

Nobody seemed to have anything to say, and Tricksy burst out again—

'You say you know who was the real thief?'

'We think we do, Tricksy,' interposed Hamish; 'but we don't know for certain.'

'Then why don't we make sure?'

'How would you do it, Tricksy?' asked Allan, while the others trudged steadily onwards.

'Why, watch him wherever he goes; and we'd soon find out where he kept the papers if he had taken them.'

There was no answer for a moment.

Then Allan said gravely, 'That wouldn't be honourable, Tricksy. We must play fair, you know.'

'Honourable! Honourable to a thief!—But yes, of course we must. Well, I don't know what's to be done then,' and Tricksy concluded by a big sigh.

When the coastguard station came in view a man was standing at the gate, scanning the road with a telescope. Upon catching sight of the young people he lowered the glass and came forward.

'Euan Macdonnell,' said Reggie, quickening his pace; 'let's hear whether he has any news.'

'I was on the lookout for you, young ladies and gentlemen,' said Euan. 'We've just got a telephone message from the Corrachin lighthouse sent by Rob MacLean. We were to tell you that Neil has reached the caves and is safe for the meanwhile, and he supposes that you, young ladies and gentlemen, have remembered the message to his mother.'

'If only Andrew hasn't seen him,' said Marjorie after the first exclamations of thankfulness.

Euan looked grave as he heard how Andrew had witnessed the landing.

'I don't trust that fellow for an instant,' he said. 'He would think nothing of putting the police on the alert if he had a mind to. We can only hope that he hasn't recognised Neil, or that Rob will find a way of getting the poor lad out of the island before any harm comes.'

When the young people had reached Ardnavoir, weary and discouraged, Mr. Stewart was in the hall. 'I know who was with you this morning,' he said abruptly. 'Was it by accident that you met?'

'Yes,' said Allan.

'Your boat was stranded on the Reachin Skerry,' went on Mr. Stewart, 'and the men have brought her home. You may have the use of her again.'

'Thank you, Father,' said Allan.

They all scanned Mr. Stewart's face to read, if possible, his intentions regarding Neil; but nothing was to be gathered.

'Isn't Father a dear?' said Tricksy, when they had wandered out to the cricket-ground. 'He knows we couldn't betray our friend, not even for him.'

'Yes,' said Reggie; 'but the question is whether he will have to do something himself, since he's a J.P.'

The question was not answered that day, and during the next they were still in ignorance.

On the third day it was discovered that detectives were in the island again, and Euan brought the news that every boat was watched both coming and going.

The days dragged on in suspense, and still Neil was in the caves. Rob MacLean had a plan for conveying him away by night and landing him somewhere on the coast of Scotland, from whence the lad was to tramp to some large town and stow himself away on a vessel bound for America; but the bright, full moon rendered any such attempts impossible for the meanwhile.

'Isn't it too bad?' broke out Marjorie one day; 'I think the law is cruel if it forces Mr. Stewart to have Neil arrested. I wonder how he could do it. He knows as well as we do that Neil isn't a thief.'

'It wasn't Father,' said Allan. 'I happen know that he's lying low and won't take any notice. All our people are bound together not to betray Neil, but some one has been a traitor; they don't know who. Neil has a secret enemy in the place.'

They all thought they knew who this was, but no one could bring the deed home to the culprit. All desire for fun and adventure seemed to have left them, and the boys and girls wandered about disconsolately or sat in groups talking about plans which they were unable to carry out; or later, ceased to find anything at all to suggest. Even the dogs seemed to know that something was the matter,

for they would lie quietly beside the children for hours, and sometimes Laddie would thrust his nose into some one's hand and look up with his honest, affectionate eyes full of sympathy.

The weather became more broken, and sometimes all intercourse between Ardnavaire and Corranmore was cut off during the greater part of a day.

When the rain ceased, Andrew MacPeters, looking up from his work, would find Reggie's dark eyes contemplating him as their owner sat astride upon a dyke, or Allan considering him with hands in his pockets, and a thoughtful countenance; or else it was the Grahams who regarded him with a mixture of interest and aversion, or Tricksy with her great eyes resting upon him with an expression of sorrow that any one could be so dreadfully wicked.

The lad would look up with a surly expression in his red-lidded eyes; but watch as they might, they never detected in him any expression of guilt or embarrassment.

CHAPTER XIV

CAUGHT

The evening had closed in heavy rain, and towards morning a gusty wind arose, buffeting the walls of Corranmore and making wild noises in the ruin.

Marjorie awoke and sat up in bed. A moment's hearkening convinced her that what the islanders most dreaded had become reality; a westerly gale had arisen while Neil was still in the caves.

She sprang to the window; and the grey light showed her an angry sea, with the white horses leaping and hurrying towards the Corrachin headland.

The tide was rising, and was being driven eastward with terrific force by the gale.

Marjorie ran to her brother's room; but a glance showed her an empty bed.

'No time to lose,' said Marjorie to herself; 'perhaps he has gone to warn Neil, and perhaps he hasn't; in any case I'd better go too.'

She hurried on some clothing and ran out of doors. The wind had swept the clouds towards the east, and an angry dawn was breaking above the hills. Marjorie sped over the drenched grass and heather, the wind was lifting her nearly off her feet, and blowing her frock in front of her like a sail. There were more than three miles of rugged country between Corranmore and the headland. It was a race between herself and the tide; and the tide seemed to be gaining.

Marjorie ran on and on. Neither Hamish nor any other living creature was in sight. The sheep had left the moors and the gulls were taking refuge inland.

At last the headland came in view. A glance showed Marjorie that the waves had not yet reached high-water mark. Mechanically she chose the road by the shore.

Now the wind was partly against her, and at times threatened to pin her against the cliff; but Marjorie struggled forward. Soon the rocks were frowning above her head, while the breakers were coming closer, rising in solid walls which thundered as they fell. Showers of spray were flung shoreward; and looking up at the wet glistening cliffs Marjorie wondered whether foothold would be possible upon them, and what her feelings would be were she to find herself caged between the cliffs and the breakers.

Yet she did not feel frightened, only excited.

At the caves she had only time to make a dash before a huge breaker fell; and some of the water swirled after her into the opening.

'Neil!' she cried; 'Neil!'

Neil was lying watching the flood quite calmly, as though it did not concern him in the least.

Catching sight of Marjorie he looked up in amazement; then sprang to his feet.

'Is Hamish here?' shouted Marjorie.

Her voice was drowned in the thunder of waves and wind.

Neil led her to a small chamber in the rocks, lighted from above, and where the tumult was softened into a dull roar; and she repeated her question.

'No, Miss Marjorie, I have not seen him,' answered Neil. Their voices sounded strangely muffled, the force of the breakers making the walls of the little cavern tremble.

'Then, Neil, you must leave this at once; the caves will be flooded in another minute, and I've come all this way to warn you.'

'Did you, Miss Marjorie? Did you indeed? You came to warn me. No, indeed; I cannot let you stay here.'

'How are we to get out, Neil? I think the tide is at the foot of the cliffs now?'

As she spoke a stream of water broke in and ran along the floor of their little shelter.

'It is too late to get out that way now, Miss Marjorie,' said Neil; 'and in any case it would be too slippery that the cliffs would be. I will be knowing an opening leading to the moor, where it's not difficult to climb up. Come this way.'

He helped her along the passages. Soon they were in total darkness. The flood was gaining upon them, and the noise rendered it impossible to exchange a word. Sometimes the water hissed and gurgled at their heels, and sometimes they plunged ankle-deep into pools.

They slipped and scrambled along, Marjorie clinging to her guide; and presently a glimmer of light came from above.

'Here we are, Miss Marjorie,' said Neil. 'If you could be managing to climb up here we would come out on the moor.'

The ascent was broken and dangerous, and was in some places only very imperfectly lighted. Neil, with his sailor's training, swung himself from point to point, sometimes drawing Marjorie up to a ledge, and sometimes instructing her

where to set her feet. At last the welcome daylight burst upon them, and grasping the tufts of heather, they drew themselves on to firm ground.

'At last,' said Marjorie, throwing herself down on the heather, and blinking in the sun. 'Now you can go to the lighthouse, Neil.'

'Hullo,' said a voice; and Marjorie looked up to see the laird and Mr. Graham, who had come all this way to watch the storm at the Corrachin Caves, and were very much astonished at this sudden encounter.

'Run, Neil,' gasped Marjorie; but Neil drew himself together.

'It iss no use,' he said; 'they will be watching wherever I will go, and I hev not a chance.'

Then to Mr. Stewart he said, 'I am not for trying to escape. I know I shall be taken. I'd rather give myself up to you than to any one else. If you wass not to be letting my mother know it iss grateful to you I will be, sir.'

The laird looked greatly distressed.

'Neil, my lad,' he said, 'I have no warrant for arresting you. It's none of my business. You may go away if you like; I shall not try to prevent you.'

Neil shook his head.

'It iss no use, sir,' he said; 'I would rather yield of my own accord than be taken, and I have no chance of escaping now. I had nothing to do with the theft of the letters, but it iss no matter. My mother hass not long to live, and she need neffer know if things go against me. Keep it from her if you can.'

Marjorie stood by, white and trembling, and nearer to shedding tears than she could have believed possible.

'You can come with me for the present, Neil,' said the laird; 'we'll see what can be done.'

A pony cart was chartered from the nearest farmhouse. Marjorie got in with the others and a sorrowful party set out across the moors.

When they reached Ardnavaire, the ill news seemed to have preceded them, for Reggie looked stormily from an upper window and then came into the hall where Allan and the Grahams were already waiting, and Mrs. Stewart came downstairs accompanied by Tricksy, whose eyes were very big and dark with dismay.

Neil dropped into the chair that was offered him, and leant his head on his hand, while the others gathered silently around him. Allan and Reggie were nearest, one on either side, and Reggie put his hand protectingly on his friend's shoulder. In the background, Mr. Stewart fidgeted with the things that had been carried in from the pony cart, and Tricksy was silently shedding tears, poor little girl, leaning against her mother.

The only one who could think of anything to do was Laddie, who came in, planted himself in front of Neil, and endeavoured to express his sympathy by slipping his nose under the lad's disengaged hand. Almost without knowing that he was doing it, Neil put out his hand and caressed the dog's smooth head, and the two remained thus in a silent understanding.

Every one was feeling very miserable when there came a sound of wheels; a gig drew up at the door, and several persons sprang down and burst into the hall.

CHAPTER XV

HAMISH TO THE RESCUE

The storm which awakened Marjorie had also roused Hamish. He awoke to hear the rain pouring down, and the burn rushing along in heavy spate.

'Fine fishing, to-morrow,' said Hamish to himself, 'but, whew! how the wind's rising. The rain can't last long at this rate.'

He lay a little longer, listening to the rushing of the burn; then he began to think of the people who might be without shelter that night; Neil (who he hoped would take shelter in one of the cottages if the gale continued) and the gipsies, and Gibbie MacKerrach.

At the thought of Gibbie a sudden recollection came into his sleepy brain.

He remembered the lad's lair in the hills, above his father's house, and that the wind had been blowing from that direction on the day when a paper had been found fluttering in the ruins.

Had no one ever connected the crazy lad with the robbery?

The idea seemed fanciful, but still it would do no harm to go and examine Gibbie's curious little cave on the hillside.

Hamish thought he would set out at once, before daylight came and made him feel how ridiculous it was to think of such a thing.

The dawn was hardly making any headway through the clouds and the rain, and Hamish pulled up the collar of his coat and pushed forward in the darkness.

As he toiled up the hill the wind was rising in angry squalls and after awhile the rain ceased and a large break began to open in the clouds, letting the grey light through.

The burn, along whose banks Hamish was making his way, was coming down tumultuously, bearing with it bits of stick, clods of earth, and other rubbish.

Once or twice Hamish fancied he saw a bit of white paper whirl past, but it was carried down stream before he could reach it.

At last he reached the hollow where Gibbie's little dwelling was situated. Just above there was a little cascade, and the swollen waters, coming down with a rush, overflowed their banks and flooded the lair, sweeping out a quantity of straw mixed with scraps of paper.

Hamish plunged into the stream and caught straw, papers and all in his arms.

A shout from the lair made him look round, and there stood Gibbie, soaked with wet, and plastered with mud from head to foot.

'You must not be touching these,' cried the lad; 'they're for Neil, all for Neil!'

'All right, Gibbie,' said Hamish tranquilly; 'you can give them to Neil as soon as you like, I was only keeping them from being carried away.'

'Who told you I had seen Neil?' asked the lad craftily; 'Andrew said I was not to tell any one, and I'm not going to say he is here; only the nice gorjo in dark blue clothes asked me and I told him.'

'Ah, did you tell him?' said Hamish, speaking quietly, but trembling between the fear of asking too much or too little; 'and when did you see Mrs. MacAlister last?'

A sly expression passed over the lad's face.

'Me and Mrs. MacAlister not friends,' he said. 'Play her tricks.' Suddenly he began to laugh. 'Played her a fine trick, though; she never find out! Gibbie steal her letters when she and her husband had gone out to see Neil home. Door left open, no one see Gibbie—clever Gibbie!'

'Wait, Gibbie,' interrupted Hamish; 'I'm going to fetch something for you,' and he made off downhill with all speed.

Dr. MacGregor was just driving home from a night visit to a patient when his son dashed into the road, spattered with mud and with the water squelching from his boots.

'Father,' said Hamish, 'come with me; I've found out who robbed the post-office,' and throwing the reins to his groom, the astonished doctor was dragged all the way to the gipsy's burrow.

'Hullo, Gibbie, you look cold,' said the doctor, taking in the situation with great presence of mind; 'come with me and have a glass of something hot.'

Sitting by the fire in the nearest cottage, with a glass of steaming toddy in his hand, Gibbie became communicative, and the doctor soon drew from him the rest of the story.

'Neil's a good lad,' said the gipsy. 'Neil knows how to behave to a Romany chel; drives away bad boys when they laugh and throw stones. Gibbie gave Neil a present; two presents; something out of the letters. Neil will find it in his coat pocket some day. Papers worth a hundred pound.'

'All right, Gibbie,' said the doctor craftily; 'suppose we go and tell Neil that you put them there. He may not have been able to find them yet.'

Dr. MacGregor's tired horse was withdrawn from its feed, and Hamish, his father, and Gibbie set out for Ardnavaor.

'Neil's cleared,' announced Hamish; and every one turned round to encounter the strange-looking figure of the gipsy.

Finding himself among so many people, Gibbie became suspicious and refused to speak, but the faces of his companions rendered all explanation unnecessary.

'I am glad to say that your innocence is established beyond a doubt, Neil,' said Dr. MacGregor beaming upon him; 'and I am glad to shake hands with you.'

'Oh, hooray, hooray,' shouted the boys. 'Neil, old boy, you're cleared,' and they capered round him, patting him on the back and cheering until the lad was quite bewildered.

Laddie, after looking puzzled for a moment, burst into a joyous barking and leaped up three times and turned round in the air; then ran to Neil and jumped up again, trying to lick his face. An indescribable tumult reigned, and Neil extricated himself with difficulty.

'Excuse me,' he said; 'you are all ferry kind, but I must be going and telling my mother.'

'Wait a bit, Neil,' said the doctor, laying a detaining hand upon the lad's shoulder; 'not so suddenly, if you please; I will go with you and prepare her,' and the two left the house together.

'But Mrs. Macdonnell, Mummie,' said Tricksy, with a quivering lip, 'do you—do you think she'll die?'

'Not she,' said the laird, coming forward; 'happiness has never killed any one yet, and a little of that is what Mrs. Macdonnell was wanting. But where is the hero of the day; the one who found out what no one else has been able to discover! We have not congratulated him yet.'

'We do, we do,' they all cried; and they laid forcible hands upon Hamish, who had retired into the background with a very red face, carried him out of doors and chaired him triumphantly round the courtyard.

'But *Hamish*,' said Harry later in the day, his eyes bright with astonishment; 'to think that after all it was Hamish who did it!'

'Why not?' inquired Allan gruffly.

'Why, he's such a quiet fellow, one never thinks of his doing anything. If it had been you or me now, or Reggie, or even Marjorie (although Marjorie's far too conceited for a girl); but Hamish!'

Marjorie had caught some of the last words, and she turned upon the boy like lightning.

'Ever heard the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise?' she queried. 'If not you'll find it in the Third Reading Book. Perhaps you're not as far as that yet though.'

Still Harry found the matter hard to understand, and during several days, he was frequently to be observed sitting on dykes and contemplating Hamish, who shared the honours of the time with Neil.

'Only a few days now,' observed Tricksy regretfully, 'and there will be an end of all the fun. Every one's going to school except me, and there will be no

boating or fishing or playing at pirates any more.'

'What about next year, Tricksy?' said Marjorie.

'Next year! Why, you'll be grown-up by then. Your mother said you must be sent to school to learn to be less of a tomboy.'

'I won't be less of a tomboy,' declared Marjorie. 'I'm going to fish, and climb rocks and ride ponies bare-backed, and do all those kinds of things until I'm ever so old. We'll have better fun than ever, now we have Neil back again. I vote we make a Compact——'

'We've made one already,' interposed Tricksy.

'Well, a new one then. We'll call it a League;—the Adventure League—and we'll promise to come back every year. Harry and Gerald too, and we'll have the Pirates' Den for our house; and we'll never bother about being grown-up until we're too old to get any fun out of being tomboys any more.'

'Agreed,' said the others. 'Neil, you shall be Captain of our League.'

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