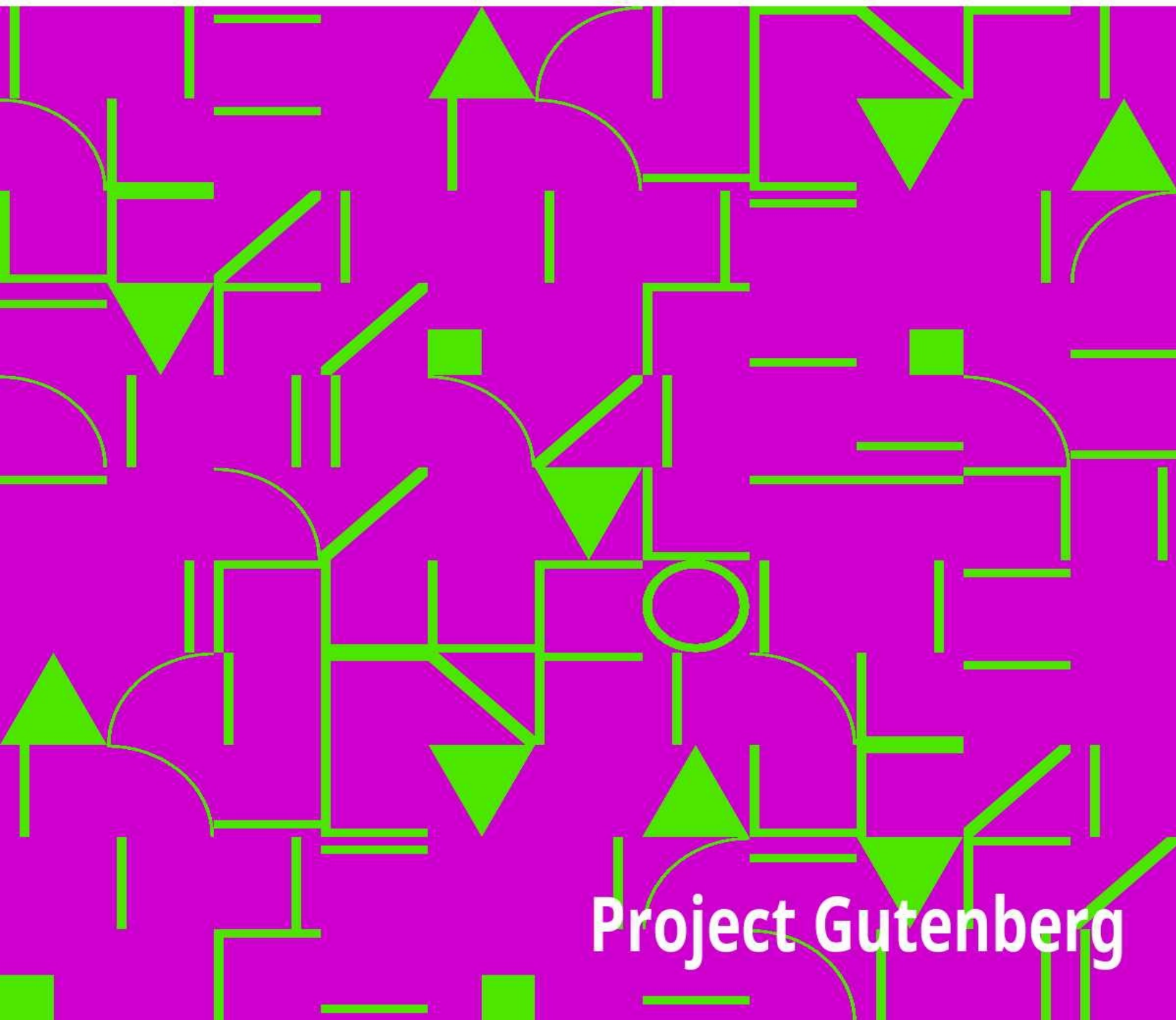


The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson; Or, Fighting Fire in Sleepy Hollow

Laura Dent Crane

The background of the lower half of the cover is a solid black field filled with a complex, repeating pattern of white geometric shapes. These shapes include various line segments, right angles, triangles, and semi-circles, creating a modern, architectural aesthetic.

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Run! Run for Your Lives!
Run! Run for Your Lives!

The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson

OR

Fighting Fire in Sleepy Hollow

By

LAURA DENT CRANE

Author of The Automobile Girls at Newport, The Automobile
Girls in the Berkshires, Etc., Etc.

Illustrated

PHILADELPHIA
HENRY ALTEMUS COMPANY

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The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson

CHAPTER I—THE UNEXPECTED ALWAYS HAPPENS

“I think I’d make a pretty good housemaid,” said Barbara, on her knees, energetically polishing the floor of the cottage parlor.

“Only housemaids don’t wear gloves and all-over aprons and mobcaps,” replied Mollie.

“And they don’t protect their skins from dust with cold cream,” added Barbara, teasingly. “Do they, Molliekins?”

“Oh well,” replied Mollie, “duty and beauty rhyme, and every woman ought to try and keep her looks, according to the beauty pages in all the papers.”

“Poor old Molliekins!” exclaimed her sister. “Crowsfeet and gray hair at fifteen!”

“Going on sixteen,” corrected Mollie, as she gave a finishing rub to the mahogany center table, a relic of more prosperous days, and flourished an old, oily stocking that made an excellent polisher. “But the papers do say that automobiling is very harmful to the complexion and the face should be protected by layers of cold cream and powder, and a veil on top of that.”

“I’m willing to take the chance,” laughed Barbara, “if ever I get another one.”

“I suppose Ruth is so busy getting ready for her six weeks’ trip abroad that she won’t have much time for her ‘bubble’ this August,” observed Mollie. “But, dear knows, we can’t complain. There never was a rich girl who knew how to make other people happy as well as she does. Sometimes I think she is really a fairy princess, disguised as a human being, who is just gratifying her desire to do nice things for girls like us.”

“No, she is no fairy,” commented Barbara. “That is why we love her so. She is just a jolly, nice girl and as human as anybody. When she asked us to go to Newport it was because she really wanted us. She has often told me, since, that she had been planning the trip for months, but the girls she knew were not exactly the kind who would have fallen into such a scheme. Gladys Le Baron

would never have done, you see, at that time, because she always wanted Harry Townsend hanging about.”

Harry Townsend, our readers will recall, appeared in a former volume of this series, “The Automobile Girls at Newport.” He was the famous youth known to the police as “The Boy Raffles,” whose mysterious thefts were the puzzle of the society world. It was Barbara Thurston, by her grit and intelligence, who finally brought the criminal to justice, though not before Newport had been completely bewildered by a number of inexplicable jewelry robberies.

Following the visit to Newport came another delightful trip to the Berkshire Hills. The romantic rescue of a little girl whose birth had been concealed from her rich white relatives by her Indian grandmother; Mollie Thurston lost in an unexplored forest; the thrilling race between an air ship and an automobile—these and other exciting adventures were described in the second volume of the series entitled “The Automobile Girls in the Berkshires.”

“How hot it is!” continued Bab. “Suppose we have some lemonade. These forest fire mists are really fine ashes and they make me quite thirsty.”

She polished away vigorously while Mollie tripped off to make a cooling drink in the spotless little kitchen. Except for the tinkle of ice against glass the house was very still. Outside, not a breeze was stirring, and the meadows were draped in a curious, smoky mist. The sun hung like a red ball in the sky; the air was hot and heavy. The flowers in the garden borders drooped their heads in spite of persistent and frequent waterings. Three months’ drought had almost made a desert of Kingsbridge. The neat little scrap of a lawn was turning brown in patches, like prematurely gray hair, Barbara said. Even the birds were silent, and Mollie’s cherished family of bantams, a hen, a rooster and one chick, crouched listlessly in the shadow of the hedge.

Just then the stillness was broken by the distant crunch-crunch of an automobile. But the girls were too intent on what they were doing to take any notice until it stopped at their own front gate, and the sound of gay laughter and voices floated up the walk. Mollie and Barbara rushed together to the front porch.

“It’s Ruth herself!” they cried in the same breath, running down the steps without stopping to remove their long gingham aprons and dusting caps. “And there’s mother, too,” exclaimed Mollie.

“And Mr. Stuart and Aunt Sallie, all complete!” cried Barbara.

In a moment the three girls were engaged in a sort of triangular embrace while

the others looked smilingly on.

“Well, young ladies,” said Mr. Stuart, “are those automobile coats you’re wearing, and bonnets, too?”

“I think they would do pretty well for motoring,” replied Barbara, “they are specially made for keeping out the dust.”

“They are just as cute as they can be,” said loyal Ruth, who was too tender-hearted to let her friends be teased.

“But where on earth did you come from, Ruth?” asked Mollie. “We were just talking about you a moment ago. We thought, of course, you were still in Denver, and lo and behold! you appear in person in Kingsbridge.”

“Well, papa had a call East,” replied Ruth, bubbling with suppressed joy, “and I had a call, too. Papa’s was business and mine was—well, just to call on you.” By that time they had reached the cool, half-darkened little parlor whose bare floor and mahogany furniture reflected their faces in the recently polished surfaces.

“Oho!” cried Mr. Stuart. “I see now where Queen Mab and her fairies have been working in their pinafores and caps.”

“Take them off now, girly,” said Mrs. Thurston, “and get a pitcher of ice water. I know our friends must be thirsty after their dusty ride.”

But Mollie, who had already disappeared, came back in a few minutes bearing a large tray of glasses and a tall glass pitcher against whose sides cracked ice tinkled musically.

“That’s the most delightful sound I’ve heard to-day,” exclaimed Mr. Stuart, and even Aunt Sallie took a second glass without much urging.

“Where is our little Indian Princess from the Berkshire Hills?” asked Mr. Stuart suddenly. “One of my reasons for coming East was to see Eunice. Ruth says she is the prettiest, little brown bird that ever flew down from a mountain to live in a gilded cage. What have you done with her, Mrs. Thurston?”

“I have had to give her up, Mr. Stuart,” Mrs. Thurston replied, sadly. “And I was beginning to love Eunice like one of my own children. You cannot guess how quickly she learned the ways of our home. She soon forgot the old, wild mountain life and her Indian grandmother’s teaching. But just now and then, if one of us was the least bit cross with her, she would run away to the woods; and then only Mollie, whom she always loved best, could bring her home again.”

“Oh, how I hated to have her leave us!” Mollie declared. “But after the one

winter with mother, Eunice's rich uncle, Mr. Latham, came here to see her. He was so charmed with her beauty and shy lovely manners that he took her back to his home in the Berkshires to spend the summer with him. This fall Mr. Latham is going to put Eunice in a girl's boarding school in Boston, so that she can be nearer his place at Lenox. He wants to be able to see her oftener. The dream of little Eunice's life is to some day ask 'The Automobile Girls' to visit her."

"Well, girls," said Ruth, as they moved toward the front porch, leaving their three elders to chat in the parlor, "I suppose you know I've got something in my mind again."

"No, honor bright, we don't," declared Barbara. "Isn't Europe about as much as you can support at one time?"

"But Europe doesn't happen until next month, children, and after finishing his business in the East, papa is going to be kept very busy for at least a month in the West. In the meantime Aunt Sallie and I have no place to go but out, and nothing to do but play around until it's time to sail. And so, honored friends, I'm again thrown upon your company for as long a time as you can endure my presence. And this is the plan that's been working in my head all the way on the train: What do you say to a lovely motor trip up along the Hudson to Sleepy Hollow? Don't you think it would be fine? Grace can go, and we'll have our same old happy crowd. It's really only one day's trip to Tarrytown, where we will stop for as long as we like, and from there we can motor about the country and see some of the fine estates. It is a historic place, you know, girls, full of romance and old stories and legends. We can even motor up into the hills if we like."

"It would be too perfect!" cried the other two girls.

"I'm just in the mood for adventures, anyway," declared Barbara. "I've been feeling it coming over me for a week."

"When are we going?" asked Mollie.

"Well, why not to-morrow," replied Ruth, "while the spirit moves us?"

"O joy, O bliss, O rapture unconfined!" sang Mollie, dancing up and down the porch in her delight.

"You see, there is no special getting ready to do," went on Ruth. "The chauffeur will go over 'Mr. A. Bubble,' this afternoon, and put him in good shape. He's been acting excellently well for such a hardworking old party. I mean 'A. Bubble,' of course."

“Does mother know yet, Ruth?” asked Barbara, with a sudden misgiving.

“Oh, yes, she knows all about it. Papa and I laid the whole plan before her when we picked her up in the village. She was agreeable to everything, but of course she would be. She is such a dear! Aunt Sallie was the only one who was a bit backward about coming forward. She seemed to think that the forest fires would devour us if we dared venture outside of New York. But, of course, they are only in the mountains and there is no danger from them. It took me an age to gain her consent. If she has any more time to think about it she may back out at the eleventh hour.”

“Is it all settled, girls?” called Mr. Stuart’s voice through the open window.

“Oh, yes,” chorused three gay voices at once.

“Well, I think we’d better be going up to the hotel, then,” cried Miss Sallie. “If I’m to be suffocated by smoke and cinders I think I shall need all the rest I can get beforehand.”

“But, dearest Aunt Sallie,” said Ruth, patting her aunt’s peach-blossom cheek, “the fires are nowhere near Sleepy Hollow. They are miles off in the mountains. And truly, in your heart, I believe you like these little auto jaunts better than any of us.”

“Not at all,” replied the inflexible Miss Stuart. “I am much too old and rheumatic for such nonsense.”

Whereupon she jumped nimbly into the car.

The others all laughed. They understood Miss Sallie pretty well by this time. “She has a stern exterior, but a very melting interior,” Barbara used to say of her.

“Don’t fail to be ready by ten, girls,” called Ruth as she followed her aunt, while Mr. Stuart was offering his adieux to Mrs. Thurston.

“But, Bab,” whispered Mollie, as the automobile disappeared around a curve in the road, “what about the forest fires?”

“Sh-h!” said Barbara, with, a finger on her lip.

And they followed their mother into the house.

CHAPTER II—MR. STUART CONFIDES A SECRET

The next day was like the day before, very hot and still, the air thick with a smoke-like mist even in that seashore place. It hung over the sea like a heavy fog, and the foghorn could be heard in the distance moaning like a distracted animal calling for its young.

Barbara had refreshed herself by an early morning dip in the ocean, but she felt the oppressive atmosphere in spite of the tingling the cool salt water had given to her skin.

They were seated around the little breakfast table, always so daintily set, for Mrs. Thurston had never lost that quality which had characterized her in her youth and which still clung to her in the days of her hardships and troubles.

“And now, girlyes,” she said, “you must promise me one thing. Don’t lose your heads at the wrong time. Not that you ever have before, and I am sure I have no premonitions, now; but remember, my daughters, if anything exciting should happen, to make a little prayer to yourselves; then think hard and the answer is apt to come before you know it.”

“Do you remember how Gladys Le Baron shrieked the time the curtains in her room caught fire?” asked Mollie. “She didn’t do anything but just wring her hands and scream, and it was really Barbara who put the fire out. Bab pulled down the curtains and threw a blanket over them. And then Gladys had hysterics. But Barbara always keeps her head,” added Mollie, proudly.

“Your head is all right, too, Molliekins,” exclaimed Barbara. “The night the man tried to break in the house, don’t you remember, mummie, how brave she was? She followed us up with a poker as bold as a lion.”

“So you did, my pet, and I’m not the least afraid that either one of you ever will be lacking in courage. But, when I was very small, my mother once taught me a little prayer which she made me promise to say to myself whenever I felt the temptation to give way to fear or anger. And many and many a time it has helped me. It was only a few words: ‘Heaven, make me calm in the face of danger,’ but

I have never known it to fail.”

“Dearest little mother,” cried Barbara, kissing her mother’s soft cheek, “you’re the best and sweetest little mummie in the world and I’m sure I can’t remember ever having seen you angry or hysterical or any of those terrible things. But if ever I do get in a tight place I hope I shall not forget the little prayer.”

“Heaven, make me calm in the face of danger,” repeated Mollie, softly.

“But, dear me, how gruesome we are!” exclaimed Mrs. Thurston. “It is time you were packing your bags, at any rate, children. Be sure and put in your sweaters. You may need them in spite of this hot wave. And, Mollie, don’t forget the cold cream for your little sunburned nose.”

The two girls ran upstairs to their room. In a few moments they were deep in preparations. By the time the whirl of an automobile was heard in the distance they had got into their fresh linen suits and broad-brimmed straw hats, and were waiting on the porch with suit cases and small satchels. Mrs. Thurston looked them over with secret pride.

“Do you see anything lacking, mother?” asked Barbara.

“No, Bab, my dear. I haven’t a word to say. You made a very choice selection in that pink linen, and Mollie was just as happy in her blue one. I never saw neater looking dresses. I hope they won’t wrinkle much. But you can have them pressed at the hotel, I suppose.”

“And don’t forget our automobile coats,” exclaimed Mollie proudly, as she shook out her long pongee duster, last year’s Christmas gift from Ruth. “This is the first time we’ve had a chance to wear them. I feel so grand in mine!” she continued, as she slipped it on. “With all this veil and hat I can almost imagine I am a millionaire.” And she swept up the porch and back with a society air that was perfect. “Good morning,” she said to her mother in a high, affected voice. “Won’t you take a little spin with me in my car? Life is such a bore now at these barbarous seaside places! There is really nothing but bridge and motoring, and one can’t play bridge all the time. Oh, and by the way,” she continued, pretending to look at Bab haughtily, through a lorgnette, “won’t you bring your little girl along? She can sit with the chauffeur.”

They were still laughing when the automobile came spinning up with Ruth, Grace Carter, Miss Sallie Stuart and her brother.

“On time, as usual, girls,” cried Ruth gayly. “And I am late as usual. But who cares? It’s a lovely day and we’re going to have a perfect time. I am so glad

we're going that I would like to execute a few steps on your front porch for joy."

"Go ahead," said Barbara. "We've just been having one exhibition from Miss Clare Vere de Vere Thurston, who is bursting with pride over her automobile coat, and we would be pleased to see another."

"By the way, I should like to have a few words in private with the young party in the pink dress," called Mr. Stuart, who was engaged in taking a last look at the inner workings of the automobile.

"Meaning me?" asked Bab. "Come in, won't you, Mr. Stuart?"

"Now, what could they be having secrets about?" exclaimed Ruth, and even Miss Sallie looked somewhat mystified.

"I am dying to know what you two are confabbing about," cried Ruth, as Mr. Stuart and Barbara returned. "Have you given Bab permission to tell us?"

"Miss Barbara Thurston is a young woman of such excellent judgment," replied Mr. Stuart, "that I shall leave the secret entirely in her hands, and rely upon her to keep it or tell it as she thinks best."

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Sallie, "here's a nice mystery to commence the day on! But come along, girls; we had better be starting."

Mr. Stuart, with Bab's assistance, gathered up the bags and suit cases piled on the porch, packing the cases on the back with the others where they were secured with straps, and putting the small hand satchels on the floor of the car. Barbara seized her own satchel rather hastily and placed it beside her on the seat.

"Why, Bab, one would think you were a smuggler," cried Ruth. "Don't you want to put your satchel on the floor with the others?"

"Oh, never mind," replied Barbara carelessly. "It's all right here," and she exchanged a meaning look with Mr. Stuart.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Ruth. "You and papa grow 'curiouser and curiouser.'"

Then the good-byes were said, and the big automobile went skimming down the road in a whirl of dust, leaving Mrs. Thurston and Mr. Stuart at the gate waving their handkerchiefs, until it turned the curve and was lost to sight.

The travelers lunched at Allaire, as usual, in the little open-air French restaurant, and strolled about under the enormous elms of the deserted village while the meal was being prepared. But they did not linger after lunch. Ruth was hoping to make Tarrytown in time for dinner that evening, instead of stopping for the night

in New York, which, she said, appeared to be suffering from the heat like a human being. "The poor, tired city is all fagged out and fairly panting from the humidity. If all goes well, I think we should get to New York by four o'clock, have tea at the Waldorf and start for Tarrytown at five. We ought to reach there by seven at the latest. It will be a long ride, but it's lots cooler riding than it is sitting still. Once we get to Tarrytown we can linger as long as we please."

They whizzed along the now familiar road, through the endless chain of summer resorts that line the Jersey coast, up the Rumson Road between the homes of millionaires, and finally struck the road to New York.

"It'll be easy sailing now," observed Ruth, "if we only catch the ferries."

By a stroke of good luck they were able to do so, and actually drew up in front of the Waldorf at a few minutes before four o'clock.

"Well, Ruth, I must say you are a pretty good calculator," exclaimed Miss Sallie, "harum-scarum that you are."

There was a brief interval for face-washing and the smoothing of flattened pompadours; another longer one for consuming lettuce sandwiches and tea, followed by ices and cakes, and the party was off again, as swiftly as if it had been carrying secret government dispatches.

Up Riverside Drive they sped, past the Palisades which loomed purple and amethyst in the misty light. Then eastward to Broadway, which was once the old Albany Post Road; along the borders of Van Courtlandt Park, where, even on that hot day, the golfers were out; through Yonkers, too citified to be interesting to the girls just then; and, finally, along the river through the loveliest country Barbara and Mollie had ever seen. Still the crags of the Palisades towered on one side, while on the other were beautiful estates stretching back into the hills, and little villages nestling down on the river front.

Miss Sallie and Grace were both sound asleep on the back seat. Mollie had let down one of the small middle seats, and sat resting her chin on the back of the seat in front of her, occasionally pressing her sister's shoulder for sympathy.

Ruth was in a brown study. She was very tired. It was no joke playing chauffeur for more than a hundred miles in one day.

"Bab," whispered Mollie, awed by the lovely vistas of river and valley, "do you think the Vale of Cashmere could be more exquisite than this? Or the Rhine, or Lake Como, or any other wonderful place we have never seen?"

"Isn't it marvelous, little sister? It's like an enchanted country, and it is full of

legends and history, too. During the Revolution the two armies were encamped all through here.”

“Oh, yes,” interrupted Ruth. “If I were not too tired, I might tell you a lot of things about this historical spot, but we must take another spin down here later and see it all again. This village we are now entering is Irvington, the home of Washington Irving. His house is no longer open to the public, however. Tarrytown is only a little distance down the river. We shall soon be there.”

It was not long before a tired, sleepy party of automobilists drew up in front of an old hotel shaded with immense elms.

“Wake up, Aunt Sallie, dear,” cried Ruth, giving her sleeping relative a gentle shake. “Bestir yourselves, sweet ladies, for food and rest are at hand and the hostelry is open to us.”

Supper was, indeed, ready, and rooms, too. For Mr. Stuart had notified the hotel proprietor to expect an automobile containing five women to descend upon him about sundown.

The five travelers mounted the steps to the supper room, and refreshed themselves with beefsteak and hot biscuits; then mounted more steps to their bedrooms, where they soon fell into five untroubled slumbers.

CHAPTER III—ROCKING CHAIR ADVENTURES

“Well, girls,” exclaimed Ruth, next morning at the breakfast table, “here we are ready for adventures. But they will have to be early morning or late evening ones. It’s already too hot to breathe.”

“For my part,” observed Miss Sallie, “the only adventure I am seeking is to sit on the shady side of the piazza, in a wicker chair, and read the morning paper.”

“But, Miss Sallie, even that might turn into something,” said romantic Mollie.

“Yes, indeed,” pursued Ruth, “you know the way mamma met papa was by staying at home instead of going to a ball.”

“Why, Ruth!” cried Miss Sallie.

“But it’s quite true, dear Aunt Sallie. Mamma was visiting at a house party in the South, somewhere, and she had a headache and stayed home from a ball, and was sitting in the library. Papa came a-calling on one of the others, and was ushered into the library, by mistake, and introduced himself to mamma—and she forgot her headache and he forgot he was due to catch a train to New York at nine o’clock. It was simply a case of love at first sight.”

“My dear, I am not looking for any such romantic adventures,” said Miss Sallie, bridling. “Your father was an intimate friend of the family at whose house your mother was stopping. It was perfectly natural they should have met, if not that evening, at least another one. I always said your mother showed extreme good sense in staying away from a party and nursing her headache. Not many others would have done the same.” Miss Stuart gave her niece a meaning look, while the four girls suppressed their smiles and exchanged telegraphic glances of amusement.

Not long before Ruth had “doctored” herself up with headache medicine, and had gone to a dance against her aunt’s advice. As a result she had been obliged to leave before the evening was over, more on account of the medicine than the headache, Miss Sallie had believed.

“Dearest little auntie, you have a touch of sun this morning, haven’t you?” asked Ruth, leaning over and patting her aunt’s soft cheek; while Miss Stuart, who was indeed feeling the general oppressiveness of the weather, melted at once into a good humor and smiled at her niece tenderly.

Two persons were rather curiously watching this little scene from behind the shelter of the morning papers. One of them, a very handsome elderly man, seated at a table by the window, had started perceptibly when the party entered the room; and from that moment, he had hardly eaten a bite of breakfast. He was occupied in examining not the fair young girls but Miss Sallie herself, who was entirely unconscious of being the object of such scouting.

The other individual was quite different in appearance. He was dressed in black leather from head to foot, and a motor cap and glasses lay beside him on the table. His evident interest in the conversation of the girls was impersonal, perhaps the curiosity of a foreigner in a strange country. There was some admiration in his eyes as they rested on pretty Mollie’s golden curls and fresh smiling face; but his manner was perfectly respectful and he was careful to conceal his glances by the newspaper.

“That man is rather good-looking in a foreign sort of way,” whispered Mollie.

“Too much blacky face and shiny eye, to suit my taste,” replied Bab. “He looks like a pirate, or a smuggler, in that black leather suit.”

“Dear me, you are severe, Bab,” observed Ruth. “If he were not so young, I should take him for an opera singer on a vacation. He would do nicely dressed as a cavalier.”

“Be careful, my dears; you are talking much too loudly,” admonished Miss Sallie, for the young foreigner had evidently overheard the conversation, and had turned his face away to conceal an expression of amusement.

“I vote we adjourn to the porch,” said Ruth, “until we decide where we are going this morning. Come on, auntie, dear. There may be a rocking chair adventure waiting for you on that shady piazza. I saw a white haired gentleman giving you many glances of admiration, this morning, around the corner of his newspaper. Did you notice it, girls?”

“I did,” replied Grace, somewhat hesitatingly, for she was just a little fearful about entering into these teasing humors with Ruth.

“Don’t be silly, Ruth,” said Miss Sallie. But she glanced quickly over her shoulder, nevertheless, as she led the little procession from the dining room, her

lavender muslin draperies floating in the breeze. She stopped in the office and bought a newspaper, then proceeded to the shady piazza, where she seated herself in a rocking chair and unfolded the paper.

The girls leaned over the railing and looked down into the street, while Ruth expounded her views on their morning's ride.

"Suppose we have a lunch fixed up," she was saying, "and spend the morning at Sleepy Hollow? It's lovelier than anything you ever imagined, just what Washington Irving says of it, a place to dream in and see visions."

A charming tenor voice floated out from an upper window, singing a song in some foreign language.

The girls looked at each other and laughed.

"He did hear us, and he is an opera singer," whispered Grace.

"I knew it," came Miss Sallie's voice from the depths of the paper.

"Knew what?" demanded the four girls somewhat guiltily, as the singing continued.

"Knew that we would all be cremated if we came into these dreadful wild regions," replied Miss Sallie, as she gazed tragically down the shaded street lined with beautiful old homes.

"But, Miss Sallie," interposed Barbara in soothing tones, "the fires are up in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, aren't they? It is only when the wind blows in this direction that we get the smoke from them. Even New York gets it, then; and certainly there is no danger of New York burning up from the forest fires."

"Very well, my dears, if we do run into one of those shocking conflagrations, you may just recall my words to you this morning."

The girls all laughed, and there is nothing prettier than the sound of the light-hearted laughter of young girls; at least so thought the tall, military-looking man they had seen at breakfast. He had strolled out on the piazza, and was walking straight toward Miss Sallie with an air of determination that was unmistakable even to the stately lady in lavender.

A few feet from her chair he paused as if a sudden thought had arrested him, and the two looked straight into each other's faces for the space of half a minute. The girls were fairly dumb with amazement as they watched the little drama. Miss Sallie's face had flushed and paled before it resumed its natural peachy tone. They could not see the face of the stranger whose back was turned to them.

“Is it possible,” asked Miss Sallie after a moment, in a strange voice, “that this is John Ten Eyck?”

She had risen from her chair, in her excitement, and the newspapers had fallen on the floor with her lavender silk reticule, her fan and smelling salts, her lace-edged handkerchief and spectacle case, all in a confused mass.

“You have not forgotten me, Sallie?” the man demanded, almost dramatically. “I am John Ten Eyck, grown old and gray. I never dreamed that any of my old friends would recognize me after all these years. But are these your girls, Sallie?” he asked, turning with a courtly air to the four young women.

“No, indeed, John,” replied Miss Sallie, rather stiffly, “I have never married. This is my niece, Ruth Stuart, my only brother’s child.” And she proceeded to introduce the others in turn. “Ruth, my child, this is Major John Ten Eyck, an old friend of mine, whom I have not seen for many years. I suppose you have lived in foreign lands for so long you have completely lost sight of your American friends.”

“It has been a great many years,” answered Major Ten Eyck, after he had taken each girl by the hand and had looked into her face with such gentleness and charm of manner as to win them all completely. “It’s been thirty years, has it not, Sallie?”

“Don’t ask me such a question, John Ten Eyck! I’m sure I have no desire to be reminded of how old we are growing. Do you know, you are actually getting fat and bald; and here I am with hair as white as snow.”

“But your face is as young as ever, Sallie,” declared the gallant major.

“Isn’t it, Major Ten Eyck?” exclaimed Ruth, who had found her voice at last. “She is just as pretty as she was thirty years ago, I am certain. Papa says she is, at any rate.”

“So she is, my dear,” agreed the old man as he gazed with undisguised admiration into Miss Sallie’s smiling face.

“Do sit down,” said Miss Sallie, slightly confused, “and tell us where you have been, and what you have been doing these last three decades.”

“It would take too long, I fear,” replied the major, looking at his watch. “I am looking for my two nephews this morning.”

“You mean Martin’s sons, I suppose?” asked Miss Sallie.

“Yes, they are coming down to stay with me at my old place, back yonder in the

hills. They are bringing one or two friends with them, and we shall motor over this afternoon if the weather permits. But tell me, what are you doing here? Spending the summer? Don't you find it a little dull, young ladies?"

"Oh, we are just on a motor trip, too," replied Ruth. "We are birds of passage, and stop only as long as it pleases us."

"And have you no men along, to look after you and protect you from highwaymen, or mend the tires when they are punctured?"

"My dear Major," replied Miss Sallie, "you have been away from America for so long that you are old-fashioned. Do you think these athletic young women need a man to protect them? I assure you that the world has been changing while you have been burying yourself in Russia and Japan. Ruth, here, is as good a chauffeur as could be found, and Barbara Thurston can protect herself and us into the bargain. She rides horseback like a man." Barbara blushed at the memory of the stolen horseback ride on the way to Newport. "Grace and Mollie are a little bit more old-fashioned, perhaps, and I am as helpless as ever. But two are quite enough. They have got us out of every scrape so far, the two of them."

The girls all laughed.

Only Barbara, who was leaning on the railing facing the window, saw a figure move behind the curtain, which had stood so still she had not noticed it before.

"Since you are off on a sort of wild goose chase for amusement," began the major (here the figure that was slipping away paused again), "couldn't you confer a great honor and pleasure on an old man by making him a visit?"

"Oh!" cried the girls, breathless with delight, remembering the automobile full of youths that would shortly appear.

"Now, Miss Sallie, you see they all want to come," continued the major. "Don't, I beg of you, destroy their pleasure and my happiness by declining this request of my old age."

"Oh, do say yes, Aunt Sallie!" cried Ruth.

And still Miss Sallie hesitated. She had a curious smile on her face as she looked out over the hills and meadows beyond.

"It's an interesting old place, Sallie," continued the major. "It was built by my Dutch ancestors, a charming old house that has been added to from time to time. I would like to see it full of young faces once more. What do you say, Sallie? Won't you make us all happy? The boys and me, and the girls, too? For I can see

by their faces they are eager to come.”

“How far is it from here, John,” asked Miss Sallie, doubtfully. “Is it anywhere near those dreadful forest fires?”

“It is fifteen miles back in the country, and I have heard no rumor of any fires in that vicinity lately. The boys and I are leaving this afternoon. We will see that everything is ship-shape, and you and the girls could follow to-morrow. I have an excellent housekeeper. She and her husband were a young couple when I went away, and they have lived at the place ever since. I am certain she can make you comfortable. I will give Miss Ruth explicit directions about the route. It is a fairly good road for motoring. We have a fine place for dancing there, young ladies. There’s a famous floor in what, in my grandmother’s time, we used to call the red drawing-room. There are dozens of places for picnics, pretty valleys and creeks that I explored and knew intimately in my youth. I have some good horses in my stables, Miss Barbara, if you have a fancy for riding,” he continued, turning to Barbara with such grace of manner that she blushed for pleasure.

Looking from one eager face to another, and finally into the major’s kindly gray eyes, Miss Sallie melted into acquiescence and the party was made up forthwith.

The major then pointed out to Ruth and Barbara the street they were to take, which would lead to the road to his old home. He drew a map on a piece of paper, so that they could make no mistake.

“When you come to the crossroads,” he added, as a parting caution, “take the one with the bridge, which you can see beyond. The other road is roundabout and full of ruts besides.”

Just then the horn of an automobile was heard, as a large touring car containing four young men and a deal of baggage, drew up in front of the hotel. At the same time, Barbara, who was still facing the window, saw the figure on the other side of the curtain steal quietly away.

Major Ten Eyck went forward to meet the newcomers, and he and his two nephews had a little earnest conversation together for a few moments. The young men looked up, saw Miss Sallie and the girls, and all four caps came off simultaneously.

“Please don’t go yet,” called the major, as Miss Stuart rose to leave. “I want to introduce the boys first.”

Stephen and Martin Ten Eyck were handsome, sturdy youths, with clear cut

features. The two visitors were far different in type; one, Alfred Marsdale, a young English friend, who was spending the summer with the Ten Eycks, and the other, Jimmie Butler, who seemed to have come from nowhere in particular but to have been everywhere.

“And now come along, boys,” urged the major, after he had given the young people a chance to talk a few minutes. “These ladies want their ride, I know, and we must be off for the hall before it gets too hot for endurance.”

With a last caution to Ruth about the proper road to Ten Eyck Hall, and a reminder to Miss Stuart not to break her promise, the major ushered his boys into the hotel office, while “The Automobile Girls” went up to their rooms.

“Isn’t this perfectly jolly, girls?” called Ruth from the mirror as she pinned on her hat.

“De-lighted!” exclaimed Barbara and Mollie, joining the others.

“And listen, girly, dear! Did you scent a romance?” whispered Ruth.

“It certainly looked very much like one,” replied Barbara.

“They were engaged once,” continued Ruth, “but they had some sort of lovers’ quarrel. The poor major tried to make it up, but Aunt Sallie wouldn’t forgive him, and he went away and never came back, except for flying trips on business. Until to-day she has never seen or heard from him.”

“But she must have cared some, because she didn’t marry anyone else,” observed Mollie reflectively.

“I wonder what he did,” pondered Grace.

“Flirted with another girl,” answered Ruth. “Papa has often told me about it. Aunt Sallie had another lover, at the same time, who was very rich. She kept the two of them dangling on, and it was because she went driving with the other lover that Major Ten Eyck paid devoted attention to some other girl, one night at a ball. So they quarreled and separated.”

“Poor old major!” sighed tender-hearted Mollie.

“But she *did* have her rocking chair adventure after all,” laughed Barbara, as they started downstairs in obedience to Miss Sallie’s tap a few moments before.

The lovely vistas of valley and river, with intersecting hills, were softened into dream pictures by a transparent curtain of mist, which hid the parched look of the foliage from the long drought.

The five automobilists sped along over smooth roads between splendid estates. Most of the great houses were screened by stretches of thickly wooded parks, and each park was guarded by a lodge, after the English fashion. But there were plenty of charming old houses in full view of the passerby—rambling, comfortable homes set down on smooth lawns.

“How beautiful all this is!” sighed Mollie, as she leaned back in her seat and gazed down the long avenue of trees.

“Yes,” called Ruth over her shoulder. “I took the longest way to the church, because this road is so pretty.”

“Here’s the lane to Sleepy Hollow,” cried the ever-watchful Barbara, and the automobile turned into a country road that appeared to lead off into low-lying hills beyond.

“What is that cloud of dust behind us,” demanded Miss Sallie, looking back.

“It’s a man on a motor cycle,” replied Grace. “He is turning in here, too, but he is slowing up. I suppose he doesn’t want to give us a dusting. Rather nice of him, isn’t it?”

“Fancy a motor cycle and a headless horseman riding in the same lane,” observed Ruth.

“Well, if it came to a race,” replied Barbara, “I think I would take the motor cycle. They do go like the wind.”

“And the noise of them is so terrifying,” went on Ruth, “that the poor headless horseman would probably have been scared back to death again.”

Presently the girls came to a steep declivity in the land that seemed to dip and rise with equal suddenness.

“Is this the Hollow?” asked Mollie a little awed.

“This land is full of hollows, my dear,” answered Miss Sallie, who did not like uneven traveling. “We have been through several already, and, with that hobgoblin on an infernal machine coming after us, and all these dense forests packing us in on every side, and nothing but a lonesome churchyard in front of us, it seems to me we should have brought along some better protectors than two slips of girls.”

Here Miss Sallie paused in order to regain breath.

“I declare,” exclaimed Ruth, “I don’t know which one of these roads leads to the

churchyard. Of course we can explore both of them, but we don't want to miss seeing the old church, and we certainly don't want to miss lunch. It will be so cheerful picnicking in a graveyard."

The automobile stopped and the motor cycle, catching up with them just then, stopped also. The rider put his foot down to steady himself, and removing his black leather cap and glasses, bowed courteously to Miss Stuart.

"Is Madame looking for the ancient church?" he asked, in very excellent English with just a touch of accent.

The five women remembered, at once, that this was the stranger whom they had lately seen at breakfast. From closer quarters they saw that he was good-looking, not with the kind of looks they were accustomed to admire, but still undeniably handsome. His features had rather a haughty turn to them, and his black eyes had a melancholy look; but even the heavy leather suit he wore could not hide the graceful slenderness of his figure.

"Yes; we were looking for the church," replied Miss Sallie in a somewhat mollified tone, considering she had just called him a hobgoblin on an infernal machine. "Will you be good enough to tell us which one of these roads we must take?"

"If you will follow me," answered the stranger, "I also am going there. You will pardon me if I go in front? If you will wait a moment I will get somewhat ahead, so that madame and the other ladies will not be dusted."

"I must say he is rather a polite young man," admitted Miss Sallie, "if he is somewhat rapid in his movements."

"He is curiously good-looking," reflected Ruth. "Not exactly our kind, I should say; but, after all, he may be just foreign and different. Just because he is not an American type doesn't keep him from being nice."

All the time the foliage was getting more impenetrable. Tall trees reared themselves on either side of the road, seeming vanguards of the forests behind them. A cool, woodsy breeze touched their cheeks softly, and Barbara closed her eyes for a moment that she might feel the enchantment of the place.

"How many Dutch burghers and their wives must have driven up this same grassy road," she was thinking to herself. "How many wedding parties and funeral trains, too, for here is their graveyard. No wonder a traveler imagined he saw ghosts on this lonely road, with nothing but a cemetery and an old church to cheer him on his way. And here is our auto running in the very same ruts their

funny old carriages and rockaways must have made, and this stranger in front of us on something queerer still. I wonder if ghosts of the future will ride in phantom autos or on motor cycles. What a fearful sight! A headless man on an infernal machine——”

Her reflections were interrupted by the turning around of the automobile. Ruth had evidently decided to go back by the way they had come. Opening her eyes she saw before her a quaint and charming old church set in the midst of a rambling graveyard.

There also stood the black cyclist, like a gruesome sentinel among the tombs. He lifted his cap as they drew up, and, after hesitating a moment, came forward to open the door and help Miss Sallie alight.

“Permit me, Madam,” he said, with such grace of demeanor that the lady thanked him almost with effusion. Grace and Mollie were assisted as if they had been princesses of the blood, as they described it later, while the other two girls leaped to the ground before he had time to make any overtures in their direction.

There was rather an awkward pause, for a moment, as the stranger, with uncovered head, stood aside to let them pass. The silence was not broken and Miss Stuart chose to let it remain so.

“One cannot be too careful,” she had always said, “of chance acquaintances, especially men.” However, she was predisposed in favor of the cyclist, whose manners were exceptional.

The girls were strolling about among the graves, examining the stones with their quaint epitaphs, while the stranger leaned against a tree and lit a cigarette.

Miss Stuart, with her lorgnette, was making a survey of the church.

“From the account of the supper party at the Van Tassels’ in Sleepy Hollow,” said Ruth, “the early Dutch must have just about eaten themselves to death. Do you remember all the food there was piled on the table at the famous quilting party? Every kind of cake known to man, to begin with; or rather, Washington Irving began with cakes. Roast fowls and turkeys, hams and sausages, puddings and pies and the humming tea-urn in the midst of it.”

“I don’t think the women had such big appetites as the men,” observed Mollie. “At least Katrina Van Tassel is described as being very dainty, and I can’t imagine a pretty young girl working straight through such a bill of fare, and yet looking quite the same ever after.”

“But remember that they took lots of exercise,” put in Barbara, “of a kind we

know nothing about. All the Dutch girls were taught to scrub and polish and clean.”

“What were we doing when Ruth and Miss Sallie and Mr. Stuart arrived, Bab, I’d like to know?” interrupted Mollie indignantly. “Weren’t we rubbing the parlor furniture and polishing the floor?”

“Yes,” returned Barbara, “but you could put our entire house down in the parlor of one of those old Dutch farm houses, and still have room and to spare.”

“And think of all the copper kettles they had to keep polished,” added Grace.

“And the spinning they had to do,” said Ruth.

“And the cooking and butter making,” continued Bab. “Yes, Mistress Mollie, I think there’s some excuse for sausages and all the rest. And I am sure I could have forgiven Katrina if she ate everything in sight.”

“Ah, well,” replied Mollie, “no doubt she was fat at thirty!”

CHAPTER IV—A CRY FOR HELP

AS they talked the young girls wandered over the grassy sward of the churchyard and their voices grew fainter and fainter to the cyclist and Miss Sallie.

The latter had seated herself on the stump of an old tree and was busily engaged in re-reading her mail, at which she had glanced only carelessly that morning.

The air was very still and hot, and the hum of insects made a drowsy accompaniment to the songs of the birds. The cyclist had stretched himself at full length on the grass under an immense elm tree and was lazily blowing blue rings of smoke skywards.

Presently there broke upon the noonday stillness a cry for help. It was in a high, girlish voice—Mollie's in fact—and it was followed by others in quick succession.

Miss Stuart, scattering her mail on the ground in her fright, rushed in the direction of the cries, the cyclist close behind her.

On a knoll near the church the sight which met Miss Sallie's eyes almost made her knees give way. But she had a cool head in danger, in spite of her lavender draperies and pretended helplessness.

A tramp, who seemed to them all at the moment as big as a giant, with matted hair and beard and face swollen from drink, had seized Ruth and Barbara by the wrists with one of his enormous hands. A woman equally ragged in appearance was tugging at the fellow's other hand in an effort to quiet him.

As Miss Sallie ran toward the group she heard Barbara say quietly:

"Let go our wrists and we shall be glad to give you all the money we have with us."

"I tell you I want more money than that," said the man in a hoarse, terrible voice. "I want enough money to keep me for the rest of my days. Do you think I like to sleep on the ground and eat bread and water? I tell you I want my rights. Why

should you be rich and me poor? Why should you be dressed in silks while my wife wears rags?"

As he raved, he jerked his hand away from the woman, almost throwing her forward in his violence, and gesticulated wildly.

The two girls were both very pale and calm, but the poor tramp woman was crying bitterly.

Barbara's lips were moving, but she said nothing, and only Mollie knew it was her mother's prayer she was repeating.

"Don't be frightened, young ladies," sobbed the woman, "I will see that no harm comes to you, even if he kills me."

"Do you call this a free country," continued the tramp, "when there are thousands of people like me who have no houses and must beg for food? I would like to kill all the rich men in this country and turn their children loose to beg and steal, as we must do to get a living! Do you think I would ever have come to this pass if a rich man had not brought me to it? Do you think I was always a tramp like this, and my wife yonder a tramp, too?"

At this point the drunken wretch began to cry, but he still held the two girls tightly by the wrists.

"I tell you I'll take a ransom for you and nothing less. I'll get out of the world all it's taken from me, and your father will have to do the paying. Come on!" he cried in a tone of command, to his trembling wife.

At this critical moment Miss Stuart and the motor cyclist came running to the scene.

There was a look of immense relief on Miss Sallie's face when she saw the courteous stranger at her heels. She had been about to speak, but was silent.

"Oh, ho!" cried the tramp, "so you've got a protector, have you? Well, come on! I'll fight the whole lot of you, women and men, too, and with one hand, at that!"

He loomed up like a giant beside the small, slender cyclist, but he was a drunken giant nevertheless and not prepared for what was about to happen.

However, at first, it appeared to them all that a little persuasion might be better than force.

"If you will let the young ladies go, my good man," said the cyclist, "you will not regret it. You will be well paid. I would advise you to take a sensible view of

the matter. You cannot kidnap us all, and it would not take long to get help. Would you prefer a long term in jail to a sum of money?" And the cyclist drew a leather wallet from his coat pocket.

"You think you are mighty smart, young man," sneered the tramp, "but I can kidnap all of you, and nobody ever be the wiser. Do you think I'd let a chance like this go? My pals are right over there." He pointed with his free hand to the woods back of him.

"You will be sorry," said the cyclist.

With an oath, the tramp put his finger to his mouth and gave a long, shrill whistle.

But in that moment he was off his guard, and the cyclist leaped upon him like a leopard on a lion. One swift blow under the jaw and down tumbled the giant as Goliath fell before David.

The poor woman, who was crouching in terror behind a tree, jumped to her feet.

"Run!" she cried in a frightened whisper. "Run for your lives!"

The cyclist seized Miss Sallie by the arm.

"She is right. It is better to run. The others may be coming."

And they did run. Terror seemed to lend wings to their feet. Even Miss Stuart, assisted by their rescuer, fled over the grass as swiftly as her charges.

Ruth and Barbara reached the automobile first. In an instant Ruth had cranked up the machine while Barbara opened the door.

Another moment, and they were off down the road, the black-clad cyclist following. Glancing back, they saw two other rough-looking men helping their comrade to rise to his feet. Then they disappeared in the woods while the woman, with many anxious backward glances, followed her companions.

Nobody spoke for some time. The girls were too much terrified by the narrow escape to trust to their voices. The bravest women will weep after a danger is past, and all five of these women were very near the point of tears.

Presently the cyclist came up alongside of the automobile, which had slowed down somewhat when they reached the main road.

"I will go ahead and inform the police," he called over his shoulder, "but I fear it will not be of much use. Men like that will scatter and hide themselves at the first alarm."

Miss Sallie smiled at him gratefully. Touching his cap, which was fastened under his chin with a strap and could not be lifted without some inconvenience, the stranger shot ahead and soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Miss Sallie was thinking deeply. She wished that Major Ten Eyck and the boys had not left the hotel that morning. She felt need of the strong support of the opposite sex. She felt also the responsibility of being at the head of her party of young girls.

Should they dare start off again next day into the wilderness after such an experience? Of course, as long as they were in the automobile, going at full speed, nothing could stop them except a puncture, and punctures on country roads were not as frequent as they were on city streets. What would her brother say? Would he sanction such a trip after this fearful experience? And still she hesitated.

The truth was, Miss Stuart was as eager as the girls to accept the invitation that had been so unexpectedly made. She did not wish to revive the romance of her youth, but she did have an overweening desire to see the ancestral home of her old lover, and to talk with him on the thousand subjects that spring up when two old friends come together after many years.

It was, therefore, with half-hearted vehemence that she said to the four rather listless girls:

“My dears, don’t you think it would be very dangerous for us to go over to Major Ten Eyck’s, to-morrow, after this fearful attack?”

Everybody looked relieved that somebody had had the courage to say the first word.

“Dear auntie, we’ll leave it entirely to you,” replied Ruth. “Although, I don’t believe we are likely to be kidnapped as long as we keep the automobile going. The fastest running tramp in Christendom couldn’t keep up with us, even when we’re going at an ordinary rate. From what Major Ten Eyck said, the road is pretty good. We ought to get there in an hour, since it’s only fifteen miles from here, and the last mile or so is on his estate.”

The other girls said nothing, it being a matter for the chaperon to settle.

“Very well, my dear,” answered Miss Sallie, acquiescing so suddenly that the others almost smiled in spite of the seriousness of their feelings at the moment. “But I do feel that we had a narrow escape this morning. If it had not been for the young man on the motor cycle I tremble to think what would have been the

consequences. And I certainly believe if we are not going back to New York, the sooner we get into the society of some male protectors the better for us. I am sorry that fifteen miles separate us. I wish those boys had thought to motor back and get us to-morrow.”

“Oh, well,” observed Barbara, “fifteen miles is a mere bagatelle, when you come to think of it. Why, we shall be there before we know it.”

CHAPTER V—THE MOTOR CYCLIST

By this time the automobile had reached the hotel. Miss Sallie led the way to the dining room and they formed rather a weak-kneed procession, for they were beginning to experience that all-gone feeling that comes after a fright.

The luncheon hamper full of good things had been carried back into the hotel, since there had been neither time nor opportunity for the picnic party the girls had planned.

“I think a little food is what we really need, now,” exclaimed Ruth. “Cheer up, Mollie and Grace. Bab, smile for the ladies. It’s all over. Here we are, safe, and we are going to have a beautiful time at Major Ten Eyck’s. Please, dear friends, don’t begin to take this gloomy view of life. As for the anarchist person who attacked us in the woods, you may depend upon it that he and his friends are so frightened they will be running in an opposite direction from Tarrytown for another week. As for the foreign young man who stepped up to the rescue, he should certainly be thanked.”

Ruth had by nature a happy temperament. She quickly threw off small troubles, and depression in others made her really unhappy.

“It was truly a daring deed,” replied Barbara, “and all the more daring considering that the tramp would have made about two of the cyclist. But the blow he gave was as swift and sure as a prize fighter’s.”

“Did you notice that the poor woman was rather pretty?” commented Mollie.

“My dear child,” cried Miss Sallie, “I really believe you would notice people’s looks on the way to your own execution. Now, for my part, I could not see anything. I was almost too frightened to breathe. I felt that I should faint at any moment.”

“Why, Aunt Sallie, you are more frightened now than you were then,” exclaimed her niece. “You were as calm as the night. As for Grace, she looked like a scared rabbit. Mollie, darling, I’m glad you had the presence of mind to scream. If you hadn’t Aunt Sallie and the motor cyclist might have looked for us in vain.”

While she was speaking the cyclist came into the dining-room.

As soon as Miss Stuart saw him she rose from the table in her most stately manner and walked over to meet him.

“Sir,” she said, and Ruth gave the merest flicker of a blink at Bab, “you did a very brave thing to-day, and I want to thank you for all of us. If you had not been there my niece and her friend would undoubtedly have been kidnapped. You perhaps saved their lives. They might have been killed by those ruffians. Won’t you give us your name and address? My brother, I am sure, would like to write to you himself. We shall be indebted to you always.”

The young man’s face flushed with embarrassment.

“It was nothing, I assure you, Madam,” he replied. “It was easy because the man was intoxicated. He went over at the first blow. My name,” he continued, “is Martinez. José Martinez. My address is the Waldorf, New York.”

“I am Miss Stuart,” said Miss Sallie, “and I would like to present you to my niece, Miss Ruth Stuart, and her friends Miss Grace Carter and Misses Barbara and Mollie Thurston. It would give us great pleasure if you would lunch with us, Mr. Martinez.”

“When a man saves your life you certainly can’t stand on ceremony,” commented Miss Sallie to herself.

An animated discussion followed. Mr. Martinez had been to see the chief of police, he said, who would call on Miss Stuart that afternoon, if convenient. He could not offer any hope, however, of catching the men.

Miss Sallie replied that, for her part, she hoped they wouldn’t take the creatures. It would do no good and she did not want to spend any time cooped up in a court room in such scorching weather. But did Mr. Martinez think it would be dangerous for them to take a trip up into the hills the next day?

“It would depend upon the road,” replied Mr. Martinez. “That is, if the trip were taken by automobile. Of course my motor cycle can run on any road.”

“It is a good road,” replied Ruth. “At the crossroads there is a bad road; but, fortunately, we do not have to take it, since the new road with the bridge has been opened up, so Major Ten Eyck says.”

In which case Mr. José Martinez was of a mind with the young ladies that the trip would be perfectly safe.

Miss Sallie gave a sigh of relief. If this estimable young man sanctioned the trip

she felt they might take it with clear consciences. But she did hope her brother's views on the subject would be the same.

Then the talk drifted into other channels.

"You are a Spaniard, I presume, Mr. Martinez?" questioned Miss Sallie.

"Yes, Madam, a Spaniard by birth, a Frenchman by education and at present an American by choice. I have lived in England, also, but I believe I prefer America to all other countries, even my own."

Miss Stuart was much gratified at this avowal. She felt that in complimenting America he was complimenting her indirectly.

"Have you seen the Alhambra and the Rock of Gibraltar?" demanded Mollie, her wide, blue eyes full of interest.

"Oh, yes, Mademoiselle," replied the handsome Spaniard, smiling at her gently, "I have seen the Alhambra many times, and Gibraltar once only." A curious shade passed over his face as if Gibraltar held memories which he was not anxious to revive.

"Does the Rock of Gibraltar really look like a lion?" asked Grace, who had not noticed his distaste to the mere mention of the name.

"I do not know, Mademoiselle," he replied shortly. "I saw it only from land. I was," he added hesitatingly, "very ill when I was there."

The waiter announced the chief of police to see Miss Sallie, and the luncheon party adjourned to the shady side of the piazza.

All this time Barbara had been very quiet, so quiet, indeed, that Ruth had asked her in a whisper, as they left the dining room, if she were still feeling the shock of the morning.

"Oh, no," replied Barbara, "I am simply trying to stifle a ridiculous fear I have that, maybe, we ought not to go to-morrow. It is absurd, so please don't mention it to the others, especially as even Miss Sallie thinks it safe, and little coward Mollie is not afraid."

"You are just tired, poor dear," said sympathetic Ruth. "Come along up to your room, and we shall have a little 'relaxation,' as my old colored mammy used to say. We'll spend a quiet afternoon in our rooms, and at sunset we can take a spin along the river bank before supper. What do you say?"

"I am agreeable," replied Bab.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Martinez,” said Ruth, as the others came up. “You will be wanting to take your siesta now, I suppose. Siestas, in Spain, are like afternoon tea in England, aren’t they? Here in America we don’t have either, much, but I think we shall need both to-day. Perhaps we shall see you at dinner?”

“If I may have that pleasure,” replied the Spaniard, bowing low.

“Strangers of the morning are friends in the afternoon, in this, our life of adventure,” laughed Ruth as they passed along the corridor to the steps.

But they did not see the stranger again that day. For some mysterious reason he left the hotel in the afternoon, and did not return until nearly midnight, when Barbara, who happened to be awake, heard him whistling softly as he went down the hall to his room.

CHAPTER VI—A FOREST SCRIMMAGE

It was really Miss Sallie Stuart's fault that they were so late in starting the next day to Major Ten Eyck's home.

The automobile had been ordered to be on hand immediately after an early luncheon, but another call from one of the town police caused the first delay.

The tramps had securely hidden themselves, the officer said, and no trace of them had been found in other towns in that vicinity.

The second delay was caused by a telegram from Miss Stuart's dressmaker, stating that a dress had been expressed to her which would reach Tarrytown that morning. Bab and Mollie were also expecting an express package of fresh clothes and their organdie dresses, which they felt, now, they would assuredly need.

Consequently the party waited patiently for these ever-necessary feminine adornments, and it was four o'clock before the girls started.

A third delay was caused by the puncture of a tire just as they were leaving the hotel. Now they were obliged to go to the nearest garage and have it repaired, which consumed another three quarters of an hour.

However, it was pleasanter riding in the cool of the afternoon, and they still hoped to reach Ten Eyck Hall long before dark. It was a very gay party that finally took the road, swathed in chiffon veils and dusters.

"I never felt so much interested in a visit as I do in this one," remarked Ruth. "Certainly we ought to be glad to get there after all these mishaps and delays."

Barbara was still in her silent humor. She sat with her small handbag clasped tightly on her knees and looked straight before her, as though she were watching for something.

"Bab, my child, what is it?" asked Ruth. "You have been in a brown study all day."

"Nothing at all, dear," replied Bab, smiling. "Perhaps this haziness goes to my

head a little. But I am awfully glad, too, about the visit. I always wanted to see an old colonial house, and the only way really is to stay in it. If we have the run of the rooms, and all the halls and galleries, we can get to know it much more intimately than if we were just sight-seers being conducted through by an aged housekeeper.”

Meanwhile, on the back seat, Miss Sallie was in a reminiscent mood. It was very agreeable to her to hark back to the joyous days of her youth, for Miss Stuart had been a belle, and the two girls were listening with pleasure to her accounts of the gallant major, who had been graduated from West Point ahead of time in order to join the army during the Civil War.

The conversation was interrupted by the sudden stoppage of the automobile at the crossroads, one of which led straight into the woods, while the other branched off into the open, crossing the now dry bed of a river spanning which was the new bridge.

“This is the right road, of course,” said Ruth, taking the one with the bridge.

“Wait!” cried Barbara. “There’s something stretched across the bridge.”

Sure enough, a rope blocked all passage over the bridge, which was quite a long one. Secured to the rope with cords was a plank on which was painted:

“DANGEROUS: TAKE THE OTHER ROAD!”

“The paint on the sign is still sticky,” exclaimed Barbara who had jumped out and run over to take a good look at it. “And the bridge is broken. There is a large hole, like a gash, on one side, and another further down.”

“How remarkable!” replied Ruth. “It must have happened some time this morning. I do not suppose Major Ten Eyck knows anything about it, or he would have let us know. I’ll back up, anyway, to the crossroads, and we can decide what to do. We could go on, I suppose. The major said the other road passed his front gate, but it was a longer one and not such good traveling. What do you say, Aunt Sallie? Speak up, girls, are you all agreed?”

Miss Sallie was much troubled. She wanted to go and she did not want to go, and her mind was in a turmoil.

Bab was silent, and Grace and Mollie looked ready for anything.

“Well,” said Miss Sallie, after a moment’s reflection, “it is very dangerous and very venturesome; but, having got thus far, let us proceed on our way.” She folded her hands resignedly, like a martyred saint.

“Then off we go!” cried Ruth. The automobile rolled into the wooded road that penetrated a deeper part of the forest.

The dense shade was a relief after the open, dusty country. Tall trees interlaced their branches overhead and the ground was carpeted with fern and bracken.

But an uneasiness had come upon the automobilists. They did not attempt to explain it, for there was no apparent cause. The road was excellent so far, smooth and level; but something was in the air. Miss Sallie was the first to break the silence.

“I am terribly frightened,” she admitted, in a low voice. “We must have been bewitched to have attempted this ride. Ruth, my dear, I beg of you to turn and go back. I feel that we are running into danger.”

Ruth slowed up the machine a little, and called over her shoulder:

“You are right, Aunt Sallie, but I am afraid we can’t turn just yet, because there isn’t room. Anyway, we may be nearer to the other end of the wood by this time.”

The car sped on again, only to stop with such a sudden jerk, in the very depths of the forest, that the machinery ceased to whirl and in a moment was silent.

For a few moments all hands sat perfectly still, dumb with terror and amazement.

Across the road was stretched another rope. There was no sign board on it to tell them there was danger ahead, but the girls needed none. They felt that there was danger ahead, behind, and all around them. They knew they were in a trap, and that the danger that threatened them would make itself known all too soon.

Barbara had whispered to Ruth.

“Back up as fast as you can!”

Ruth had replied in another whisper:

“I can’t before I crank up.”

Regaining her nerve, Ruth was about to leap to the ground when she saw, and the four others saw at the same moment, the figure of a man standing by a tree at the roadside. It would seem that he had been standing there all along, but so still and motionless that he might have been one of the trees themselves. And for two reasons he was a terrifying spectacle: one because his features were entirely concealed by a black mask, the other because he carried in one hand a gleaming

and remarkably sharp looking knife, a kind of dagger, the blade slightly curved and pointed at the end, the silver handle chased all over in an intricate design.

To her dying day Bab would never forget the picture he made.

He wore a dark green velveteen suit, like a huntsman's, and a felt hat with a hanging brim that covered his head.

"Pardon me, ladies," he said in a curious, false voice, "but I must request you to keep your places."

Ruth, who was poised just over the step, fell back beside Barbara, who had maintained her position, and sat with blanched cheeks and tightly closed lips.

The highwayman then deliberately slashed all four tires with his murderous looking weapon. At each explosion Miss Sallie gave a stifled groan.

"Do not cry out, Madam," said the robber sternly, "or it will go hard with you."

"Be still," whispered little Mollie, bravely taking Miss Stuart's hand and patting it gently.

"And now, ladies," continued the man more politely, "I must ask you to put all your money and jewelry in a pile here. Stand up," he said to Barbara. "Put it on this seat and leave out nothing or you will regret it."

The five women began mechanically to remove what simple jewelry they happened to be wearing, for the most part pins, rings, bracelets and watches, the latter Ruth's and Grace's. Then came the pocket books, Mollie's little blue silk knitted purse topping the pyramid.

"But this is not all your money," said the robber impatiently. "Do not delay. It is getting late."

"I have some more in my bag," said Ruth faintly. "Mollie, it is on the back seat. Will you hand it to me?"

Mollie searched with trembling hands for the bag which was stored somewhere under the seat.

"And have you nothing in that bag?" asked the highwayman, turning roughly to Barbara.

She did not answer at first. Her lips were moving silently and the others thought she must be praying. Only Mollie knew she was repeating, for the second time since they had left home, the words her mother had taught her: "Heaven make me calm in the face of danger."

The highwayman laid his hand on the bag, flourishing his knife in a menacing way.

“Wait,” she said calmly, looking at him with such contempt that his eyes dropped before her.

Placing the bag on Ruth’s lap, Bab slowly opened it, fumbled inside for a moment and drew out a small pistol.

It caught a last ray of the setting sun, which had filtered through the trees and gleamed dangerously, in spite of its miniature size.

Barbara pointed it deliberately at the robber, with a steady hand, and said quietly:

“Drop that knife and run unless you want me to shoot you!”

The robber stared at her in amazement.

“Quick!” she said and gave the trigger an ominous click.

The pistol was pointed straight at his midwaist.

“Drop the knife,” repeated Barbara, “and back off.”

He dropped the knife and started backward down the road.

“Now, run!” cried Barbara. And the highwayman turned and walked swiftly until he was out of sight.

“There’s no time to be lost,” cried Barbara. The other four women sat as if in a trance. Their deliverance had been so unexpected that they were still suffering from the shock.

Miss Sallie began to wring her hands in frantic despair.

“Girls, girls!” she wept, “I have brought you to this pass! What shall we do? The man is sure to come back. We can’t stay here all night! Oh mercy! why did I ever consent to take this dangerous trip? It’s all my fault!”

Drop That Knife and Run!
Drop That Knife and Run!

“Don’t cry, Aunt Sallie, dearest! It’s everybody’s fault, and you mustn’t waste your strength,” urged Ruth, trying to comfort her aunt, whose nerves had had about all they could endure by now. “What do you think we’d better do?” continued Ruth, turning to Barbara, who, with her pistol was keeping watch at

the back of the automobile.

“I think we shall have to walk,” replied Barbara. “There is no other way, and we must start at once, before it gets dark. Ruth, you and Grace help Miss Sallie. Mollie, put all the valuables on the seat into my bag. There is no time to divide them now. We had better not try to carry anything except the small bags.”

The little company seemed to feel a kind of relief in submitting itself to Barbara’s direction. Each doing as she was bid, they started down the wood road, leaving the car with all their baggage behind them.

Miss Sallie had recovered her composure. The necessity of moving quickly, had taken her mind off the situation for the present, and she walked at as brisk a pace as did the girls.

Barbara had directed Mollie to walk a little in front and to keep a sharp lookout, while Bab brought up the rear and watched the sides of the road as vigilantly as a guard in war time, her pistol cocked, ready to defend and fight for her friends and sister to her last breath.

Presently curiosity got the better of Ruth.

“Bab,” she asked, “where on earth did you get that pistol?”

“From your father,” answered Bab. “That was the secret. Don’t you remember? But we must not risk talking now. The quieter we are the better. Voices carry in these woods.”

“You are quite right, Bab, dear,” replied Ruth, under her breath, and not another word was spoken.

Each one was engaged in her own thoughts as the silent procession moved swiftly on.

Miss Sallie was wondering whether they would ever see morning alive.

Grace, who was very devout, was praying softly to herself.

Ruth, in the innermost depths of her mind, was secretly enjoying the whole adventure, dangerous as it was.

Mollie was feeling homesick for her mother, while Bab had no time for any thought than the one that the highwayman might appear at any moment, and from any direction. Who knew but that he had turned and doubled on them, and would spring at them from the next tree?

Presently Mollie, who was a few feet in advance of the others, paused.

“Look!” she whispered as the others came up. “I see the light of a fire through the trees. I hear voices, too.”

Sure enough, through the interlacing branches of the trees, they could distinctly see the glow of a large fire.

“Wait,” exclaimed Bah under her breath. “Stand here at the side of the road, where you will be hidden. Perhaps we may find help at last.” Creeping cautiously among the trees she disappeared in the darkness. It seemed an age to the others, waiting on the edge of the narrow woodland road, but it was only a few minutes, in reality, before Bab was back again.

“They are Gypsies,” she whispered. “I can tell by their wagons and tents.”

“Gypsies!” exclaimed Miss Sallie, with a tragic gesture of both hands. “We shall all be murdered as well as robbed!”

“No, no,” protested Mollie. “I have a friend who is a Gypsy. This may be her tribe. Suppose I go and see. Let me go. Now, Bab,” as her sister touched her with a detaining hand, “I want to do something.”

And little Mollie, with set lips and pale cheeks, her courageous heart throbbing with repressed excitement, stole off into the dense shadows of the forest.

It seemed another age before the stillness was broken again by the sound of crackling underbrush, and Mollie’s figure was gradually outlined in the blackness.

“I couldn’t tell,” she said. “They seemed to be only men sitting around the fire smoking. I was afraid to get any nearer for fear one of them might be the robber. They say Gypsies can be very kind, but I think it would be better if we all went together and asked for help, if we go at all. The men looked very fierce,” she added faintly, slipping her hand into her sister’s for sympathy.

“Dearest little sister,” whispered Bab, kissing her, “don’t ever say again you are a coward.”

Then two persons emerged from between the trees on the other side of the road.

The five women held their breath in fear and suspense as the figures approached, evidently without having seen these women standing in the shadow. They were close enough now for the automobilists to make out that they were two women, one young and the other old apparently.

Suddenly, with a cry of joy and relief, Mollie sprang upon the elder of the two women, threw her arms about the stranger’s neck and burst into uncontrollable

sobs.

“O Granny Ann, Granny Ann!” cried Mollie. “At the very time we needed your help most you have come to us. I hoped and prayed it was your tribe, but I couldn’t tell. There were only men.”

The old Gypsy woman patted Mollie’s cheek tenderly, while the little girl sobbed out the story of their evening’s adventure.

The others had been so surprised at Mollie’s sudden outburst that they stood silently by without interrupting the story; but all felt that a light was beginning to break on what a short time before had looked like a hopeless situation.

Granny Ann, the sixty years of whose life had been spent in wandering over many countries, was as unperturbed as if they had met by appointment. Her companion, a young Gypsy girl, stood quietly by without speaking a word.

“The ladies will be safe with us,” said the old Gypsy, taking them all in with a comprehensive sweep of her small beady eyes; “as safe as if they were in their own homes. I have had shelter and food from the young lady, and a Gypsy never forgets a kindness. Come with me,” she added, with a commanding gesture, and led the way to the encampment.

The Gypsy girl brought up the rear and the others trailed along in between, Ruth and Grace still assisting Miss Sallie over the rough places.

When they reached the camp the four Gypsy men, picturesquely grouped around the fire, rose to their feet and looked curiously but imperturbably at the party of women.

Granny Ann called a grizzled old man from the fireside speaking rapidly in a strange language, her own Romany tongue, in fact. After conferring with him a few moments, she turned to Miss Sallie.

“My rom,” she said (which in Gypsy language means husband), “thinks you had better stay here to-night. It would not be easy to find the gentleman’s house on such a dark night, but we can make you comfortable in one of our tents. He and the other men will take the horses and draw the steam carriage down the road until it is near enough to be guarded—if one of the young ladies will show the way. There is no danger,” she continued, sternly, as Miss Sallie began to protest at the idea of one of her girls going off with all those strange men. “A Gypsy does not repay a kindness with a blow. Come,” she called to the men, “that young lady will show the way.” And she pointed at Barbara, who had slipped the pistol into her belt, and was talking to Ruth in a low voice.

Miss Sallie explained to the girls what Granny Ann had decided was the best course for them to take, while the four men untethered the four lean horses and half-harnessed them, and the old Gypsy man gathered some coils of rope together.

Ruth insisted on accompanying Barbara, and the two girls led the way through the wood to the road, the men following with the horses.

They found the automobile exactly as it had been left, save in one particular. The murderous-looking dagger was gone. But the suit cases and numerous dress boxes were untouched.

The girls waited at one side while the Gypsies secured the ropes to the car and then to the collars of the horses. Two Gypsies walked on either side, holding the reins, while the other two ran to the back and began to push the machine. The horses strained at the ropes; then in an instant the automobile was moving easily, urged from the back and pulled from the front like a stubborn mule.

When the girls again reached that part of the road opposite the camp, the caravan came to a full stop.

Ruth directed that all the cushions be carried to the tent, together with the steamer rugs stored under the seats, the tea-basket and other luggage. The dismantled automobile was then left for the night.

Ruth and Bab found Miss Sallie waiting at the tent, a tragic figure in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII—A NIGHT WITH THE GYPSIES

“I think we shall be comfortable enough, Aunt Sallie,” said her niece, after their belongings had been deposited in the tent. “We will fix you a nice bed, auntie, dearest, with steamer rugs and your rubber air cushion, and for the first time in your life you will be almost sleeping under the stars.”

But poor Miss Sallie only smiled in reply. She was too weary and exhausted to trust the sound of her own voice, now that danger was over and they had found protectors.

While Grace and Ruth arranged three beds inside the tent (Ruth and Bab having joyfully elected to sleep just outside) the two sisters made tea and opened up boxes of tea biscuits and Swiss chocolate which were always kept in the provision basket for emergencies.

Granny Ann had offered them food, but they had courteously declined, remembering tales they had heard of the unclean Gypsy, and giving as an excuse that they had a light supper with them. “Very light indeed,” commented Ruth later; “but I don’t think we’ll starve.”

“Now that everything is comfy,” observed Grace, “I, for one, think it is great fun. Our little house in the woods! For one night, it is almost as good as the cabin in the Berkshires.”

“Yes, for one night; but give me a roof when the rain comes,” cried Ruth.

“You are safe for to-night, at any rate, Ruth,” said Barbara, looking up at the sky through the branches of the tall forest trees. “There’s not a cloud, even as small as a man’s hand. And how bright the stars are! There comes the harvest moon. It looks like a great, red lantern.”

“Money, money!” cried Mollie excitedly.

“What is the matter with you, child?” said Miss Sallie, startled into finding her voice at last.

“Didn’t you see it?” said Mollie. “It was a splendid shooting star. It had a tail

that reached halfway across the heavens. Don't you know that, if you remember to say 'money, money, money,' before it fades out of sight or goes wherever it disappears to——”

“Oh, mother, where do the shooting stars go?” laughed Ruth, breaking in upon Mollie—“you will inherit a large sum of money,” continued Mollie.

“We shall be sleeping at the feet of an heiress, then,” said Bab. “Or did the star fade out before you had finished, Molliekins?”

“I don't know,” replied Mollie. “I was so excited that I forgot to look.”

By this time tea was ready and a rug had been spread in front of the tent for the guests to sit upon. Miss Sallie with her air cushion between her shoulders and the trunk of a tree that spread its branches over the tent, was beginning to feel that life, after all, held a number of pleasant things, including a certain favorite blend of tea that was as delicious, fragrant and expensive as heart could wish.

The night breeze touched their faces gently, and the stillness and sweet scents of the woods soothed them into forgetfulness of their troubles. While they sipped their tea and talked, in subdued voices, of the mystery of the forest at night, the Gypsy girl crept up and gazed curiously, almost wistfully, at them.

“Do have some chocolate,” called Ruth, as she held the box toward the girl. “Come over and sit down, won't you? What is your name?”

“My name is Zerlina,” replied the Gypsy, as she nibbled gingerly at a piece of chocolate.

“And is Granny Ann your mother?” asked Ruth.

“She is my grandmother,” replied Zerlina. “My mother died many years ago.”

Ruth looked at her sympathetically. They had, she thought, at least one thing in common in their widely separated circumstances.

“Would you like,” she asked gently, “to live in a city and go to school?”

For a moment Zerlina's face flushed with a deep glow of color. Her eyes traveled from one to another of the automobile party. She noted their refined, well-bred faces, their dainty dresses, the luxurious pile of long silk coats and chiffon veils. Nothing escaped the child, not even the elegant little tea basket with its fittings of silver and French china.

“There are times when I hate this life,” Zerlina said finally, turning to Ruth, who was watching her curiously. “There are times in the winter when we have been

too poor to go far enough South to keep warm. It is then that I would like the city and the warm houses. But my grandmother is very strict.”

She paused and bit her lip. She had spoken so fiercely that the girls had felt somewhat embarrassed at their own prosperity. “But,” continued Zerlina in a quieter tone, “when summer comes, I would rather be here in the woods. Gypsies do not live in houses,” she went on a little proudly. “My grandmother has told me that they have been wanderers for thousands of years. They do not go to school. They teach each other. My grandmother has taught me to read and write. She was taught by her mother, who was adopted and educated by a noble lady. But she came back to the Gypsies afterwards.”

“And your mother?” asked Mollie.

“My mother is dead,” returned Zerlina, and closed her lips tightly, as if to block all further inquiries in that direction.

“It is very interesting!” exclaimed Ruth. “And your education is then really inherited from your great-grandmother.”

“Yes,” assented the girl, “but I have inherited more than that—from my mother.”

The girls waited for Zerlina to finish. They hesitated to question her about her mother since it was evidently a forbidden subject with her.

“I have inherited her voice,” she added confidentially. “It may be that I shall be a singer some day.”

“Oh, really?” cried all the girls in unison.

“You will sing for us now, won’t you?” added Ruth.

“If you wish,” said Zerlina. “I will get my guitar.” And she disappeared in the darkness.

“Isn’t she pretty?” commented Mollie.

“How soft her voice is, and what good English she speaks,” marveled Ruth. “But then, we must remember her great-grandmother was educated by a noble lady and transmitted her learning and manners straight to her.”

“Poor thing!” exclaimed Bab. “I am really very sorry for her. The instincts of her great-grandmother and her grandmother keep up a sort of warring inside of her. In the winter time she’s her great-grandmother, and in the summer time she’s a real Gypsy. There are times when she sighs for a steam-heated house, and times when she sighs for the open.”

“But it’s mostly the open she gets,” said Grace. “What do you suppose she meant when she said that Granny Ann was very strict?”

“I can’t imagine,” replied Ruth, “unless Granny Ann refuses to allow her to buy herself a warm house. Seriously, though, I should like to do something for a girl like Zerlina. She strikes me as being far from ordinary. But here she comes. We will hear her sing first. This beggar girl may be a future prima-donna.”

Zerlina emerged from the darkness, with an old guitar, and, sitting crosslegged on the ground, began to thrum an accompaniment. Then she sang in a deep, rich voice a song of the Gypsies. The song was in Spanish and the beat of the music was so weird and insistent that the listeners could hardly restrain themselves from joining hands and dancing in time to the rhythm.

They were thrilled by the romance of the Gypsy camp and the charm of the girl’s singing. When she had finished they begged for more, and Zerlina was about to comply when a voice called her from the encampment. It was her grandmother’s, and what she said was not understood, since it was in the Romany language. But the girl leaped hurriedly to her feet.

“I will not sing again to-night,” she said. “The ladies are tired. Another time. Good-night,” And she slipped away in the darkness.

“Granny Ann is strict,” said Ruth. “You wouldn’t think she would object to Zerlina’s associating with a few girls her own age. I wonder why she doesn’t like to have her sing? Perhaps she is afraid she will run away, some day, and go on the stage.”

“I wish I had her beautiful voice,” sighed Grace. “Think what it could be made with proper training.”

“If she does not coarsen in feature, as so many of these dark women do,” observed Miss Sallie, “she will be very handsome some day.”

“And now for our lowly beds,” cried Ruth. “Barbara, you and I will sleep at the door of the tent like faithful slaves guarding their noble ladies. Nobody need be afraid. Granny Ann has promised to have a Gypsy man keep watch, and I have pinned my faith to Granny Ann. I believe she’s a woman of her word.”

“Mollie, you seem to be on such friendly terms with these people. What is your opinion?” asked Miss Sallie.

“I believe we shall be as safe as if we were in our own homes,” replied Mollie. “Granny Ann will keep faith with us. You will see. Perhaps she wouldn’t if she didn’t feel under obligations for a few sandwiches and lemonades, and things

that I have made for her occasionally in the summer on hot days. But I know she's a kind of queen in the tribe, and used to being obeyed."

Fifteen minutes had hardly slipped past when Miss Sallie and "The Automobile Girls" were sound asleep, Bab with her pistol at her side.

CHAPTER VIII—THE HAUNTED POOL

To be awakened early in the morning by the songs of birds and innumerable woodland sounds, and find one's self in the very center of a forest, is no common experience. To the girls, as they looked up through the leafy canopies, and then across the green aisles formed by trees that looked as if they might have stood there since the beginning of time—it was all very wonderful.

"How beautiful this is!" exclaimed each one, as she opened her eyes upon the wooded scene.

"Girls," cried Ruth, "I wouldn't have missed this for worlds! No wonder Zerlina hates to live in a house in the summer time. Isn't this fun? Shall we go over there and wash our faces in that little brook!"

Off they scampered, a curious procession for the deep woods, each with a burden of toilet articles, soaps and sponges, wash rags, mirrors and brushes.

"Well," exclaimed Miss Sallie Stuart as she knelt beside the stream and dipped her hands into its cool depths, "I never expected to come to this; but it is very refreshing, nevertheless."

"This is Nature's bathtub, auntie, dear. We should be thankful to have it so near. I suppose that is the reason the Gypsies chose this spot to camp in," said Ruth.

"My dear child," replied her aunt, "I know very little about the Gypsy race; but I do know one thing: that a Gypsy never took advantage of any kind of a bathtub, wooden, tin, porcelain or Nature's."

The girls all laughed joyously.

The fright of the day before had not left a very deep impression. Sleep and a feeling of safety had almost effaced it.

Presently they were back at the tent making tea and boiling eggs supplied by Granny Ann from the Gypsy larder. Ruth wanted to build a fire, but they decided that the ground was too dry to risk it. The Gypsies had dug a small trench all around their camp fire. If they had not, those splendid old woods would have

been in serious danger of burning, explained Barbara, who had been reading a great deal in the papers about forest fires.

It was arranged, after breakfast, that one of the men should ride over with a note to Major Ten Eyck's, asking the major to send for them at once, and also to dispatch his chauffeur to mend the slashed tires.

The Gypsy camp had been astir long before the automobilists arose, and the men were now sitting at their ease around the clearing, smoking silently, while Granny Ann and two other women were moving about the tents, "cleaning up," as Ruth expressed it.

"They have a lovely chance to learn housework," said Grace. "But they do seem to air their bedclothes. Look at all those red comforts hanging on the bushes."

"It's easier to air them than to make up the beds," observed Mollie. "All you have to do in the morning, is to hang your blanket on a hickory limb, and when you go to bed, snatch it off the limb and wrap up in it for the night."

"Do you suppose they sleep in their clothes?" pondered Barbara.

"Why, of course they do," replied Ruth. "You don't for a moment imagine they would ever go to the trouble of undressing, only to dress again in the morning?"

"Girls, girls," remonstrated Miss Sallie, "we must not forget that we are accepting their hospitality. Besides, here comes that young woman with the voice."

"Let's take Zerlina as a guide, and go for a walk," cried Ruth. "I'm so full of life and spirits this morning that I couldn't possibly sit down like those lazy men over there, who seem to have nothing to do but smoke and talk. Auntie, dear, will you go, or shall we fix you a comfortable seat with the cushions under this tree and leave you to read your book?"

"I certainly have no idea of going for a walk," replied Miss Stuart, "after what I've been through with these last two days. Nor do I want you to go far, either, or I shall be terribly uneasy."

But Miss Sallie was not really uneasy. It was one of those enchanting mornings when the mind is not troubled with unpleasant feelings. Perhaps the Gypsies had bewitched her. At any rate she sat back comfortably among the cushions and rugs, with her writing tablet, the new magazines and the latest novel all close at hand, and watched the girls until they disappeared down the leafy aisles of the forest. How charming their voices sounded in the distance! How sweet was the sound of their young laughter! Miss Stuart closed her eyes contentedly. The spell

of the place was upon her, and she fell asleep before she had opened a single magazine or cut one leaf of the new novel.

In the meantime, the four girls, led by Zerlina and her dog, were following the little stream in its capricious windings through the forest.

A squirrel darted in front of them with a flash of gray and jumped to the limb of a tree.

Zerlina made a sign for the girls to be silent. Then speaking to her dog in her own language, he sat down immediately on his haunches and never moved a muscle until she spoke to him again. She walked slowly toward the tree, where the squirrel sat watching them uneasily. A few feet off she paused and gave a shrill, peculiar whistle. The squirrel pricked up his ears and cocked his head on one side. Zerlina whistled again and held out her hand. The charm was complete. Down the limb he crept until he reached the ground, paused again, surveyed the scene with his little black eyes, and with one leap, settled himself on her shoulder.

“Oh!” cried the impulsive Ruth and the spell was broken.

Away scampered the frightened little animal.

“How wonderful!” exclaimed the others as they gathered around Zerlina, who held herself with a sort of proud reserve as they plied her with questions.

“It is because I have lived in the woods so much of the time,” she explained.

“One makes friends with animals when one has no other friends.”

“Zerlina,” said Ruth, “let me be your friend.”

“Thank you,” replied the girl simply, “but perhaps we shall not meet again. You will be going away in a little while.”

“You must come and sing for us at Major Ten Eyck’s,” said Ruth, “and then we shall see if we cannot meet again.”

They were walking in single file, now, along the stream. Mollie was gathering ferns which grew in profusion on the bank. Barbara, who was behind the others, had stopped to look at a bird’s nest that had fallen to the ground and shattered the little blue eggs it had held.

As she knelt on the ground, something impelled her to look over her shoulder. At first Bab saw only the green depths of the forest, but in a moment her eyes had found what had attracted them. Stifling a cry she rose to her feet. What she had seen was gone in an instant, so quickly that she wondered if she had not been

dreaming. Peering at her through the leaves of parted branches she had seen a face, a very strange, old face, as white as death. It was the face of an old person, she felt instinctively, but the eyes had something childlike in their expression of wonder and surprise.

When it was gone, Barbara felt almost as if she had seen a ghost. She leaned over and dipped her hands into the stream to quiet her throbbing veins.

“Truly this wood is full of mysteries,” she thought to herself as she turned to follow the others. But she decided not to say anything about it. They had had enough frights lately, and she was determined not to add another to the list.

By this time the girls had reached a lovely little pool set like a mirror in a mossy frame. On one side the bank had flattened out and was carpeted with luxuriant, close-cropped grass, almost as smooth as the lawn of a city park. The trees had crowded themselves to the very edge of the greensward. They closed up on the strip of lawn like a wall and stretched their branches over it, as if to shield it from the sun.

“Did you ever see anything so sweet in all your life?” cried Ruth, as she flung herself on the turf.

“Never!” agreed the others with enthusiasm, following her example.

“This pool is supposed to be haunted,” said Zerlina, and Bab started, remembering the face she had just seen.

“Haunted by what, Zerlina?” she asked.

“It is not known,” replied the Gypsy girl, mysteriously; “but on moonlight nights some one is often seen sitting on this bank.”

“What some one—a man or a woman?” persisted Bab.

“It is not known,” repeated Zerlina. “But it has been seen, nevertheless. Besides,” she continued, “this is supposed to be the meeting-place of fairies. Though people do not believe in fairies in this country.”

“I do,” declared Mollie, and the other girls laughed light-heartedly.

“And,” went on Zerlina, “the deer who live in this wood come here to graze and drink water from the pool.”

“Now, that I can believe,” said Ruth.

“Well, it is an enchanted spot,” cried Mollie. “It must be. Look at Zerlina’s dog.”

The shepherd dog had taken his tail in his mouth and was circling slowly. The

girls watched him breathlessly as he turned faster and faster. Once he fell into the stream, but he never stopped and continued to circle so rapidly, as he clambered out, that he lost all sense of direction and waltzed over the girls' laps, staining their dresses with his wet feet, while they laughed until the tears rolled down their cheeks, and the woods rang with the merry sound.

At a word from the Gypsy girl the dog stopped and stretched himself exhausted, on the ground.

"Zerlina, you must have bewitched that animal," cried Ruth. "But wasn't it beautiful? If we had been lying down he would have waltzed right over our faces."

"Girls," proposed Grace, after they had recovered from the exhibition of the waltzing dog, "let's go in wading."

"What a great idea, Grace!" cried Ruth. In a jiffy they had their shoes and stockings piled together on the bank and had slipped into the little pool of clear, running water.

Zerlina watched them from the bank. Perhaps Miss Sallie was right, and water had no charms for this Gypsy child.

As they clung to each other, giving little shrieks of pleasure and making a great splashing, Mollie exclaimed suddenly:

"Look, look! Here comes a man!"

Sure enough there was a man emerging from the trees on the other side of the stream. The girls scampered excitedly out of the water, giggling, as girls will do, and sat in a row on the bank, tailor-fashion, hiding their wet feet under their skirts.

By this time the stranger had come up to the pool and stood gazing in amazement at the party of young women.

"Well, for the love of Mike!" he exclaimed.

It was Jimmie Butler, one of the major's house party.

Then he caught sight of the pyramid of shoes and stockings; his face broke into a smile and he laughed so contagiously that everybody joined in. Once more the enchanted pool was given over to merriment.

"Where on earth did you come from?" demanded Ruth.

"And where have you been?" he echoed.

Whereupon everybody talked at once, until all the adventures had been related.

“And you’re actually alive, after all these hairbreadth escapes, and able to amuse yourselves in this simple fashion?” gasped Jimmie Butler. “Ladies, putting all joking aside, permit me to compliment you on your amazing nerve. I don’t think I ever met a really brave woman before, and to be introduced to five at once! Why, I feel as if I were at a meeting of suffragettes!”

“But how did you happen to be here?” repeated Ruth.

“Oh, I’m just out for a morning stroll,” he replied. “I came to see the haunted pool.”

“Just take another little stroll, for five minutes, until we get on our shoes and stockings. Then we’ll all go back to our home of canvas,” said Ruth.

By the time they had reached the encampment Bab had almost forgotten about the strange face she had seen, and they were all talking happily together about Ten Eyck Hall, which, according to Jimmie Butler, was the finest old house in that part of the country.

In the meantime the major himself had arrived in his automobile, while the boys had ridden over on horseback. When the others came up, they found the chauffeur busily engaged in repairing the tires of Ruth’s automobile. Miss Stuart and Major Ten Eyck were deep in conversation, while the Gypsies stood about in groups, looking at the strangers indifferently.

“Miss Ruth,” said the major, after greetings had been exchanged, “if you can run this machine, suppose we start at once and leave my chauffeur to follow with yours. You ladies must be very hungry. We will have an early luncheon.”

The girls said good-bye to the Gypsies and thanked them graciously. Ruth had tried to compensate Granny Ann, but the old woman had haughtily refused to accept a cent.

“A Gypsy takes nothing from his guest,” she said, and Ruth was obliged to let the matter drop. However, she made the old Gypsy promise to bring her granddaughter over to see them very soon, and as they disappeared down the road, they saw Zerlina leaning against a tree, watching them wistfully.

At last, the journey which had been so full of peril and adventure was ended, and “The Automobile Girls” arrived safely at Ten Eyck Hall.

CHAPTER IX—TEN EYCK HALL

Ten Eyck Hall, with its high-peaked roofs, its rambling wings and innumerable dormer windows, seemed to the four girls the very home of romance.

It was an enormous house built of brick, turned a faded pink, now, from age, which made a delicate background for the heavy vines that shaded the piazzas and balconies and clambered up to the roof itself.

The handsome old master of this charming house leaped to the ground as lightly as one of his nephews, the moment the automobile drew up at the front door. Lifting his hat he made a low, old-fashioned bow.

“Dear ladies,” he said, “you are as welcome to my home as the flowers in spring!” Giving his arm to Miss Stuart, he conducted her up the front steps. The great double doors flew open as if by magic, and the party filed into the vast center hall, on each side of which stood the servants of the household, headed by the butler and his wife, the housekeeper.

“Dear me,” exclaimed Miss Sallie, “I feel as if I were entering a baronial castle. Why did you never tell me years ago you owned such a fine place, John Ten Eyck?”

“Because I didn’t in those days, Sallie,” answered the major. “There were several heirs ahead of me then. But I always wanted you to come and see it. Don’t you remember my mother wrote and asked you to make us a visit? But you were going abroad, that summer, and couldn’t come.”

“Well, I was a very foolish girl,” replied Miss Sallie. “But better late than never, John, and it will be a pleasure to see the young people enjoy themselves in this beautiful house.”

Some of the young people were already plainly showing their delight and pleasure in the visit. The major made a smiling gesture toward the four young girls, who, with arms around each other’s waists, were strolling up the great hall toward the fireplace at the far end, pausing here and there to look at the fine old portraits and curious carved cabinets and settees. Many of the latter had been

collected by the major during his travels abroad.

“I feel like a princess in a castle, Major,” called Ruth.

“And here comes one of the princes, my dear,” answered the major, glancing up at the broad staircase which occupied one side of the hall. All eyes followed the direction of his gaze, and an exclamation of surprise escaped the lips of the automobilists. For there, on the landing of the staircase, looking down at the little group of people below as calmly as a real prince might regard his subjects, was the motor cyclist.

“Why, it’s Mr. Martinez!” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “How are you?” she said graciously, as he descended the broad staircase. “We had no idea you were a friend of the major’s, too.”

“Nor had I, Madam,” replied the young man, as he bowed low over Miss Stuart’s hand and acknowledged the greetings of the girls. “I did not know who Major Ten Eyck was when he was stopping at the hotel, or I should have presented my letter there. It was a surprise to find in him the same gentleman I had come down to meet, and it is, indeed, a great pleasure and surprise to meet you and the young ladies so soon again.”

“Martinez is the son of an old friend of mine, José Martinez of Madrid,” broke in the major. “But how did you happen to meet him?”

Miss Stuart explained that he was the brave young man who had saved them from the attack of the drunken tramp.

“My dear José,” exclaimed the major, grasping him cordially by the hand, “you were brave. It was an act worthy of your father, and I can say no more for you than that.”

The young man flushed, and for the first time in their acquaintance showed signs of real embarrassment.

“It was nothing,” he said. “The man was drunk and drunken men are easy to manage.”

“But he was not easy to manage,” exclaimed Ruth. “He was a giant in size and strength.”

The young foreigner shrugged his shoulders and the flush deepened on his face.

“Well, well,” laughed Major Ten Eyck, “we won’t embarrass you any more by insisting on your being a hero whether you will or no. Here comes Mary to show you to your rooms, ladies. You look as fresh as the morning, but after a night

spent in a Gypsy camp perhaps you would like to spruce up a bit before luncheon. Come along, José, and let me show you my library. I am very proud of my collection of Spanish books. I want your opinion of them.”

The major waved his hand gallantly to the five women who were following the housekeeper up the carved oak staircase to the regions above.

“Am I awake, or asleep?” asked Mollie. “This whole morning has seemed like a dream, and now this lovely old house——”

“And the lovely old major, in the lovely old house,” added Ruth.

“Isn’t he a dear!” pursued Mollie. “I wonder if Miss Sallie is sorry now,” she continued to herself. “If he were as gentle and charming when he was young as he is now, I don’t think I could have been cross with him, ever.”

Meanwhile, Barbara was saying to Miss Stuart:

“No; we never told Mr. Martinez where we were going, or mentioned the major’s name, so of course he had no way of knowing that we were coming here. It is curious, though,” she went on thoughtfully, “our meeting him here. I wonder when he arrived?”

“Yesterday, I suppose,” replied Miss Sallie. “Or it may have been this morning. However, it doesn’t make any difference. I am glad, at least, that a friend of ours can show him some hospitality in return for his courageous act.”

By this time they had reached the top of the stairs and had a glimpse of another hall corresponding to the one below, at one end of which was a great casement window with a broad cushioned window-seat under it. The other end, where the stairs turned, was lighted by an enormous stained glass window.

Little exclamations of rapture escaped the girls as they tripped over the softly carpeted floors to their rooms, which were on the left side of the hall. Opposite were the major’s rooms, so Mary explained, while the young men were all quartered in the right wing except Mr. Martinez, who had a room at the end of the hall on the same side as the major’s suite.

“I could live and die in a house like this, and never want to leave it,” cried Bab, her eyes sparkling with pleasure as Mary opened the door leading to the room that had been assigned to Ruth and her.

They could have a room apiece, if they wished it, the housekeeper said, but when it was discovered that this would necessitate two of the girls taking rooms in the right wing, many passages and corridors away from the others, all said

they would rather share the rooms on the main hall. Mary looked somewhat relieved at this. It was evident she was not in favor of the right wing for the girls, either; although she did not explain her reasons.

In the large old-fashioned bedrooms, hung with chintz curtains and furnished with mahogany that would have been the joy of the antique dealers, were already placed the boxes and satchels of the automobilists. Two neat housemaids were engaged in unpacking their things and placing them in the drawers of the massive highboys and wardrobes.

“Bab,” exclaimed Ruth, giving her friend an affectionate little shake, “this is worth two highwaymen and a night in a Gypsy camp. I feel as if I were in an English country house. I feel we are going to have a perfectly wonderful time. And, somehow, the young Spaniard adds muchly to the whole thing. He seems to belong in the midst of carved oak and Persian rugs, doesn’t he, Barbara, dear? As he stood on those steps he looked like an old Spanish portrait. All he needed was a velvet cape, a sword and a plumed hat.”

“Well, that seems a good deal to complete the picture, considering he was wearing an ordinary pepper and salt suit,” observed Barbara.

“I don’t believe you like Senor José Martinez,” said Ruth.

“Oh, yes I do,” replied the other. “I like him and I don’t like him. His eyes are just a bit too close together, and still he is very handsome. But give me time, give me time. I don’t enjoy having my likes hurried along like this. If he can play tennis, ride horseback and dance as well as he can knock down a tramp, he will be a perfect paragon among men. Look here, Ruth,” she continued, exploring the various closets, “do you know we have a bathroom all to ourselves? Did you say that Major Ten Eyck was poor when Miss Sallie threw him over?”

“Well, he wasn’t rich at that time,” replied Ruth; “that is, not according to Aunt Sallie’s ideas, but since then, she tells me, an uncle has left him lots of money.”

“Now, for a bath!” cried Barbara, as she turned the water on in the tub.

“Don’t use too much of it,” called Ruth. “I never saw a country house where the water didn’t run short, no matter how grand a place it was. Remember the drought, Bab, and leave a little for your fainting friend.”

The girls had barely time to bathe and dress, when a deep gong sounded in the hall. The five automobilists, refreshed by their belated baths, and dainty in crisp ducks and muslins, filed down the great staircase at the sound. Miss Stuart, in a

lavender organdie, her white hair piled on top of her head, led the procession.

The major, waiting for them at the foot of the steps, smiled rather sadly as he watched the charming picture. The five young men grouped together at the end of the hall, came forward at sight of the ladies. Three of them at least were rather shy in their greetings, especially the English boy, Alfred Marsdale, who was only seventeen and still afraid of American girls. Stephen and Martin Ten Eyck, boys of sixteen and seventeen, were also rather green in the society of girls. They had no sisters and their vacations had been spent either at Ten Eyck Hall or out West on their father's ranch. And an avalanche of four pretty, vivacious young women, advancing upon them in this way, was enough to make them tongue-tied for the moment. Jimmie Butler, who was nineteen and had seen a deal of life all over the world with his mother, a well-to-do widow, was proof against embarrassment, and the young Spaniard also seemed perfectly at his ease.

"Come along, young people," said the major, giving his arm to Miss Sallie and leading the way to the dining room.

Soon they were all gayly chatting at an immense, round table of black oak, so highly polished that it reflected the silver and china and the faces of the guests in its shining board.

"Miss Barbara," said the major, "suppose you let us have a history of the attempt at robbery? Since it was your courage and presence of mind that drove the robber away you ought to be the one to give the most connected account. Miss Stuart tells me that he was a giant with a deep bass voice, but that the sight of a pistol made him cut and run like a rabbit. You have not heard, José," continued the major, turning to Martinez, "that our ladies were in danger of being robbed last night and would have been but for Miss Barbara, who drove off the robber with a pistol?"

"Is it possible?" replied José, looking at Barbara with admiration. "But there must be a great many robbers in this country. Almost as numerous as in the mountains of my own country. And what was the appearance of the robber, may I ask, Miss Thurston? Was he again a tramp?"

"He was not a giant," answered Barbara. "He struck me as being rather short and very slender, so slender that it made him appear taller than he was. His voice was curious. I could not describe it, and I think really it was disguised. He spoke only a few times. He wore a mask that completely covered his face, and a slouch hat, so there was no telling what his hair was like; but he gave me the impression of being dark. I think he was a coward, because he ran so fast when I pointed the

pistol at him.”

“Do you suppose he’s hiding in the woods now, Major?” asked Mollie. “We were walking there all morning, but we had nothing to be robbed of.”

“Oh, he is probably running still,” replied the major. “But what is quite plain to me is that it was somebody who knew you expected to make the trip. This robber had evidently prepared beforehand for the attack. He had chopped holes in the bridge, painted the sign, fastened the ropes across, and had arranged the whole thing during the morning. But he had not reckoned on your little pistol, Miss Barbara, had he? Ah, you are a brave girl, my dear, and they tell me that this is only one among many acts of heroism of yours.”

Barbara blushed.

“I am sure any of the others would have done the same thing, Major, if Mr. Stuart had given them the pistol.”

“Do the ladies in America carry firearms?” asked Alfred Marsdale, looking from one to another in a hesitating, embarrassed way.

“Why, certainly, Alfred, my boy,” replied Jimmie Butler. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous, in this country, for a woman to walk on the streets unarmed unless she is dressed like a suffragette? And then she doesn’t need a pistol to make people run from her.”

“Now, you’re joking, Jimmie,” said Alfred.

At which everybody laughed until they all felt that they had known each other much longer than just a few hours.

“While I think of it,” observed the major, “I have only one request to make of my guests, and that may seem like a very inhospitable one, but you will all understand, I know. Don’t be too lavish with the water.”

Ruth and Barbara looked at each other and smiled.

“I mean,” continued the major, “don’t fill the tubs to the brim. A hand’s depth is the allowance; or we shall be high and dry without any water and no prospect of any unless a rain comes. This interminable drought has dried up every brook on the place and the cisterns are lower than they have ever been before. We keep one cistern always full—not so much in case of drought as in case of fire; it might be needed some day.”

They all promised to bathe in what Jimmie Butler called “two-fingers of water.”

“If the water gives out,” said Jimmie, “we’ll beautify our complexions by bathing in milk. I think I need a lotion for a delicate skin, anyhow.” Jimmie’s nose was a mass of freckles.

“You would have to have your face peeled, Jimmie,” said Stephen, “before you could call it delicate.”

“Excuse me,” replied Jimmie, “my indelicate skin then.”

“I have not made any plans for your entertainment this afternoon, young ladies,” the major was saying. “Miss Stuart is determined that you must lie down and sleep off the effects of the Gypsy camp. But to-morrow we shall have a picnic to make up for it, and Miss Ruth may take her tea basket, since we have none in this household.”

“I’m not a bit tired now,” said Ruth.

“Neither are we,” echoed the other girls as they rose from the table.

“Well, suppose we make a compromise,” said the major, “by showing you over the house? After that sleep must be your portion, eh, Sallie?”

“It must, indeed,” replied that lady firmly, and all adjourned to the library.

CHAPTER X—AN ATTIC MYSTERY

The library of Ten Eyck Hall was, to Bab, the most beautiful of all the rooms. The walls were literally lined with books from floor to ceiling, and there were little galleries halfway up for the convenience of getting books that were too high to reach from the floor. Big leather chairs and couches were scattered about and heavy curtains seemed to conceal entrances to mysterious doors and passages leading off somewhere into the depths of the old house.

“This is just the place for a secret door or a staircase in the wall,” exclaimed Grace.

“There is a secret door, I believe, in this very room,” replied the major; “but it is really a secret, for the location was lost long ago and nobody has ever been able to find it since.”

“How interesting!” said Ruth. “Can’t you thump the walls and locate it by a hollow sound?”

“But, even if you discovered a hollow sound, you wouldn’t know how to open the door,” said Martin.

“Press a panel, my boy. That is all that is necessary,” replied Jimmie. “With a wild shriek Lady Gwendolyn rushed through the portals of the lofty chamber. With trembling hands she pressed a panel in the wainscot. Instantly it flew back and disclosed a secret passage. Another instant and she had disappeared. The panel was restored to its place and Sir Marmanduke and her pursuers were foiled.”

All this, the irrepressible Jimmie had acted out with wild gesticulations.

They all laughed except Alfred Marsdale, who stood looking at Jimmie in a dazed sort of way.

“Wake up, Al, old man! What’s the matter with you?”

“Oh, nothing,” replied Alfred, “I was only wondering where I had read that before.”

There was another laugh, and the major led the way to the red drawing room. It had been the ball room in the old days.

“It’s a long time,” observed the major, “since anyone has danced on these floors.”

The room took its name, evidently, from the red damask hangings and upholstering of the furniture. The walls were paneled in white and gold and there was a grand piano at one end.

“We’ll have to take turn about playing,” said Ruth. “Grace and I each play a little.”

“Oh, Jimmie can play,” replied Martin. “Is there anything Jimmie can’t do?”

“Jimmie, you’re a brick,” said Alfred.

Back of the red drawing room was another smaller room which, the major said, had always been called a morning parlor, but it had been a favorite room of the family when he was a young man, and had been used as a gathering place in the evening as well as after breakfast.

“This is the prettiest room of all, I think,” observed Mollie.

And it was certainly the most cheerful, with its brightly flowered chintz curtains and shining mahogany chairs and tables.

After that came a billiard room, a small den used as a smoking room, and a breakfast room.

“Who wants to see the attic?” said Martin.

“We all do?” came in a chorus from the young people.

“Now, girls,” protested Miss Sallie, “remember you were to take your rest this afternoon.”

“Oh, we shan’t be up there long,” said Martin. “We promise you to bring them back in time for the beauty sleep.”

“Very well,” answered Miss Sallie; “go along with you. It’s very hard to be strict, Major. Don’t you find it so!”

“I never even tried the experiment, Sallie,” replied the gentle old soldier, “because I always found it harder on me than on the boys. It’s really a certain sort of selfishness on my part, I suppose. Cut along now, boys, and don’t keep the girls from their rest too long.”

The pilgrimage started up the great front staircase, led by Martin and his older brother, who together had made many excursions to the attic and knew the way by heart.

On the second floor the explorers followed a passage that led to another flight of stairs, and this in turn to another passage, and finally to one last narrow flight of steps with a mysterious door at the top.

“This reminds me of the House of Usher,” said Jimmie, “only it goes up instead of down. Can’t you imagine all these doors opening and closing, and the sound of footsteps on the stairs, down, down?”

Just then Martin opened the door and a gust of wind blew in their faces. Something flashed past that almost made the whole party fall backwards down the steps.

Mollie gave a little shriek.

“Don’t be frightened,” said José, who was standing just behind her. “It is only a bird.”

“Somebody must have left the window open,” exclaimed Stephen in surprise. “I wonder who it was? The servants are afraid to come up here. They believe it is haunted. Lights have been seen at midnight, shining through some of these windows, and the only persons who are not afraid are the housekeeper and the butler, who come twice a year, and clean out the dust.”

The young people found themselves in a vast attic whose edges were hidden by dense shadows. The center was lighted by dormer windows, here and there, that gleamed like so many eyes from the high sloping roof. Scattered about were all sorts of odds and ends of antiquated furniture, chests of drawers, hair trunks, carved boxes and spinning wheels.

“Isn’t this great!” cried Jimmie Butler. “Just the place for handsprings,” and he began to turn somersaults like a professional, while the girls looked on delighted.

“Stop that, Jim,” protested Stephen. “You’ll get yourself filthy and break your neck into the bargain. You are much too old for such child’s play. You’ll have rush of blood to the head and strain a nerve, and heaven knows you’ve got enough to strain.”

““In my youth, Father William replied to his son,
I feared it would injure the brain,
But now that I’m perfectly sure I have none;
Why, I do it again and again!””

sang Jimmie as he wheeled over the floor toward a partition wall which cut off one end of the great room. Over and over he circled, without looking where he was going, until suddenly, bang, his heels hit against the wall.

There was a curious grating noise, a creaking of rafters, and before their amazed eyes the wall slid along and disclosed another attic as large as the first.

Jimmie was so bewildered he forgot to pull himself up from the dusty floor, and lay with his head propped against an old trunk looking across the enormous space.

Then everybody began talking at once.

“This looks to me like smugglers,” cried Alfred. “I was in an old house in England, where there was the same sort of wall, only not so large.”

“And look,” called Bab, “there are footsteps in the dust. Who could have been here lately, to have left those marks. Do you see? They come from over there in the right hand corner.”

“Yes, is it not curious,” replied José, “that they are going away from the wall and not approaching it? He must have walked out of the wall. Perhaps there is a secret door there, too.”

They rushed across pell mell, and began thumping the walls, but nothing happened.

“I say, Stephen,” said Martin, “do you suppose we had smugglers in our family?”

“I don’t know,” answered Stephen. “They managed to keep it secret if they had.”

“I’d like to be a smuggler,” cried Martin. “There would be some excitement in life then. But how did you manage to do it, Jimmie? You are always having things happen to you.”

“I don’t know,” replied Jimmie. “I must have kicked the panel that worked the spring. Let’s see if we can move it back again. Here’s the place in the floor,” and bending over he pressed on a sliding board in the floor. Instantly the wall began slipping back in place. The others leaped back into the first attic, and in a moment the partition had fitted itself as snugly as if it never had been moved.

“All is as if it never had been,” exclaimed Jimmie. “Now let’s find the place I kicked.”

But try as they would, no one could locate the spot again.

“Well, of all that’s curious and mysterious!” said Stephen. “Jimmie, go and turn a few more wheels and see if it happens again.”

Jimmie did as he was bade, and kicked the wall vociferously from one end to the other but it never budged an inch.

In the meantime, Martin and the girls were diving into some old trunks and carved chests which were filled with clothes of another date, old-fashioned silks and dimities that had been worn by the major’s grandmother and aunts.

“There is a trunkful of men’s things, too,” called Stephen, leaving the sliding partition, to join in the rummage.

“I say, girls,” cried Jimmie, “wouldn’t it be fun to give a fancy dress party some day, and surprise the major and Miss Stuart?”

“How delightful!” exclaimed the girls in one voice.

“Oh, pshaw!” said Martin, disgusted.

“Oh, I say now, Jimmie, what a beastly idea!” exclaimed Alfred, equally disgusted.

“Come on, fellows; don’t throw cold water on the scheme if the girls like it,” put in Stephen.

And so the party was arranged.

All this time José had never left the partition, but had kept up a continuous thumping to find the sliding panel.

“Everybody take a hand, and we will carry down everything we can find, and then we won’t have to make another trip,” called Stephen. “Come, José, we’re going to dress up. You’ll have to be a pirate. Here’s a red sash and a three cornered hat that will just suit your style.”

So saying, the cavalcade departed from the dark old attic, laden with spoils.

“If this is to be a surprise on uncle and Miss Stuart, we had better hide the things, hadn’t we?” observed Martin, who was very cautious and always thought ahead, once he had decided to do a thing.

“Very well. We’ll let Mary take charge of them and divide them later,” replied Stephen. “You had better go take your naps now, girls,” he added in a whisper, “or we’ll have the old lady and gentleman on our necks.”

The young people separated, the boys taking a corridor leading to the left wing, the girls following the main hall. Bab left the others and started downstairs.

“I’ll be right back,” she called. “I left my handkerchief in the library.”

She confessed to herself, as she descended the stairs, that she was rather tired. The excitement of the two past days, her uncomfortable bed made of a steamer rug spread on the ground, the night before, and finally the close, dusty air of the attic had combined to give her a headache and a feeling of extreme weariness.

When she reached the cool, darkened library, she sat down for a moment in one of the big chairs and closed her eyes. It was very restful in there. The sun had left that side of the house in the shade and the room with its heavy hangings, its dark leather furniture and rich rugs was full of shadows.

She was almost asleep, a slender little figure in a great armchair of carved black oak. Her head dropped to one side and her eyes closed, when she was awakened with a start by a draught of cold air. One of the curtains next the book shelves bulged out for a moment and Barbara’s eyes were fastened on a long, white hand that drew them aside. Then a face she had seen in the wood looked from around the curtain. The eyes met hers, and again that strange, childlike look of sorrow and amazement filled them.

A dizziness came over Barbara. She closed her eyes for a moment, and, when she opened them again, the face, or phantom, or whatever it was, had gone.

Holding her breath to keep from crying out, Barbara ran from the room as fast as her trembling knees could carry her. In the hall she met José. He looked at her curiously.

“Mademoiselle, have you seen a ghost?” he asked as he stood aside to let her pass.

She was afraid to answer, for fear of bursting into tears.

“I am sorry,” he continued. “Has anything really happened?”

But still she refused to speak, and ran up the stairs.

He turned and went into the library, closing the door after him.

There was a queer little smile on his face. Perhaps he, too, had seen the old man and understood her look of terror.

By the time she reached her room, Bab had regained her self-composure, and had again determined to say nothing about the adventure. It would only frighten the girls and take away from the pleasure of the visit.

CHAPTER XI—JOSÉ HAS AN ENEMY

“I like them all, the pretty girls,
I like them all whether dark or fair,
But above the rest, I like the best
The girl with the golden hair!”

rang out the charming tenor voice of José, while he thrummed a delightful accompaniment on the piano.

Dinner was over, and the major, and his guests were sitting in the moonlight on the broad piazza. Windows and doors were stretched as wide as possible; the curtains in the red drawing room were drawn back and José was entertaining the company.

“I sing it translated,” he called, as he finished the song, “that it may be understood.”

Whereupon Jimmie winked at Stephen, and looked at Mollie; the major smiled indulgently, and the others were all more or less conscious that Spaniards always liked blond girls because they were so rare in Spain.

Mollie herself, however, was unconscious that she was being sung about. She was looking out across the moonlit stretches of lawn and meadows, her little hands folded placidly in her lap.

“Do you dance as well as sing, Mr. Martinez?” she asked in her high, sweet voice.

“I can dance, yes,” replied José, “but I like best dancing with another. I do not like to dance alone.”

“But there is no one else here who dances Spanish fancy dances, is there?” demanded Miss Sallie.

There was a silence.

“Don’t all speak at once,” cried Jimmie. “I will play for you, José, if you will try dancing alone,” he added. “I am afraid we can’t help you in any of your Spanish

dances.”

“Very well,” replied José. “I will, then, try a dance of the Basque country, if Mademoiselle Mollie will be so kind as to lend me her scarf. I must have a hat also.”

He disappeared through the window and returned in a moment with a broad-brimmed felt hat he had found in the hall. Mollie handed him her pink scarf with a border of wild roses, and walking composedly up to the end of the long piazza he stood perfectly still, waiting for the music to begin. Jimmie struck up a Spanish dance with the sound of castanets in the bass.

“How’s that for a tune?” he called out.

“Very good, very good,” answered José. Then he started the strange dance while the others watched spellbound.

The boys, who had been rather scornful of a man’s dancing fancy dances, confessed afterwards that there was nothing effeminate in José’s dancing, no pirouetting and twisting on one toe like Jimmie Butler’s one accomplishment in ballet-dancing. They gathered that it was a sort of bullbaiting dance. It began with a series of advances and retreats, with a springy step always in time to the throb of the music.

The young Spaniard was very graceful and lithe. He seemed to have forgotten that he was on the piazza of foreigners in a strange country. The dance grew quicker and quicker. Suddenly he drew a long curved dagger from his belt and made a lunge at some imaginary obstacle, probably the bull he was baiting.

Bab, who was nearest the dancer, rose to her feet quickly, and then sat down rather limply.

“The knife, the knife!” she said to herself. “It is the highwayman’s knife!”

And now the handsome dancer was kneeling at Mollie’s feet offering her the scarf.

He had risen and was bowing to the company, when whir-r-r! something had whizzed past his head, just scratched his forehead and then planted itself in the wooden frame of the window behind him.

Was Barbara dreaming; or had she lost her senses?

The knife in the wall was the same, or exactly like the knife José had been using in the dance.

In a moment everything was in wild confusion.

“Go into the house, ladies!” commanded the major.

The four boys leaped from the piazza, to run down the assassin, so they thought, but the figure vaguely outlined for an instant in the shadows of the trees, was as completely hidden as if the earth had opened and swallowed it up.

José, in a big chair in the drawing room, was being ministered to by Miss Sallie and the girls, while the major, with a glass of water, was standing over him on one side and the housekeeper, on the other, was binding his head with a linen handkerchief.

Whir-r-r! Something Whizzed Past His Head.

Whir-r-r! Something Whizzed Past His Head.

“Major,” Miss Sallie was saying, “this country is full of assassins and robbers. I believe we shall all be murdered in our beds. I am really terribly frightened. We have had nothing but attacks since we left New York. And, now, this poor young man is in danger. Who could it have been, do you suppose, and what good did it do to hurl a knife into the midst of a perfectly harmless company like that!”

“The country is a little wild, Sallie,” replied the major apologetically, “but I have never heard of anything like this happening before. Of course, there are highwaymen everywhere. There are those Gypsies in the forest. Perhaps it was one of them.”

Just then the boys returned, and the attention of the others was distracted from José, who still sat quietly, his lips pressed together.

Barbara, who had been standing a little way off, turned to him quickly.

“The knife?” she asked, but stopped without finishing, for José had fixed her glance with a look of such appeal that she could say no more.

“By the way,” observed Jimmie Butler, “where is the knife?”

“Sticking in the wall of course,” replied Stephen.

The two boys ran out on the piazza, but returned empty-handed.

“Mystery of mysteries!” cried Jimmie, “the knife is gone!”

“It is impossible,” exclaimed the major. “We have not left this room. We could see anyone who came upon the piazza.”

“Well, it’s gone,” said Jimmie. “While you were nursing José, somebody must

have crept up and got it.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “Do you mean to say that the murderer has been that close to us again? Do close those windows and draw the curtains.”

“Yes, do so,” said the major. “Mary,” he continued to the housekeeper, who was entering at that moment with a basin of water, “I wish you would have all the men on the place sent to me. Some of them may be asleep, but wake them up. We shall scour every part of the estate to-night. If there’s anybody hiding around here we shall rout him out.”

Mary hurried off to deliver her orders, while the boys ran to their rooms to get on tennis shoes and collect various weapons.

“I am sorry José was scratched,” Martin confided to Alfred, “but—well, this is pretty good sport, old man. Don’t you think so?”

“By Jove, it is,” replied Alfred with enthusiasm. “If that assassin should leap at us in the dark I should like to give him a nip with this shillalah. What a beastly coward he was to attack a man when his back was turned!”

And with that, he waved a big knotted club, one of Stephen’s possessions, around his head, and glared ferociously.

“Come on, boys,” called Stephen. “We haven’t a moment to lose. The man will be well away if we don’t hurry. We are going to ride in twos and divide the place in sections.”

In another ten minutes a company of horsemen rode off in the moonlight, two by two, while the frightened maid-servants locked and barred the house doors and windows.

José had begged to be allowed to go along, but the major had silenced him by saying that Miss Sallie and the girls needed a protector, and that under the circumstances it was better for him to stay at home and look after them. Even the old major was rather enjoying the zest of a man-hunt, and his eyes flashed with a new fire under his grizzled eyebrows.

But nothing happened and the assassin remained at large. The hunters scoured the country, searched the forest on the outskirts of the Ten Eyck estate, and woke the sleeping Gypsies to demand what they knew. The Gypsies knew nothing, and at midnight the horsemen returned.

The house was silent. Everyone had gone to bed except José, who sat in the library listening for every sound that creaked through the old place. He met

Major Ten Eyck and the boys at the front door, holding a candle high and peering anxiously into the dark to see what quarry they had brought home.

And, when he saw they had no prisoner bound to the horse with the ropes that the major had ordered his man to take along, a look of strange relief came into the Spaniard's face. He breathed a deep sigh, smiled as he thanked them, said good-night and went up the broad stairway with the same smile still clinging to his lips.

In the meantime Bab was stretched out beside the sleeping Ruth, wide awake, going over the events of that tumultuous day.

She felt that these events had no connection with each other, and yet deep down in her inner consciousness she was searching for the link that bound all the strange happenings together. She was not quite sure now whether she had seen the face in the library or not. She had been so tired and hot. It might, after all, have been a dream. But the footsteps in the dust on the attic floor, coming from the wall, what of them?

And last, though most strange and mysterious of all, the two daggers? José had been saved just in time from the stigma of suspicion by the appearance of the other dagger, for, in the moment she had seen the two, Bab had realized they were absolutely alike.

She could not believe José was a highwayman, and yet there were certain things that looked very black. It was true he had not known where they were going, but she imagined he could have found it out.

Was it his figure she had seen behind the curtain that morning, listening? Whoever it was heard the exact route of their trip, with explicit directions from the major. Undoubtedly, Bab believed, the eavesdropper was the highwayman.

Furthermore, what did they know about José? It is true he had come bearing credentials, but such things were easily fixed up by experts, and the major was a simple old fellow who never doubted anybody until he had to.

On the other hand, José had every appearance of being a gentleman. He had proved himself to be brave by knocking down the tramp twice his size at Sleepy Hollow. There was an air of sincerity about him which she could not fail to recognize. He was graceful and charming. Everybody liked him, even those who had been inclined to feel prejudiced at first.

Would the Spaniard have dared to use the same dagger in the dance that he had used to slash their tires with? It was assuredly amazingly reckless, and yet he

might have trusted to the darkness and risked it.

But the look he gave her when she started to speak of the twin daggers! What could that have meant? Was he trying to shield his own enemy?

Should she speak to the major or should she say nothing?

On the whole, Barbara thought it would be better to keep quiet for a day or two. It might be that Miss Sallie would insist on taking them away after this last attack; but she believed Ruth's and the major's prayers would prevail, and that they would all stay through the visit.

They had planned so many delightful parties it seemed a shame to break up on the very first day of their visit. And, after all, Miss Sallie had a great tenderness for the major, a tenderness lasting through thirty years.

Then Barbara dropped off to sleep, and in the old house only one other soul was still awake as the clock in the hall chimed the hour of two.

In his room, by the light of a flickering candle, José sat examining the dagger that had so baffled Bab's curiosity. On his face was an expression of sorrow and bitterness that would certainly have aroused her pity had she seen him that moment. At last he shook his head hopelessly, muttered something in Spanish, and blew out the candle.

But before getting into bed he picked up the dagger again.

"Even in America," he said in English, "even in this far country it is the same. But I will not endure it," he muttered. "It is too much!"

Putting his dagger under the pillow, he crept to bed.

CHAPTER XII—NOSEGAYS AND TENNIS

The household was late in pulling itself together next morning. At half-past nine, Mary and her husband, John, had carried trays of coffee and rolls to the rooms of the guests, informing them, at the same time, that luncheon would be served at half-past twelve.

Mollie and Grace, in dressing gowns and slippers, had carried their trays into the room shared by Ruth and Barbara. Miss Sallie had followed, looking so charming in her lavender silk wrapper, elaborately trimmed with lace and ribbons that all the girls had exclaimed with admiration; which put the lady in a very good humor at the outset. Who does not like to be complimented, especially in the early morning when one is not apt to feel at one's best?

To add to the gayety of the company there was a knock on the door, which, when opened, disclosed John bearing a large tray of flowers, a small nosegay for each of the girls and a large bunch of dewy sweet peas for Miss Sallie, all with the major's compliments.

"What a man he is!" she cried. "He disarms me with his bunches of flowers just as I was about to tell him something very disagreeable. I really don't see how I can do it."

"Oh, please don't, auntie, dear!" exclaimed Ruth. "I know what it is. We all do. But if we broke up the party, and went trailing off home, now that the worst is over, it wouldn't do anybody much good, and think of what a beautiful time we would be missing. To tell you the truth, auntie, we are just dying to stay. In spite of everything we are. Aren't we, girls?"

"Yes, indeed," came in a chorus from the other three girls, a little faintly from Bab perhaps, but very eagerly from Mollie and Grace.

"Well, we'll see," replied Miss Sallie. "But it does seem to me that this trip has started off very badly. Three attacks in as many days."

"That's true," said Ruth. "Yet by the magic Rule of Three we should have no more. We have finished now and the curse is lifted."

“When Mollie’s old Gypsy comes over we must ask her to tell a few things,” observed Grace. “I believe she really can predict the future. That night when you and Bab had gone with the Gypsies to get the automobile I asked her if she told fortunes, and all she said was: ‘I can tell when there is blood on the moon.’”

“What a horrible idea!” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “Weren’t you frightened?”

“No, I wasn’t frightened, because she seemed to have forgotten me entirely. I really thought, at the time, she must be talking about her own affairs. She looked so black and fierce.”

“Perhaps she meant José’s blood,” remarked Mollie from behind her nosegay of honeysuckle and mignonette.

“Well, there wasn’t much of it,” replied Bab, “because José received only a scratch, and lost scarcely any blood. It was a close shave, though. Just half an inch nearer and it would have gone straight through his head.”

“He seems to be a very remarkable young man,” said Miss Sallie. “Did you notice he never said one word? Just sat there as quietly as if nothing had happened.”

“He was thinking,” answered Barbara. “But of course most people would have been too frightened to think. Did you notice the knife?” she ventured.

But nobody had, evidently. They had all been too excited and horror-struck at the time to have noticed anything.

“I saw it was a knife, and that was all,” said Ruth.

“I never saw a man dance before,” observed Mollie, as if following aloud a train of thoughts she had been pursuing while the others talked. “I was almost sorry he said he would, but when I saw what kind of dancing it was I was glad. It was really and truly a man’s dance. I think it must have been a toreador’s dance, don’t you?”

“Something like this,” said Ruth, using a towel for a scarf and a comb for a dagger. “And, by the way,” she continued, pausing as she pranced around the room, “how did he happen to have a dagger so handy!”

“That’s because he is a Spaniard, my dear,” remarked Miss Sallie. “These foreigners carry anything from dynamite bombs to carving knives. They are always murdering and slashing one another.”

“Perhaps,” cried Mollie, excitedly, “it was the Black Hand that tried to kill him.”

The others all laughed.

“Really, Mollie,” cried Miss Sallie, “don’t add any more horrors to the situation. We are already surrounded by Gypsies, and tramps and assassins.”

“But protected, Aunt Sallie, dear,” protested Ruth, “protected by five ‘gintlemin frinds,’ as Irish Nora used to say.”

“Well, dress yourselves now,” said Miss Stuart, making for the door with her silken draperies trailing after her. “And remember, Ruth, dear, if your father scolds us for staying I shall lay all the blame on you.”

“Oh, I will manage Dad,” replied Ruth.

When the two girls were left alone they did not speak for a little while. Barbara, who was sitting on the floor near the window with her head propped against a pillow, closed her eyes, and for a moment Ruth thought she was asleep. A breeze laden with the perfume of the honeysuckle vines stirred the curtain. Barbara took in a deep breath, opened her eyes and sat up.

“Ruth,” she said, “do you know, the smell of the honeysuckles gives me the queerest sensation? I feel as if I had been here before, once long ago, ever so long. I can’t remember when, and of course I haven’t been, but isn’t it curious? These old rooms are as familiar to me as if I had lived in them. I believe I could find my way blindfolded around the house.”

“I should like to see you try it,” replied Ruth, “especially when you struck one of those back passages that lead off into nowhere in particular. But you are tired, Bab, dear,” continued her friend, leaning over and patting her on the cheek. “Come along, now, and get dressed. I told Stephen and Alfred we would play them a game of tennis some time this morning.”

The girls found the two boys waiting in the hall to keep their appointment. Alfred was fast losing his shyness in the presence of these two wholesome and unaffected girls who could play tennis almost as well as he could, ride horseback, run a motor car, repel a highwayman with a pistol and not lose their heads when they needed to keep them most. But, what was more to the purpose, they were not in the least shy or afraid to speak out. They were full of high spirits and knew how to have a good time without appealing constantly to some everlasting governess who was always tagging after them, or asking mamma’s permission. In fact, Alfred had suffered a change of heart. When he had heard the house party was to be increased by a number of girls he had bitterly repented ever having left England. By this time, however, he could not imagine a house

party without girls, especially American girls.

“I say, you know,” he said to Ruth as they strolled toward the beautiful tennis court that was shaded, at one side, by a row of tall elm trees, “must I call you Ruth? I notice the other fellows do?”

“Oh, well,” replied Ruth, “we are none of us actually grown yet and what is the use of so much formality before it is really necessary? What do you do in England?”

“In England,” replied Alfred, “we don’t call them anything. We don’t see them except in the holidays, and then they are only sisters and cousins.”

“Isn’t there any fun in sisters and cousins?” asked Ruth.

“Well, they’re not very jolly,” replied the candid youth; “not as jolly as you, that is.”

Ruth laughed. By this time they had reached the court and were selecting racquets and tossing for sides.

“Stephen, Ruth and I will play against you and Barbara,” said Alfred rather testily. “What is the use of tossing when it was arranged beforehand?”

“You seem rather eager, Alfred, my boy,” replied Stephen. “I’m sure we have no objections, have we, Barbara?”

“None,” said Barbara, “At least I haven’t. You may, however, when you hear that Ruth won the championship at Newport last summer.”

“You look to me like a pretty good player, too,” said Stephen.

Just then Jimmie Butler appeared, bearing a hammock and a book.

“You can get in the next set, Jimmie,” called Stephen. “We are just starting in on this one.”

“I don’t care for the game,” replied Jimmie. “I prefer a book ’neath the bough, especially as this house party seems to go in companies of twos. Every laddie has a lassie but me, so I’ve taken to literature.”

He waved his hand toward the garden, and then toward the walk leading from the house.

In the old-fashioned flower garden, a stone’s throw from the court, could be seen Miss Sallie and the major strolling along the paths, stopping occasionally to examine the late roses and smell the honeysuckle trained over wicker arches.

In the direction of the house appeared Mollie and Grace, followed by Martin and José. The sound of their laughter floated over to Jimmie as he swung in his hammock.

“Keep away, all,” he called as he spread himself comfortably among the cushions and opened his book. “I intend to enter a monastery and take the vow of silence, and this is a good time to begin. It’s easy because I have nobody to talk to.”

“What are you grumbling about, Jimmie?” asked the major, who came up just then with Miss Sallie.

“Oh, nothing at all, Major,” replied Jimmie. “I was only saying how delightful it was to see all you young people walking around this sylvan place in couples. It reminds me of my lost youth.”

“Jimmie’s lonesome,” exclaimed Martin. “We’ll have to get up some more excitement if we want to keep him happy.”

“Very well,” replied the major. “We will. The most exciting thing I can think of, just now, is to take a long ride in the automobiles, or go driving, whichever the ladies prefer, and wind up at the forest pool for tea. How does that strike you, Jimmie?”

“It sounds fine,” said Jimmie, “if you mean the haunted pool. It is a beautiful spot, and it has a new haunt since last you saw it, Major. It’s haunted by water nymphs now.”

“Only nymphs in wading,” cried Mollie, blushing. “Jimmie caught us in the act yesterday morning.”

“Oho!” exclaimed the major. “You really are little girls, after all, are you?”

“Think of going in wading in that lonesome spot,” said Grace, “and actually meeting somebody as casually as if you were walking up Fifth Avenue?”

“You’re likely to meet Jimmie anywhere,” said Martin. “He’s a regular Johnnie-on-the-spot. He is the first person to get up and the last one to go to bed. Excitements have a real attraction for him. Haven’t they, Jimsy?” and Martin gave the hammock such an affectionate shake that Jimmie nearly fell out on his face.

The luncheon gong rang out in the summer stillness, and they started toward the house, leaving the players to finish the game.

“José,” asked the major, putting his arm through the young Spaniard’s, “have

you any theories about last night?"

"Yes," replied José. "I do not think it will do any good to hunt for the one who threw the knife. I have, in my country, an enemy. I believe it was he."

"What?" cried the major. "He has followed you all the way to America, and your life is constantly in danger?"

"I do not think he will come again," answered José. "At any rate, I am not afraid," he added, shrugging his shoulders, "and I can do nothing."

"You could have him arrested," said Miss Sallie.

"Yes, Madam, I could. But it would not be easy to catch him."

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Miss Sallie. "What a dangerous country Spain must be to live in!"

"No more dangerous than America, Madam, I find," replied José.

"True enough," assented Miss Sallie, "since this is America and not Spain, and we find ourselves in a perfect hotbed of criminals. My dear John, I think we shall need a body-guard if we go out in the open this afternoon."

"Well, Sallie," answered the courteous old man, "you shall have one in me and my nephews and their friends—a devoted body-guard, I assure you."

At luncheon the feeling of good will which comes to friends who have just found each other, so to speak, had spread itself. Enjoyment was in the air and there were no discordant elements. All their troubles were of the past, and Bab determined to cast aside her suspicions and regard José in the light of a mysterious but otherwise exceedingly attractive foreigner. When she looked across the table into his clear, brown eyes, which regarded her sadly but without a single guilty quiver of the lids, she could not but believe that there had been some bitter mistake somewhere. He was lonely and strange, and there was something about him that aroused her pity. Everybody liked him; even Miss Sallie was attracted by his graceful and gentle manners.

Luncheon over, everyone made ready for the auto trip, and it was not long before the two autos carrying a merry party, had set forth.

CHAPTER XIII—CROSS QUESTIONS AND CROOKED ANSWERS

After a long ride through the country, skirting the edge of the forest in which the highwayman had lurked, and where the smoke from the Gypsies' camp fire could be seen curling up in the distance, the two automobiles took to the river road.

Ruth was steering her own car with Alfred beside her; behind them on the small seat sat José and Mollie, and on the back seat were Bab and Stephen. As they skimmed over the bridge, which had been repaired by the major's men, Mollie said to José:

"Was the bridge all right, Mr. Martinez, when you came over it the other day?"

The Spaniard flushed and his eye caught Bab's, who was gazing at him curiously.

"Yes, no—or rather, I do not know," he stammered. "I did not come by the bridge but through the forest."

"But how did you find the way?" asked Mollie, wondering a little at his embarrassment.

"I asked it," he replied, "of a Gypsy."

"Oh, really?" cried Mollie. "And did she tell you?"

"It was not a woman," went on José. "It was a man."

"And did he know the way? Because they told us they did not, perhaps because they didn't want to be disturbed so late in the evening."

"Perhaps," said José, and changed the subject by asking Stephen whose was the large estate they were now approaching. It was that of a famous millionaire, and their attention was for the moment distracted. José seemed to breath a sigh of relief and engaged Mollie in conversation for the rest of the ride, telling her about his own country, the bull fights and carnivals and a hundred other things of

interest until the little girl had quite forgotten his confusion at the mention of the damaged bridge.

On the way back the automobiles turned into the wooded road, but before they reached the Gypsy camp they turned again into another road pointed out by Martin in the first car. The road led directly through the forest to the haunted pool, where the automobiles drew up. The pool, in the late afternoon sunlight, was more enchanting than ever.

“This is a famous spot in the neighborhood,” observed the major. “When I was a boy it was the scene of many a picnic and frolic. People in these parts were more neighborly in those days. The girls and boys used to meet and ride in wagons or on horseback over here. We ate our luncheons on this mossy bank; then strolled about in couples until dark and drove home by moonlight.”

“The Gypsy girl told us it was really haunted, Major,” said Ruth. “She even said she had seen the ghost.”

“Indeed,” replied the major, looking up a little startled, “and what sort of ghost was it?”

“Just a figure sitting here on the bank,” answered Ruth.

“Oh!” he exclaimed in a tone of evident relief.

“Why, Major,” cried Miss Sallie, “one would think you believed in ghosts.”

“And so I do, Sallie, my dear,” declared the gentle old major, “but only in the ghosts of my lost youth, which seem to appear to me to-day in the forms of all these delightful young people. What about tea, Miss Ruth Stuart?” he demanded, turning to Ruth.

The chauffeur brought out the elaborate tea basket which had served them so well at the Gypsy camp and Ruth and Barbara proceeded to make the tea while the other girls unpacked boxes of delicious sandwiches and tea cakes.

“This is a very beautiful spot,” observed José. “If it were perpetual summer I could live and die on this mossy bank and never tire of it!” Walking a little apart from the others he stretched himself out at full length on the ground, staring up into the branches overhead.

Then the other boys, who had been strolling about under the trees, returned, but they were not alone. They had espied Zerlina in the depths of the woods, with her guitar slung over her shoulder, and persuaded her to go back with them to the pool.

“You see we’ve brought a wandering minstrel with us,” cried Jimmie. “She has promised to sing us a song of the Romany Rye, haven’t you, Zerlina?”

The girls greeted Zerlina cordially. She was presented to the major, but José, as she approached, had turned over on his side and flung his arm over his head, as if he were asleep.

“Leave him alone. He’s dreaming,” said Jimmie. “Give Zerlina some tea and cake, and then we’ll have a song.”

Zerlina ate the cake greedily and drank her tea in silence. She examined the fresh summer dresses of “The Automobile Girls,” and a look of envy came into her eyes as she cast them down on her cotton skirt full of tatters from the briars and faded from red into a soft old pink shade. But she was very pretty, even in her ragged dress, which was turned in at the collar showing her full, rounded throat and shapely neck. She was lithe and graceful, and as she thrummed on the guitar with her slender, brown fingers her ragged dress and rough shoes faded into insignificance. The group of people sitting on the bank saw only a beautiful, dark-haired girl with a glowing face and eyes that shone with a smouldering fire. After a few preliminary chords she began to sing in a rich contralto voice. The song again was in the Romany tongue. It seemed to convey to the listeners a note of sadness and loneliness.

The kind old major was much impressed by the performance.

“Zerlina,” he said, “you have a very beautiful voice, much too beautiful to be wasted. You must ask your grandmother to bring you over to Ten Eyck Hall. I should like to hear you sing again.”

“Zerlina will be a great opera singer, one of these days,” predicted Jimmie. “She will be singing Carmen, yet, at the Manhattan Opera House. How would you like that, Zerlina?”

The Gypsy girl made no reply. Her eyes were fastened on José, who still lay as if asleep, his back turned to the circle.

“She can dance, too,” cried Ruth. “She told me she could. This would be a pretty place to dance, Zerlina, where the fairies dance by moonlight.”

“I have no music,” objected Zerlina.

“Oh, I can make the music all right,” said the irrepressible Jimmie, seizing the guitar and tuning it up. Then he began to whistle. The tone was clear and flute-like and the tune the same Spanish dance he had played for José. Zerlina pricked up her ears when she heard the music and the rhythm of the guitar. It is said that

no Gypsy can ever resist the sound of music. Now the body of the girl began swaying to the beat of the accompaniment. Presently she began to dance, a real Spanish dance full of gestures and movement. They half guessed the story woven in, a lover repelled and called back, coquetted with and threatened; threatened with a knife which she drew from the blouse of her dress and then restored to its hiding place; for the dance ended quickly without disaster, imaginary or otherwise. Miss Sallie had given a little cry at sight of another murderous weapon. But the knife! Had no one seen it, no one recognized the chased silver handle and the slightly curved blade? Bab sat as if rooted to the spot, waiting for somebody to speak, to cry out that the knife was the same that had whizzed past José's head the other night. After all, nobody had really seen it but herself. She had learned by a former experience to keep her own counsel, and she decided to wait, and not to tell until matters took a more definite turn.

Was it possible this beautiful Gypsy girl could be a murderess, or one at heart? But, on the other hand, would she have dared to display the mysterious dagger in the presence of the same company? Bab was puzzled and worried. Was Zerlina a robber also, or was José, after all, the robber? Perhaps there was some connection between them. There must be, since they had exchanged knives on several occasions.

Her reflections were interrupted by a general movement toward the automobiles. Zerlina was evidently pleased at the praises she had received, for her cheeks were flushed with pride.

"Won't you let us see your dagger, Zerlina?" asked Bab.

"Oh, yes, do!" begged Mollie. "It will be the third dagger we have seen this week; but this is the first chance we have had to take a good look at any of them."

Zerlina looked at them darkly. Her lips drew themselves together in a stubborn line.

"I cannot, now," she said. "Perhaps, another time. Good-bye." She slipped off into the woods as quietly as one of the spirits which were said to haunt the place.

"Gypsies are so tiresome," exclaimed Miss Sallie. "Why shouldn't she show her dagger, I'd like to know? And who cares whether she does or not, anyhow?"

"If you had ever read any books on Gypsies, Sallie," replied the major, "you would know that their lives are full of things they must keep secret if they want to keep out of jail. However, these Gypsies seem peaceable enough," he added,

his kindly spirit never liking to condemn anything until it was necessary. "But what a beautiful girl she is!" he continued. "If she were properly dressed she would be as noble and elegant looking as"—he paused for a comparison—"as our own young ladies here. I wonder if her grandmother would ever consent to her being educated and taught singing?"

"Now, Major," cried the impetuous Ruth, "keep on your own preserves! I asked her first, and I'm just dying to do it. I know papa would let me, and wouldn't it be a beautiful thing to launch a great singer upon the public?"

"It certainly would, my dear," replied the major, "and I promise not to meddle, if you had first choice."

"Why, where's Mr. Martinez?" asked Mollie, as they climbed into the automobiles and she missed her companion of the ride over.

One of the boys gave a shrill whistle and the others began calling and shouting. Presently the answer came from up the stream. "I'm coming," he called and José appeared. "I was only taking a little stroll."

"Why did you wish to miss the Gypsy song and dance?" demanded Mollie. "It was charming."

"Pardon, Mademoiselle," he replied, stiffly, "but I do not care to hear the songs of my country, or to see its dances in a foreign land."

Mollie was a little piqued by José's short answer, but she forgave him when he said sadly:

"Did you ever know, Mademoiselle, what it is to be homesick?"

"But I thought you said you liked America?" she persisted.

"So I do," he replied; "nevertheless, there are times when I feel very lonely. You will forgive me, will you not. Was I rude?"

In the meantime Stephen said to Barbara:

"Bab, are you a good walker? How would you like to take a short cut through the woods to-morrow morning, and visit the hermit who lives on the other side? We can't ride or drive very well, because it is too far by the road, but it is only about five miles when we walk. I haven't been there for several years, but I know the way well. I suppose the hermit is still alive. At least, he was all right last summer, so John the butler told me. Anybody else who wishes may go along, but nobody shall come who will lag behind and complain of the distance."

“I am good for a ten mile walk,” replied Barbara. “I have done it many a time at home.”

“The woods grow more and more interesting the deeper you go into them,” continued Stephen. “There are places where the sun never comes through, and the whole way is cool and shaded. It is full of people, too. You would be surprised to find how many people make a living in a forest. They are perfectly harmless, of course, or else I wouldn’t be taking you among them. Besides the Gypsies, there are woodcutters, old men and women who gather herbs, and a few lonely people who live in cabins on the edge of the forest and have little gardens. Uncle has always helped them, in the winter, without asking who they were or why they were there. Then there’s the hermit. He is the most interesting of the lot. He is as old as the hills and he has a secret that he would never tell, the secret of who he is and why he has lived alone for some forty years.”

“How interesting!” exclaimed Bab. “I hope Miss Sallie won’t object.”

“We shall have to get the major on our side,” replied Stephen, “and perhaps win her over, too.”

“Oh, she is not really so strict,” replied Bab, “but she feels the responsibility of looking after other peoples’ children, she says.”

“Here we are,” said Stephen, as the cars stopped at Ten Eyck Hall.

CHAPTER XIV—IN THE DEEP WOODS

It was not such a difficult matter, after all, to win permission from Miss Sallie and the major to take the walk through the forest. The major explained to Miss Sallie that Stephen was a safe and careful guide who knew the country by heart, and that if the girls were equal to the walk there would be no danger in the excursion. The party, however, dwindled to five persons, Bab and Ruth, Stephen, Jimmie and Alfred. The latter appeared early, equipped for the walk, carrying a heavy cane, his trousers turned up over stout boots.

“Now, Stephen,” said Miss Sallie, “I want you to promise me to take good care of the girls. You say the woods are not dangerous, although a highwayman stepped out of them one evening and attacked us with a knife. But I take your word for it, since the major says it is safe and I see Alfred is armed.”

Everybody laughed at this, and Alfred looked conscious and blushed.

“Doesn’t one carry a cane in this country?” he asked.

“Not often at your age, my boy,” replied Jimmie. “But I daresay it will serve to beat a trail through the underbrush.”

“Come along, girls; let’s be off,” cried Stephen, who at heart was almost a Gypsy, and loved a long tramp through the woods. He had strapped over his shoulder a goodly sized box of lunch, and the cavalcade started cheerfully down the walk that led toward the forest, a compact mass of foliage lying to the left of them.

“Isn’t this fun?” demanded Jimmie. “I feel just in the humor for a lark.”

“I hope you can climb fences, girls,” called Stephen over his shoulder, as he trudged along, ahead of the others.

“We could even climb a tree if we had to,” answered Bab, “or swim a creek.”

“Or ride a horse bareback,” interrupted Jimmie, who had heard the story of Bab’s escapade on the road to Newport.

“This is the end of uncle’s land,” said Stephen, at last. “We now find ourselves

entering the black forest. Here's the trail," he called as the others helped the two girls over the dividing fence.

"All right, Scout Stephen," replied Jimmie. "We are following close behind. Proceed with the march."

Sure enough, there was a distinct road leading straight into the forest, formed by ruts from cartwheels, probably the carts of the woodcutters, Stephen explained. The edges of the wood were rather thin and scant, like the meagre fringe on a man's head just beginning to turn bald at the temples; but as they marched deeper into the forest, the trees grew so thickly that their branches overhead formed a canopy like a roof. Squirrels and chipmunks scampered across their path and occasionally a rabbit could be seen scurrying through the underbrush.

"Isn't this great!" exclaimed Stephen, after they had been walking for some time. "Uncle says there's scarcely such another wood in this part of the country."

"Don't speak so loud, Stephen," said Jimmie. "It is so quiet here, I feel as if we would wake something, if we spoke above a whisper."

"Let's wake the echoes," replied Stephen and he gave a yodel familiar to all boys, a sort of trilling in the head and throat that is melodious in sound and carries further than an ordinary call. Immediately there was an answer to the yodel. It might have seemed an echo, only there was no place for an echo in this shut-in spot.

They all stopped and listened as the answer died away among the branches of the trees.

"Curious," said Jimmie. "It was rather close, too. Perhaps one of your woodcutters is playing a trick on us, Stephen. Suppose we try again, and see what happens!" Jimmie gave another yodel, louder and longer than the first. As they paused and listened, the answer came again like an echo, this time even nearer.

"Let's investigate," proposed Alfred. "I think it came from over there," and he led the way through the trees toward the echo.

"Halloo-o," he called, "who are you?" and the answer came back "Halloo-o, who are you?" followed by a mocking laugh.

"Well, after all, it isn't any of our business who you are," cried Stephen, exasperated, "and I don't think we had better leave the trail just here for a fellow who is afraid to come out and show himself," he added in a lower tone.

There was no reply and they returned to the cartwheel road and began the march again.

“You were quite right, Stephen,” said Ruth, “why should we waste our time over an idler who plays tricks on people?”

There was another laugh, which seemed to come from high up in the branches; then sounds like the chattering of squirrels, followed by low whistles and bird calls. They examined the branches of the trees around them, but there was nothing in sight.

“Oh, go along!” exclaimed Alfred angrily. “Only cowards hide behind trees. Brave men show themselves.”

Silence greeted this sally, also, and they trudged on through the forest without any further effort to see the annoyer. Several times acorn shells whizzed past their heads, and once Jimmie made a running jump, thinking he saw some one behind a tree, but returned crestfallen. A surprise was in store for them, however. They had been walking for some time when the trail, which hitherto had run straight through the middle of the wood, gave a sudden and unexpected turn, to avoid a depression in the land, overgrown with vines and small trees, and now dry from the drought.

They paused a moment on the curve of the path to look across at the graceful little hollow which seemed to be the meeting place of slender young pine trees and silver birches gleaming white among the dark green branches.

“How like people they look,” Bab whispered. She never knew just why she did so. “Like girls in white dresses at a party.”

“And the pine trees are the men,” whispered Jimmie. “Look,” he said excitedly, under his breath, “there’s a man! Perhaps it’s the——”

He stopped short and his voice died away in amazement. Barbara said “Sh-h-h!” and the others paused in wonder. Just emerging from the hollow on the other side, was the figure of a man. All eyes saw him at the same moment and two pairs of eyes at least recognized a green velveteen hunting suit. As the figure turned for one brief instant and scanned the forest they saw his face in a flash.

“It’s José!” they gasped.

“Bab,” exclaimed Ruth, “he is wearing the green velveteens!”

“I know it,” replied her friend. “But are we sure it was José?”

“No; we aren’t sure,” answered Stephen. “It certainly looked like José, but we’ll

give him the benefit of the doubt, at any rate.”

From beyond the hollow came another yodel.

“By Jove!” said Jimmie, “nothing but a tricky foreigner, after all, and I was just beginning to like him too.”

“He’s more than a trickster,” Bab whispered. “He’s wearing a green velveteen suit.”

“Well, what of it?” asked Stephen.

“It’s the same suit the highwayman wore who slashed the tires of the automobile.”

“Whew-w-w!” cried the boys.

“Be careful,” whispered Ruth. “Don’t let him hear us. Do you think he saw us?”

“No,” replied Alfred, “or he would never have yodeled.”

Barbara began to consider. Should she tell about the knife, or should she wait? She believed that if she told it would only complicate matters and bring Zerlina, the Gypsy girl, into the muddle. Suppose she told, and then, when they reached home, they found that José had been away that morning? It would immediately call down upon him the suspicions of the whole party, suspicions perhaps undeserved. Bab had never had cause to regret her ability to keep a secret, and she concluded to test it again by holding her peace a little longer.

“José or no José, let’s go on and have our good time,” exclaimed Stephen. “Everything depends on whether José was at home or not this morning. If he wasn’t, why, then he’ll have to give an account of himself. And if he was, we shall have to consult uncle about what to do. We will hunt the man out of these woods, anyway. He has no business lurking around here.”

Once more they started off, and were not troubled again by the yodler.

Presently the jangle of a bell was heard in the distance, a pleasant musical tinkle in the midst of the green stillness of the forest.

“What on earth is *that*?” exclaimed Ruth, a little nervous now from the nearness of the robber.

“If I am not mistaken,” replied Stephen, “that is old Adam, the woodcutter. He has been living in these woods all his life, seventy years or more. He looks almost like a tree himself, he is so gnarled and weather-beaten and bent.”

In a few moments the woodman’s cart hove into sight, drawn by a bony old

horse from whose collar jangled the little bell. The cart was loaded with bundles of wood, and Adam walked at the side holding the rope lines in one hand and flourishing a whip in the other, the lash of which he carefully kept away from his horse, which was ambling along at its pleasure.

“Good day, Adam,” said Stephen. “How are you, and how is the wood business?”

“Why, it’s Mr. Stephen!” cried the old man, touching his cap with one of his knotted hands. “The wood business is good, sir. We manage to live, my wife and I. Although I’m wishin’ t’was something else kept us going. I never fell a tree, sir, I don’t feel I’m killin’ something alive. They are fine old trees,” he went on, patting the bark of a silver birch affectionately. “I would not kill one of these white ladies, sir, if you was to pay me a hundred dollars!”

“It’s a shame, Adam,” replied Stephen. “It must be like cutting down your own family, you have lived among them for so many years. How is the hermit? Do you give him enough wood to keep him alive in the winter?”

“He’s not been himself of late,” answered Adam, lowering his voice. “He’s always strange at this time of the year.”

“Do you think he’ll see us if we go over?” asked Stephen.

“I think so, sir,” replied Adam. “No matter how bad off he is, he’s always kind. I never see him angry.”

“Well, good-bye, Adam, and good luck to you,” said Stephen, dropping a piece of money into the wrinkled palm, and they continued their journey through the wood.

The little bell resumed its tinkle, and the cart was soon out of sight.

CHAPTER XV—THE HERMIT

“Do you know,” exclaimed Ruth, “I feel as if I were in an enchanted forest, and these strange people were witches and wizards! The robber might have been a wood-elf, and now here comes the old witch. Perhaps she will turn us into trees and animals.”

“Oh, that is old Jennie, who gathers herbs and sells them at all the drugstores in the towns around here,” replied Stephen, as a strange figure came into view.

The gatherer of herbs and roots was not, however, very witchlike in appearance. She was tall and erect, and walked with long strides like a grenadier. What was most remarkable about her were her wide, staring blue eyes, like patches of sky, that looked far beyond the young people who had grouped themselves at the side of the path almost timidly, waiting for her to come up. She carried with her a staff, and as she walked she poked the bushes and grasses with it as if it had been a long finger feeling for trophies. The other hand grasped the end of an apron made of an old sack, stuffed full of herbs still green, and fragrant from having been bruised as she crushed them into the bag.

“She is blind,” whispered Stephen, “but in a minute she will perceive that some one is near. She has a scent as keen as a hunting dog’s.”

A few yards away from them old Jennie paused and sniffed the air like an animal. Reaching out with her stick she felt around her. Presently the staff pointed in the direction of the boys and girls, and she came toward them as straight as a hunter after his quarry. The girls, a little frightened, started to draw back.

“She won’t hurt you,” whispered Stephen. “Why, Jennie,” he said in a louder voice, “don’t you know your old friend and playmate?”

A smile broke out on Jennie’s handsome face, which, in spite of her age, was as smooth and placid as a child’s.

“It’s Master Stephen!” she cried, in a strange voice that sounded rusty from lack of use. “I be glad to hear you, sir. It’s a long time since we’ve had a frolic in the

woods. You don't hunt birds' nests in the summer now, or go wading in the streams. I found a wasps' nest for you, perhaps it was a month, perhaps a year ago, I cannot remember. But I saved it for you. And how is young Master Martin? He was a little fellow to climb so high for the nests."

"We are both well, Jennie, and you must come over to the hall and see us. We may have something nice for you, there, that will keep you warm when the snow comes."

"Ah, you're a good boy, Master Stephen, and I'll bid ye good day now, and good day to your friends. There be four with you I think," she added in a lower voice, sniffing the air again. "I'll be over on my next trip to the village." Old Jennie moved off as swiftly as she had come, tapping the path with her long stick, her head thrown back as if to see with her nostrils, since her eyes were without sight.

"What a strange old woman!" cried Stephen's companions in one voice.

"And the strangest thing about her," replied Stephen, "is that she has no sense of time. She can't remember whether a thing happened a year ago or month ago, and she thinks Martin and I are still little boys. We haven't hunted birds' nests with her for six years. I have not even seen her for two or three years, but she sniffed me out as quickly as if I always used triple extract of tuberose."

"Where does she live?" asked Bab.

"She lives in a little cabin off in the forest somewhere. Her father and mother were woodcutters. She was born and brought up right here. She doesn't know anything but herbs and roots, and night and day are the same to her. She knows every square foot of this country, and never gets lost. Martin and I used to go about with her when we were little boys, and she was as faithful a nurse as you could possibly find."

"No wonder you love these woods, Stephen," said Bab. "There is so much to do and see in them. I wish we had something better than scrub oak around Kingsbridge."

"Wait until you see the chief treasure of the woods, Barbara, and you'll have even more respect for them."

"Meaning the hermit?" asked Jimmie.

"But he won't tell anything, will he?" demanded Ruth. "Didn't you say he was a mystery?"

"The greatest mystery of the countryside," replied Stephen. "Nobody knows

where he came from, nor why he has been living here all these years—it's about fifty, they say. You see, he is not ignorant, like the other wood people. He is a gentleman. His manners are as fine as uncle's, and the people who live in the woods all love him. They come to him when they are sick or in trouble."

"How does he live?" asked Alfred.

"He must have some money hidden away somewhere, for he always has enough to eat, and even to give when others need help. But nobody knows where he keeps it. In a hole in the ground somewhere, I suppose."

While they were talking they had approached a clearing on the side of a hill. Most of the big trees had been cut away, and only the silver birch, "the white ladies," as old Adam had christened them, and the dogwood, mingled their shade over the smooth turf. The grass was as thick and well kept as on the major's lawn, only somewhat browned now for lack of water. All the bushes and undergrowth had been cleared away years before, and the place had a lived-in, homelike look in contrast to the great black forest that seemed to be crouching at its feet like a monster guarding it from the enemy. And indeed, that must have been what the mysterious man had intended when he built his little house at the top of the hill, for five miles of woods intervened between him and the outer world on one side, while on the other, was a high precipice that marked the end of the forest.

The house, a log cabin with a big stone chimney at one end, commanded a view, from the back, of a long stretch of valley. The portico in front was shaded by honeysuckle vines. Here, in an old-fashioned armchair, sat the master smoking a meerschaum pipe.

Stephen approached somewhat diffidently, taking off his cap.

"May we rest here a little, sir?" he asked. "We have walked a long way this morning."

"You are most welcome," said the old man in a deep, musical voice that gave the young people a thrill of pleasure. They looked at him curiously. He was tall and erect, with a beak-nose and black eyes that still had some of their youthful fire in them, despite the man's great age and his snow white hair.

"Come in, and we will bring some chairs out for the young ladies."

Stephen followed their host into the house while, through the open door, the others caught a glimpse of an enormous open fireplace and walls lined with books. The girls took the proffered chairs and sat down rather stiffly, while the

old man reappeared, carrying a bucket and a gourd.

“Perhaps you are thirsty. Will you draw some water from the well?” he asked, turning to Stephen. He stopped abruptly and looked closely at the boy. “Why, it’s little Stephen,” he exclaimed, and with an expression half of pain, half pleasure, he added, “grown to be a man and how like”——But he paused and turned hastily away.

“I am glad to see you, sir,” replied Stephen, politely. He never knew exactly how to address the hermit, and he found not knowing his name somewhat awkward. “May I introduce my friends? Miss Ruth Stuart, Miss Barbara Thurston, Alfred Marsdale and Jimmie Butler.”

The old man bowed to the company as gracefully as if he had been receiving guests in a fine mansion.

“The names are,” he repeated gently, “Miss Ruth Stuart and—did I hear you aright—Miss——?”

“Barbara Thurston,” finished Stephen.

“Barbara Thurston?” repeated the old man under his breath. “Barbara Thurston! Come here, my child, and let me look at you,” he added, in an agitated voice.

Barbara obediently came forward and stood before the hermit, who had covered his eyes with his hand for a moment, as if he were afraid to see her face.

“Barbara Thurston!” he exclaimed again. “Little Barbara!” And drawing from his pocket a pair of horn spectacles, he put them on and examined her features. He seemed to have forgotten the others. Suddenly he removed the spectacles and looked up in a dazed way.

“On the very day! The very day!” he cried, and waving his arms over his head in a wild appeal to heaven, he turned and rushed down the hillside. In another moment the forest had swallowed him up, while the five young people stood staring after him in amazement.

“Well, of all the rummy old chaps!” exclaimed Alfred.

“Oh, he’s touched of course,” said Stephen, tapping his head. “He must be. You know old Adam said he’s always pretty bad at this time of the year. I suppose it is the anniversary of something. But, Barbara, what do you mean by going and stirring up memories?”

“It wasn’t I; it was my name,” replied Barbara. “Once there was a girl named Barbara, but the rest of the story can never be written, because he won’t tell what

it is.”

“Let’s have a peep at the house before we go,” said Jimmie, “and then let’s eat. I’m starving.”

“All right,” said Stephen. “Step right in and have a look for yourselves, but hurry up before the old gentleman comes back.”

The place was certainly comfortable and cosy-looking, in spite of the wooden walls and bare floors. It was spick and span and clean, kept that way by Adam’s wife, Stephen explained. There were a great many books, some of them in foreign languages, two big easy-chairs near the open fireplace, and on an old mahogany table, the only other piece of furniture in the room, a brown earthenware jar filled with honeysuckle. Only one picture hung on the wall, a small miniature suspended from a nail just over the pot of flowers. Ruth examined the picture closely. Besides his books, she thought, this little miniature was perhaps the only link with the outer world that the old man had permitted himself to keep.

“Come here, everybody, quick,” she called, “and look at this miniature. As I live, it’s enough like Bab to be a picture of her, except for the old-fashioned dress and long ringlets.”

They looked at the picture carefully, taking it down from its nail in order to see it in the light.

“My word!” exclaimed Jimmie. “It’s as good a likeness as you could wish to find. It must have been the resemblance that gave the old man the fit, then, and not the name.”

The miniature showed the face of a young girl, somewhat older than Barbara, but certainly very like her in features and expression. She had the same laughing mouth and frank, brown eyes, the same chestnut hair curling in crisp ringlets around the forehead, but caught up loosely in the back in a net and tied with a velvet snood. She wore a bodice of rose-colored taffeta cut low in the neck, and fastened coquettishly among the curls was a pink flower.

“Who is it, Barbara?” asked Stephen. “Have you any idea?”

“I can’t imagine,” replied Bab. “Perhaps it’s just a coincidence. I am not an uncommon type and may have lots of doubles. There are many people in this world who have brown eyes and brown hair. You meet them at every turn.”

“Yes,” said Ruth, “but all of them haven’t regular features and little crisp curls, and just that particular expression. However, we must go. We shouldn’t like the

hermit to come back and find us prying into his affairs. And that is why he is here, evidently—to hide from pryers.”

“Yes,” agreed Stephen, “I really do think we had better be going. I know a pretty little dell where we can eat lunch if Jimmie can restrain his appetite until we get there.”

“Well, cut along, then,” ordered Jimmie, “and let us hasten to the banquet hall.”

Closing the door carefully behind them the young folks hurried toward the woodcutters’ road.

CHAPTER XVI—A SURPRISE

When the last sandwich had been eaten, and the last crumb of cake disposed of, the picnic party leaned lazily against the moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree to discuss the events of the morning.

José was the subject of the talk. All were inclined to believe, now, that they had been deceived by the strong resemblance between the young Spaniard and the mischievous person who had mystified them in the woods that morning. It seemed impossible that José was a thief, or that he could have been guilty of such trifling trickery as the individual in the robber's clothes. José, quiet and reserved though he was, had become a favorite with the young people.

"It is strange," said Ruth. "He must have the nameless charm, because there is not one of us who does not like him. As for me, I feel sorry for him. And why, I'd like to know?"

"It's his mournful black eye, my dear young lady," replied Jimmie.

"Whatever it is," said Stephen, decisively, "we must not make any accusations without knowing, for certain, that we are right. It is rather an uncomfortable situation, I think, considering he is uncle's guest."

"It is, indeed," replied Alfred, "and I vote that we say not a word to anyone until we find out where José spent the morning."

"Agreed by all," cried Jimmie. "Am I right, girls?"

The two girls assented, and the matter was settled.

"I think we had better be moving on toward home, now," said Stephen, "if we want to escape a scolding from Miss Stuart."

"All right, general," replied Jimmie. "The bivouac is at an end. Rise, soldiers, and follow your leader." He cocked his hat, turned up his coat collar and struck a Napoleon pose.

There was a stifled laugh, from behind a clump of alder bushes—a coarse laugh that made the boys look up quickly and uneasily.

“What was that?” asked Ruth, frightened.

Without waiting for a reply, Alfred divided the bushes with his cane disclosing three pairs of eyes gazing impudently at them. Three figures untangled themselves from the bushes and rose stiffly, as if they had been lying concealed there for a long time. The girls gave a stifled cry of alarm, for each recognized the giant tramp, who had attacked them near the churchyard of Sleepy Hollow; and his companions were probably the same, although the girls had not seen them at that time. The leader of the three roughs did not recognize them, however. He had been too much intoxicated to remember their faces; but he was sober, now, and in an uglier mood than when he had been in his cups.

“So ho!” he cried. “We have here five rich, young persons—rich with the money they have no right to—stolen money—stolen from me and mine. While we beg and tramp, and dress in rags, you throw away the money we have earned for you. Well, we won’t have it. Will we, pals? We’ll get back some of the money that belongs to us by rights. You’ll hand out what you’ve got in your pockets, and, if it ain’t enough, we’ll keep you into the bargain until your fathers they pays for your release. D’ye see? Ho! Ho!” He roared out a terrible laugh until the woods resounded.

The three boys had lined up in front of the two girls and Stephen had called to them reassuringly over his shoulder:

“Start on, girls. You know the path. Follow it the way we came. If you meet Adam, ask him to go with you, or even old Jennie. Don’t be frightened. It’ll be all right, but we’ve got to fight.”

Barbara and Ruth, both very calm and pale, were standing silently, waiting for orders.

“Do you think we could help by staying, Bab?” asked Ruth.

“I don’t know, dear,” replied Bab. “Wait, and let me think a moment.” She closed her eyes and her moving lips repeated the little prayer: “Heaven, make me calm in the face of danger,” but in that moment the fight had begun. The two girls stood fascinated, rooted to the spot.

Stephen, who was a trained boxer, had tackled the leader and had managed to give him several straight blows, at the same time dodging the badly-aimed blows from the big fist of his opponent. Alfred had purposely chosen the next largest tramp, leaving a small, wiry man for Jimmie to grapple with. Alfred, also, had been carefully trained in the arts of boxing and wrestling; but his opponent was

no mean match for him, and the two presently were rolling over and over on the ground, their faces covered with dust and blood. Poor Jimmie was not a fighter. All his life he had shunned gymnasiums, preferring to thrum the piano or the guitar, or invent models for airships. However, the boy was no coward and he went at his enemy with a will that was lacking in force only because he himself lacked the muscle to give it. But the wiry fellow who had been his portion was evidently the best-trained fighter of the three tramps, and it was only a few moments before Jimmie was bleeding from the nose and one eye was blacked. It looked as if Alfred, too, were getting the worst of it, while Stephen and his tramp were still raining blows upon each other, jumping about in a circle. Bab longed to help Jimmie, but she saw, and Ruth agreed, that they would do more harm than good.

The two girls decided to run for help, even if they had to run all the way to Ten Eyck Hall, especially as, in the midst of the scrimmage, Stephen had called out to them to hurry up.

Making the best speed they could through the brambles and ferns, they had gone not more than a few rods when, pausing in their flight, they found themselves face to face with blind Jennie.

“What is happening?” demanded the old woman in a terrified whisper. “I hear the sound of blows. I smell blood.”

“There is a fight, Jennie,” replied Bab, almost sobbing in her excitement. “We must get help quickly from somewhere. Are the Gypsies far from here?”

“Yes,” answered Jennie. “Not so near as the hall. But wait! Come with me,” and her face was illumined by the expression of one who is about to reveal a well-kept secret.

“But, Jennie, is it help you are bringing us?” asked Ruth, demurring a little.

“You may trust old Jennie,” exclaimed the blind woman. “Be ye not the friends of young Master Stephen?”

The two girls followed without a word.

Almost in sight of the fighters, she paused by the stump of a hollow tree which, when rolled away by her strong arm, disclosed a sort of trapdoor underneath. Lifting the door, crudely constructed with strips of wood, the bark still on, the girls saw a small underground chamber dug out like a cellar. The walls were shored up with split trees which also did duty as cross beams. There was a rough, hand-made ladder at the opening, and at one side a shelf on which was

neatly folded—could they believe their eyes—the suit of green velveteen. Old Jennie, who seemed to be peering down into the cavity with her sightless blue eyes, shook Bab's arm impatiently.

"Get the firearms," she whispered. "They be on the shelf. I felt them there last time."

Sure enough, lying in the shadow at the far end of the shelf the girls made out two pistols gleaming ominously in the dark. Without a word, Bab bounded down the ladder, and seizing the pistols was up again almost as quickly.

"Ruth," she said, "have you forgotten our rifle practice in the Berkshires?"

"No," replied her friend. "All you have to do is to cock it and pull the trigger, isn't it?"

"That's right," answered Bab. "Take this one and come on. They are both loaded, I see. Don't fire unless I tell you, and be careful where you aim. You had better point up so as not to hit anybody. Jennie, wait for us over here. I believe you have saved us all."

So saying, Bab ran, followed by Ruth, to the scene of the battle. And it was indeed a battle! Jimmie was lying insensible on the ground, while his opponent had joined in the fight against Stephen, who was rapidly losing strength. Alfred and his tramp were still rolling over and over, locked in each other's arms.

A few feet away from the fighters Bab fired her pistol in the air. The explosion stopped the fight. So intent had the combatants been that they had forgotten time and place. At the report of the pistol they came to themselves almost with a jump. Everybody, except poor, unconscious Jimmie, paused breathless, perspiration pouring from their faces. Alfred had got the better of his opponent and his hands gripped the man's throat. Bab, followed by Ruth, dashed up, and both girls pointed their pistols at the two tramps who were engaging Stephen.

"Shall we shoot them, Stephen?" asked Bab as calmly as if nothing had happened.

"Throw up your hands," cried Stephen to the tramps; which they proceeded to do in prompt order. "Now, give me your pistol, Ruth; give yours to Alfred, Bab."

In the meantime, Alfred had risen, hardly recognizable in a coating of dust and blood, ordering his man to lie quiet or be killed.

"Suppose we herd them together, Stephen," he suggested, "and drive them up to the hall like the cattle they are?"

“Just what I was thinking,” replied Stephen, “only what about Jimmie?”

“The girls will see to him,” answered Alfred.

“No, no,” retorted Stephen. “We can’t leave the girls here alone with him in that condition, not after this. There may be more tramps lurking around, for all we know.”

Just then an exclamation from Ruth, who was kneeling beside the prostrate Jimmie, caused the two boys to turn their heads involuntarily, and in that moment, the two men who were standing with their arms up at the point of Stephen’s pistol, ran for the underbrush, Stephen shot and missed his aim. He shot again and hit the small fellow in the leg, having aimed low; not wishing to kill even in self-defense. But the tramps had plunged into the woods, and were out of sight in an instant.

“Better not go after them, Stephen,” called Alfred. “We’ve got one here and we may catch the others later. I wish we had a rope to tie this fellow’s hands with.”

“Try this,” suggested Ruth, and she calmly tore the muslin ruffle off her petticoat and handed the strip to Alfred, who bound the man’s hands behind his back and ordered him to sit still until he was wanted.

Meanwhile, the two girls had turned their attention to Jimmie, who showed no signs of returning consciousness, but lay battered and bleeding, a sad sight in comparison to the joyous Jimmie of half an hour before. Blind Jennie had come from her hiding place behind a tree, and was kneeling beside the wounded boy. Feeling the abrasions on his face with her sensitive fingers, she shuddered.

“He should have water,” she whispered. “There is a brook not far from here. I will show you,” and she turned her sightless eyes in the direction of Stephen, who was guarding the remaining tramp.

“Ruth, you and Alfred take our three hats and go with Jennie for the water. Alfred, take the pistol with you in case of another attack. Bab, you stay and look after Jimmie, please.”

Ruth and Alfred followed after old Jennie, while Bab, kneeling beside Jimmie, began chafing his wrists. Not a sound broke the stillness. Stephen, on a log, had his pistol cocked and pointed straight at the tramp who was huddled in a heap on the ground, gazing sullenly into the barrel of the pistol. Bab had not looked around for some time, so intent was she on her efforts to bring some life back into poor Jimmie. But feeling a sudden, unaccountable loneliness, she called:

“Stephen, aren’t you curious to know where we found the pistols?”

There was no answer, and, looking over her shoulder, Bab was horrified to see Stephen lying prone on the ground in a dead faint, the pistol still grasped tightly in his hand, while the tramp had evidently lost no time in joining his pals.

Leaving Jimmie, Bab rushed to Stephen. First releasing the pistol from his hand, she laid it on a stump. Then she began rubbing his wrists and temples.

“Poor old Stephen!” she murmured. “You were hurt all the time and never said a word.”

Slowly he opened his eyes and looked at Bab in a sort of shamefaced way.

“I suppose the tramp got away?” he asked.

“Who cares,” replied his friend, “if you aren’t hurt?”

“Oh, I’m not,” he answered. “I was only winded. That big fellow gave me a blow, just as you shot the pistol off, that nearly did for me. But I thought I could keep up until the others came back. I knew I couldn’t go for the water. How did you get the pistols?”

By the time Bab had finished her story the others had come up with the water.

“It’s just as well the tramp has gone,” said Alfred, when he had heard what had happened. “I don’t believe we could have managed him and Jimmie, too.”

They bathed Jimmie’s face and wrists with the cold spring water, and it was a battered and disconsolate young man who finally opened his one good eye on the company.

“I think,” said Stephen, “we had better put these pistols back where they were. If they are gone, the robber will take alarm and we’ll never catch him. I don’t think we’ll be attacked by those tramps any more to-day. They’ll never imagine we have left the pistols.”

The others agreed, and the pistols were left on the shelf by Bab, who remembered exactly where they had been when she found them. All the others, even Jimmie, peered curiously down into the underground room.

“I don’t think it’s been very long dug,” observed Alfred. “There is so much fresh earth around the door. The fellow carted most of it away, I suppose, and put leaves and sticks over what was left. But there is plenty of evidence of fresh earth, just the same.”

“So there is,” replied Stephen. “Jennie, you did a good day’s work when you found that hole in the ground. You may have saved our lives, for all we can tell.”

But the old woman only muttered, as she punched the leaves with her staff. The somewhat dilapidated picnic party resumed its homeward journey, Jimmie supported by his two friends and stopping often to rest, while the two girls followed, keeping a sharp lookout on both sides. Old Jennie brought up the rear.

CHAPTER XVII—ZERLINA

When they reached Ten Eyck Hall, it was with relief that the young people learned that the others had gone motoring for the afternoon, and would probably not be back until dinner time. Stephen put Jimmie under the care of the housekeeper, who bound up his wounds in absorbent cotton saturated with witch hazel. The girls disappeared into their own room, but not before Bab had cautioned Stephen to bring them word about José.

The information came in the form of a few scribbled lines on the tea tray.

“John tells me,” the note ran, “that José was off on his motor cycle until lunch time. S.”

The two girls read the note excitedly.

“Bab, dear,” cried Ruth, “I simply can’t believe it of that nice boy, can you?”

“I don’t want to believe it,” replied Bab, “even though appearances are against him.”

“But who could the joker in the woods have been, if not José?” continued Ruth. “And, come to think of it, he might have been the highwayman, too. It would not have been difficult for him to have found out at the hotel where we were going. I am afraid he is in an awful mess, yet, in spite of everything, there is something about him that disarms suspicion.”

Ruth was a loyal friend to people she liked. She believed that her chosen circle consisted of a superior class of beings, and she was as blind to their faults as a mother to those of her favorite child. There was a tap on the door, and the maid informed them that Zerlina, the Gypsy girl, wished to speak to them.

“Send her up,” said Ruth, and presently Zerlina was ushered into the room.

There was a scared look in her eyes as they wandered hastily around the charming apartment and finally rested on the two girls who were stretched on the bed in muslin kimonos.

“How do you do, Zerlina?” said Ruth. “Excuse our not getting up. We are just

dead tired. Won't you have a cup of tea?"

"Thank you," replied the Gypsy stiffly, "I do not care for tea. I came——" she paused. "I thought——" she hesitated again.

"Well, Zerlina, what did you think?" asked Ruth.

Bab was looking at the girl curiously.

"I came because you asked me," she said finally.

"So we did," replied Ruth, "and we are delighted to see you. Did your grandmother come with you?"

"No," answered Zerlina and paused again.

"Perhaps you had some special reason for coming, Zerlina," hinted Bab. "Was it to ask us a question?"

The girl's face took on the same stubborn expression it had worn when Bab had asked her to show the knife used in the dance.

"I came because you asked me," she repeated, in the same sing-song tone.

Again there was a tap at the door and Bridget appeared, bringing a note for Bab.

"Another note from Stephen," observed Bab, reading it carefully and handing it to Ruth. The note said:

"If you and Ruth don't mind, kindly keep the fight, if possible, a secret from everybody for a day or two. It would be necessary to explain about the pistols, and if José is the man who owns them, telling would give everything away. I shall tell uncle, of course. People will think that Jimmie fell out of a tree or down into a hollow. Keep as quiet as possible about the particulars of our adventure. S."

"I'm sorry," exclaimed Ruth; "it would have been such fun to tell it all."

"The telling is only a pleasure deferred for a while," said her friend.

In the meantime, the Gypsy girl had lost nothing of the conversation except the contents of the note, which Bab had rolled into a little ball and thrown into a waste paper basket.

"Will the ladies not show me some of their beautiful dresses?" asked Zerlina presently.

"We haven't much to show," replied Ruth, "but we'll be glad to show what we have." She pulled herself lazily from the bed and opened the door of a wardrobe

at one side of the room.

“Ruth, you show her your fine things,” called Bab. “I haven’t a rag worth seeing. Get out your pink lingerie and your leghorn with the shaded roses. They would please her eye.”

“Why don’t you show her your organdie, Bab?” asked Ruth. “It’s just as pretty as my pink, any day.”

“Oh, very well,” returned Bab, opening her side of the massive clothes press and spreading the dress on the bed before the admiring eyes of Zerlina. “A poor thing, but mine own,” she said. “I certainly never thought to be displaying my rich wardrobe to anyone. It’s entirely a new sensation.”

In the meantime Ruth had piled her own gauzy finery on the bed beside Bab’s, and Zerlina feasted her gaze on the pink lace-trimmed princess dresses and the flower bedecked hats.

“Some day you must have pretty dresses, too, Zerlina,” said Ruth from the depths of the wardrobe, as she replaced the things; “some day when you are a great singer.”

There was no reply, and Bab, who was busy folding her dress, looked quickly around. Zerlina’s arm was in the scrap basket. She had looked up as Ruth spoke, and catching Bab’s eye, dropped the crumpled note she had just seized. An angry blush overspread her face and she bit her lip in embarrassment.

“I must be going,” she said. “It is late.”

Bab did not answer. She was thinking deeply. Here was positive proof that Zerlina and José were working together in some way.

“Wait a minute, Zerlina,” called Ruth, kindly. “Won’t you accept this red velvet bow? It would look pretty in your black hair.”

“Thank you,” exclaimed the girl, her eyes filling with tears. “You are very good to me.” Her lip trembled as if she were about to burst into tears, but she conquered them with an effort and started to the door. “Good-bye,” she said, looking at Bab so reproachfully that the latter’s heart was melted to pity.

At dinner that night there was much concern expressed for poor Jimmie who, with his face swathed in bandages, was sound asleep in his own room. Stephen had been closeted with his uncle for half an hour before the gong sounded, and the major’s usually placid face was haunted by an expression of deep worry.

“Do tell us about the hermit, Stephen,” cried Grace, and that being a safe subject

the four adventurers plunged into a description of the strange old man and the miniature that so resembled Bab.

“Do you remember when he came, Major?” asked Miss Stuart.

“Only vaguely,” replied the major, “I was quite a little chap then, eight or ten, I think I was, and we were living in France at the time. He had become a fixture when we came back, but he always shunned advances from my family. Undoubtedly he was a fugitive from somewhere. However, this is not such an out-of-the-way place but that he could have been found if they had looked for him very hard. I have not seen him for many years. How does he look?”

“Like an exiled prince,” answered Ruth. “He is a very noble looking old man.”

“José, did you play croquet with the girls this morning?” asked Stephen.

“Wasn’t he mean?” interrupted Mollie. “No sooner had you gone than he was off on his motor cycle.”

The young Spaniard’s face had flushed scarlet at the question, but he smiled at Mollie’s teasing reply and looked Stephen squarely in the eye.

“It must have been rather hot work motoring this morning, wasn’t it, José?” went on Stephen.

“I went only to the forest,” answered José.

The four friends stirred uneasily, and the major looked down at his plate. It hurt him deeply to see José put on the rack in this way.

“How far did you go into the woods, José? It’s curious we didn’t meet you.”

“Only to the haunted pool,” replied José.

“You were not far off, then,” said Stephen. “Did you hear us yodeling?”

“No,” answered José; “er—that is, yes. I did hear something like that, but I was not there long.” His face was still flushed and he looked as if he would like to run away from his inquisitors; but the soft-hearted major could endure the painful situation no longer and he changed the conversation to another topic.

“Why don’t you young people ever dance?” he asked. “I had planned to see young couples whirling around the red drawing room. It would be a pretty sight, Sallie. Would it not?”

“I have a plan,” broke in Mollie, “but I can’t tell it now. It’s to be a surprise for Miss Sallie and the major.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “Are we to feel honored or slighted, Major?”

“Oh, not slighted,” protested Mollie. “It is something that will amuse you.”

“What is it?” asked a voice from the doorway. “I am palpitating to know.”

Everybody looked up in surprise at the apparition of Jimmie regarding the company gravely with his one good eye. His other eye was swathed in a bandage, and his nose was swollen and red. There was a joyous peal of laughter from the assembled party.

“Why, Jimmie,” cried Martin, “you look like an exhausted Dutchman.”

“Don’t throw stones, my son,” replied Jimmie. “You’re a Dutchman yourself, remember.”

“Come in and have some dinner, Jimmie,” coaxed the major.

“I’ve dined, thank you, sir. My kind nurse saw to that, and I feel considerably better.”

“How did you happen to black your eye, you poor boy?” asked Mollie.

Stephen cleared his throat audibly. Why on earth had he not cautioned Mollie not to ask Jimmie any questions? But Ruth came to the rescue and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“You mustn’t ask Jimmie embarrassing questions, Mollie. A black eye and a red nose are enough to bear for the present.”

The major relieved the situation by saying:

“Now, Mistress Mollie, we are ready to be surprised.”

“Come on,” said Stephen, taking Jimmie by the arm, and as they stood aside, he whispered into his ear: “Keep it dark about the tramps. Uncle will explain.”

“The surprise is this,” explained Mollie, detaining the young people in the hall.

“Why not give our masquerade to-night?”

“This is as good a time as any other,” agreed Martin.

“Oh, you children!” exclaimed Stephen.

“Don’t be a wet blanket, Stephen,” said Martin.

“Oh, I simply thought perhaps the girls might be tired or something,” replied Stephen. “We’ll all dress up if you like.”

“What fun!” cried Mollie. “José, you’re to be a pirate, remember.”

“I think José would make a good highwayman,” observed Bab, “with a knife in his belt and a slouch hat on.” She had no sooner spoken than she repented her words.

“Perhaps I would, Mademoiselle,” he replied gently, with a deep sigh.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE MASQUERADE

The picture they made as they filed down the oak staircase two by two and all attired in their antique costumes was one long remembered by the servants of Ten Eyck Hall, who had gathered below to see the masqueraders. Miss Stuart and the major, standing together at the door of the red drawing room, were amazed and delighted.

“Is this a company of ghosts,” cried the major, “ghosts of my dear departed ancestors returned to the halls of their youth?”

“Look at the dears!” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “How pretty they are in their ancient finery! Ruth, my child, you are the very image of the portrait of your great-grandmother at home. And here is Bab, who might have stepped out of an old miniature.”

“So she has,” replied Ruth. “In that pink dress she is a perfect likeness of the miniature the hermit had.”

“José,” said the major kindly, for he could not insult a guest by believing evil of him until it had been actually proved, “you do not belong to this company of belles and beaux. You look more like a Spanish gallant of an earlier day, in that velvet coat and cavalier hat. As for you two slips of girls,” he continued, smiling at Mollie and Grace, “you might be my two colonial great-aunts stepped down from their frames. But come along, now. We must have a little fun, after all this trouble you have taken to amuse us. Strike up, my poor bruised Jimmie, and we’ll have a dance.”

Jimmie had volunteered to furnish the music. His face, in its present state, needed no further disguise, he said. The furniture was moved back, the rugs rolled up, and in a few minutes the dancers were whirling in a waltz. There was a change of partners at the second dance, and Bab found herself dancing with José. He was not familiar with the American two-step, so, after a few rounds, they stepped out upon the piazza for a breath of the cool evening air.

“Aren’t you afraid to stay out here, José, after your experience of the other

night?" Bab asked.

"Are you afraid, Barbara?" he replied.

"Why should I be?" she answered. "It was evidently you the assassin was after."

He winced at the word "assassin," and did not reply. The two stood gazing silently out onto the stretch of lawn in front of the house. Presently José sighed deeply.

"I am afraid you are unhappy," said Bab sympathetically.

"Mademoiselle Barbara," he replied, "I am in great trouble. I tell you because you have already been more observing than the others, and because I see you keep your counsel."

"Why don't you ask Major Ten Eyck's advice, José?" asked Barbara, "he is so kind and gentle. I know he would love to help you."

"In this case," replied the Spaniard, with a frightened look in his eyes, "he might not be so kind. I am afraid to tell him. To-night I shall decide what to do. It may be that it would be better to go away. I cannot tell, now."

"Tell me, José, have your troubles any connection with the Gypsies?"

"Yes," he assented.

A shadowy figure moved up the lawn and approached the house. José stirred uneasily.

"Who is that?" he whispered. "Don't you think you had better go in?"

"No," replied Barbara. "I am not afraid, if you are not."

It was Zerlina, and, seeing the two people on the porch, she paused irresolutely.

"What is it, Zerlina?" called Barbara. "Do you want to see anyone?"

"My grandmother is over there," replied the girl, pointing to the shrubbery. "She has come to tell fortunes, if it pleases the ladies."

Zerlina did not look at Bab, as she spoke. She was looking at José, long and curiously. And he returned the gaze with interest.

"You have not seen Mr. Martinez, Zerlina?" asked Bab, recalling how he had stolen away in the woods when the Gypsy danced for them.

Zerlina bowed coldly, and José took off his cavalier hat; but neither said a word, and Bab felt somewhat embarrassed at the silence.

“Wait a moment, Zerlina, and I will ask the major about the fortunes,” she said, stepping through the French window. Just as she parted the curtain, she turned to say something to José, and saw Zerlina quickly hand him a note. Bab’s face flushed angrily.

“This business ought to be stopped,” she said to herself. “We’ll all be slain in our beds some fine night. Why can’t José be frank? The entire band of Gypsies might be a lot of robbers, for all we know.”

The revelers inside were all interested to know that Granny Ann had come at last to tell fortunes, and Zerlina was dispatched at once to bring her grandmother back. When the old woman passed through the room on her way to the library, where the fortunes were to be told, she took a rapid survey of everybody there. She examined the girls and boys in their masquerade costumes, looked curiously at Jimmie’s bandaged countenance, and finally her eyes rested on José leaning on a balcony rail outside.

While the fortunes were being told, there was a concert in the drawing room. Grace sang in her high, sweet soprano voice, followed by another of Zerlina’s Gypsy songs. Then José was induced to sing a beautiful Spanish love song, and finally Jimmie gave a comic version of “The Old Homestead” in which he himself acted every part.

After the fortunes were told Granny Ann sent word that there was one person she had not seen, and so she would not until she had seen him.

“Who has not yet been in?” demanded the major.

There was no reply.

“José, you have not seen her, have you?” asked Mollie.

“No,” replied José; “I do not wish to go.”

Word was sent in to Granny Ann, who sent a message back that she insisted on seeing the young man.

“Oh, go ahead, José,” urged Stephen. “It’s only for a few minutes, and we want to have another dance before bedtime.”

José bowed and disappeared from the room. Soon after Mollie touched Bab on the arm.

“Bab,” she whispered, “come out on the porch. I have something to tell you.”

The two girls stole out onto the moonlit piazza, while Mollie continued in a low

voice: "I know I should not have done it, but I followed José into the library, by the dining-room door, and hid behind a curtain. I was curious to see what Granny Ann would do. He had hardly got into the room before she commenced talking in a loud voice. She spoke in a foreign language, but she seemed terribly angry, and shook her fist in his face. He was quite gentle with her, and just stood there, pale and quiet. I felt so sorry for him. Once I thought she would strike him, but he never flinched or dodged. What do you suppose it means, Bab, dear?"

"I don't know, Mollie," replied Barbara, "There is some mystery about José. Something happened to-day that put him in a very unfortunate light, but I'd rather not tell you until to-morrow. Don't dance with him any more to-night, but be kind to him, little sister," Bab added, "for I do feel sorry for him."

CHAPTER XIX—A RECOGNITION

The masqueraders had separated for the night; Bab, however, had asked to speak with the major before he went to his room. For half an hour she was closeted with him in his library. The time had arrived to tell him everything she knew about José.

The major had listened to her attentively. He had felt reluctance to believe anything against a guest, just on a mere chance resemblance, but certainly the circle was closing in around José.

“Do you think we had better do anything about it to-night?” he asked the girl, almost childishly. He felt obliged to ask advice in this very difficult situation, and who could give any better counsel than this fine, young woman, who had been able to keep a secret, and who was so wholesome and sweet with all her reserve?

“I don’t see what you could do, Major, in case he admitted he was guilty. You couldn’t arrest him very well to-night, unless you wanted to bind his arms and feet and take him to the nearest town. I don’t believe he has any idea of running away, because he doesn’t know we suspect him. At least he only vaguely knows it.”

“And, after all,” said the kindly old major, “it’s a pity to rout him out of his comfortable bed to-night. We will give the poor fellow another good night’s rest, and take one ourselves, too. Shall we not, little woman?”

“Yes, indeed, Major,” agreed Barbara, looking into his kindly, troubled eyes with respect and admiration. “And who knows? Maybe, in the morning, he can explain everything.”

“Indeed, my dear, I hope so,” he replied, opening the door for her and bowing good-night as if she had been Miss Sallie herself.

As Barbara started up the long staircase she felt lonely. The hall below looked vast and dark. Only a dim light was burning and every door was closed. Emerging from the shadows around the staircase she might have been a ghost of

one of the early Ten Eycks in her old-fashioned peach-colored silk, with its full trailing skirt and pointed bodice. She hurried a little and wished she had got over the long space of hall which lay between her and her room; but she had scarcely taken a dozen steps before the door behind her opened. She stopped and looked back, thinking perhaps it was one of the servants waiting to put out the lights.

Standing in the doorway was a very old man. He carried a candle in one hand, and was peering at her in the darkness with that same expression of wonder and surprise on his face that she had remembered to have seen before, for this was their third encounter, once in the woods, once in the library, and now.

“Barbara! Barbara Thurston!” he called in a quavering voice. “I have been waiting for you so long, so many years. I am old now and you are still young.” He stretched out his arms and came toward her.

Bab flew and almost ran into José, who opened his door at that moment. When they recovered themselves the old man was gone.

“Which way did he go?” asked José.

Bab pointed to the door without speaking, and, still trembling from fright, burst into her own room, where a strange scene was taking place. Three high-backed chairs were arranged in a row. Ruth in a dressing gown was crouching behind them, while Mollie and Grace sat hand in hand on the bed, giving little gasps of excitement and horror.

“This is the clump of bushes,” Ruth was saying, “and the three fights took place here and here, and here,” she went on, marking the spots with her toe. “Stephen and his man, who was none other than the giant tramp, fought straight out from the shoulder like this,” and she hit the air furiously with her doubled fists. “Then came Alfred and his friend. They didn’t hit. They gripped and rolled over and over in the dust. And last of all, poor Jimmie, who, in five minutes, lay like a warrior taking his rest.”

“Why, Ruth Stuart,” interrupted Bab, “I thought we were not to tell.”

“Sh-h! Don’t make so much noise, Bab. Aunt Sallie thinks we were safe in bed long ago. I’m not betraying confidence. Stephen told me I could tell Mollie and Grace if he could tell Martin. But, Bab, dear, what is the matter? Have you seen a ghost?”

“Yes,” replied Bab, “or rather the next thing to one. Really, girls, I’m getting more than my fair share this time. Ruth was in the fight, of course, but none of you have seen the old man who haunts the place, and I have seen him three

times. He seems to be a perfectly harmless old man, but it does give one a start to meet him at midnight in a dark hall.”

“Why, Barbara, are you dreaming? What does it mean?” cried Mollie, seizing her sister’s hand and pulling her over on the bed beside them. “Why haven’t you told us before?” she added with a sisterly reproach. “It’s no fair keeping secrets all the time.”

“I am tired of secrets, too,” said Bab, “I started with major and I’ll just finish the thing before I lay me down this night to rest.”

When Bab had concluded her ghostly tale the girls were really frightened. They tried the doors, opened all the closets and wardrobes and peered under the beds of both rooms.

“No one could climb up to these windows,” exclaimed Mollie. “But suppose there should be a secret door into one of these rooms?”

“What a horrible idea, Mollie Thurston!” exclaimed Ruth.

There was a sharp tap on the door. The four girls jumped as if they had been shot, and rushed together like frightened chickens.

“Girls,” said Miss Sallie’s voice, “go to bed this instant!”

“Right away, Aunt Sallie, dear,” answered her niece. When they were comfortably tucked in for the night, Ruth said to Bab:

“How do you suppose he knew your name?”

“I don’t know,” replied her friend, “unless I had a twin ancestor.”

At eleven o’clock the next morning the major’s guests assembled for a late breakfast. The boys were stiff from their encounters with the tramps, and Jimmie, especially, was an object of pity. The major looked serious. He had a disagreeable duty to perform, and he wished to avoid it as long as possible. Miss Sallie, alone, was animated and talkative. She had been entrusted with no confidences, and she felt the burden of no secrets. Neither did she guess that something was impending that was bound to surprise and horrify her.

José had not made his appearance and the major was relieved. The hour of reckoning was at hand, and he wished it over and done with. His old friend’s son! Was it possible that a child of José Martinez could have so far forgotten the laws of hospitality as to rob and intrigue, and play tricks on his fellow guests?

“What a quiet, dull lot of people you are,” exclaimed Miss Sallie, who at last

began to notice the gloom that had settled on the party. "What is the matter?"

"I think it must be the weather, Miss Stuart," replied Stephen, coming to the rescue of the others. "It's a very oppressively warm day, and the air is so dry it makes me thirsty."

"It's the sort of weather, I imagine, they must have in plague-stricken southern countries," observed Ruth, "where there's no water," she continued drawing the picture which held her imagination, "and people are dropping around with cholera or the bubonic plague."

"Cheerful!" exclaimed Jimmie.

"I wonder where José is this morning," said Stephen, voicing the thought of everybody in the room except the unconscious Miss Sallie.

"Suppose you run up and see," suggested the major. "Tell him, Steenie," he added, patting his nephew affectionately on the shoulder, "that I wish to see him in the morning room when he finishes his breakfast. And, Stephen, my boy, don't be rough with him. Remember what an ordeal we'll have to put him through later. Good heavens!" he groaned, "such a lovely boy! If it only had not happened in my house!"

"Perhaps he can explain, in spite of everything," replied Stephen.

Presently he returned to the library.

"José is not in his room. He didn't sleep there last night. His bed is made up and there's not a wrinkle on it."

"Why, where can he be?" cried the major. "He couldn't have run away, could he?"

"Perhaps he is taking a morning walk," suggested Martin.

"Did he take anything with him!" asked Jimmie. "I mean are his things in his room?"

"I didn't notice," replied Stephen. "We'd better ask some of the servants, first, if they have seen him this morning, and then go back and have a look for ourselves."

But the servants could give no information. On examining José's room they found everything just as he had left it. He had taken nothing in his flight, not even a comb and brush.

"Even his pearl shirt studs are here," said Jimmie.

“How about his leather motor clothes?” asked Stephen.

“Here they are,” replied his friend.

“How about his motor cycle?” asked the major with a sudden thought.

They ran down stairs and through the open door, followed by “The Automobile Girls,” who were filled with excitement. At the garage the chauffeur was busy cleaning the motor cars.

“Is Mr. Martinez’s motor cycle here, Josef?” demanded the major.

“Yes, sir,” answered the chauffeur looking up from his work, surprised at the visit of so many people at once.

“Have you see him this morning?”

“No, sir.”

“Strange,” said the major. “I can’t understand it. He must simply have slipped out of the house and gone for a long walk.”

“Uncle,” said Stephen, “suppose we wait until after lunch.”

“Wait for what, my boy?”

“Why, for José, I mean. And then, if he doesn’t turn up, we had better search for him.”

The party sat about listlessly until lunch time. It was too hot to talk and the oppressiveness of the atmosphere gave them an uneasy feeling. José had not taken even a hat, so Stephen said, and it turned out that only the day before the Spaniard had entrusted the major with a large sum of money to be locked in the family strong box until his visit was over.

“Stephen,” exclaimed the major, finally, as the afternoon began to wane, “I can’t stand this any longer. The boy may have wandered into the woods and been attacked by some of those tramp ruffians. Order the horses. We’ll ride to the Gypsy camp and take the road to town. Tell the girls to explain the situation to Miss Sallie while we are gone.”

CHAPTER XX—THE FIRE BRIGADE

Ruth and Barbara related to Miss Sallie their adventures of the day before. She went through a dozen stages of emotion, and fairly wrung her hands over the tramps. The part about José she could not believe.

“That nice boy!” she exclaimed. “It is impossible.” Then she grew indignant. “What does John Ten Eyck mean by bringing us into this lawless country, I should like to know?”

“But, auntie, the major declares it was never like this before. The woods have always been perfectly safe. When Stephen and Martin were little boys they used to play in them with only Old Jennie to look after them.”

“Ruth,” cried Miss Sallie, “the major is one of the nicest men in the world, but he always would overlook disagreeable things. He runs away from anything that hurts. He may have overlooked the tramps and robbers, just as he has been blind to ugliness whenever he could.”

“He’s a dear,” said Mollie.

“Dear or no dear,” cried Miss Sallie, “this time we really must go. Tell the chauffeur to fix up the machine, Ruth, my child, for to-morrow we shall leave this barbarous place.”

“All right, auntie,” replied her niece, relieved that they were not to go immediately, since they all wanted to see the episode of José through.

Time passed, but the four horsemen did not return. The girls were sitting with Miss Sallie at the shady end of the piazza, watching the sun sink behind the forest. There was a smell of burning in the air that the sensitive nostrils of the chaperon had sniffed immediately.

“The wind must be blowing from the mountains to-day,” she observed. “I smell burning as plainly as if it were at our gates.”

“But, Miss Sallie,” said Grace, “remember that it smelt like this in New York last week.”

“My dear,” replied Miss Sallie, “I am perfectly familiar with the smell of burning forests, I have smelt them so often in imagination. Why, see, the air is filled with fine ashes,” she exclaimed, shaking out her lavender skirts with disgust. She had hardly spoken before a tall figure was seen hurrying across the lawn.

“It’s blind Jennie,” cried Ruth. “Perhaps she can give us news of the major or José.”

As old Jennie approached they could see she was fearfully excited. Her face was working and several times she waved her stick wildly in the air. Just then a strange thing happened. Half a dozen terrified deer appeared from the direction of the forest, dashed madly across the lawn and disappeared in a grove on the other side. Squirrels and rabbits followed by the dozens, while distracted birds flew in groups and circled around and around the tops of the trees.

“What has happened, Jennie?” cried Ruth, shaking the blind woman by the arm.

Jennie seemed to scan the company with her sightless eyes, sniffing the air wildly.

“The woods are burning,” she said. “The flames are coming nearer. They are slow, but they are sure. Everything is so dry. You must hurry, if you would save the house!”

“Save the house?” repeated Miss Stuart mechanically. “Do you mean to say there is danger of this house being burned down? Is the fire coming this way? Great heavens! Order the car at once, children. We must leave at any cost. This is the last straw!”

“But, Aunt Sallie,” urged Ruth, laying a detaining hand on her aunt’s arm, “you wouldn’t have us desert the major’s house, would you, and leave all these beautiful things to burn? Besides, we may be running away from the major and the boys. How do we know but that they are in the woods? They may need our help.”

“My child, we are not a fire department,” exclaimed Miss Sallie, “and if we are to save this beautiful house, how do you propose to do it?”

“If worse comes to worst,” cried Bab, “we can form a bucket brigade here, and keep the fire from getting to the house.”

“What about water?” demanded Miss Sallie.

“Don’t you remember the major said he had a well of water reserved for fires?”

said Ruth.

“It may not be necessary to use the water,” Bab continued. “The first thing to do is to cut off the forest fire by having a trench dug on that side of the house. Everybody will have to get to work. Come on! We must not lose time.”

Miss Sallie ran into the hall and rang a bell violently. John, the butler, came at once.

“John,” she cried, speaking very rapidly, “the forest is on fire. Get every available person on the place as fast as you can, with shovels and hoes and help the young ladies dig a trench to protect the major’s house.”

John looked dazed, sniffed the air and ran without a word. Presently a bell thundered out in the stillness. It had not been rung for many years, but the employees on the place knew what it meant, and came running from their cottages, and the work of digging a trench beyond Ten Eyck Hall was begun. Each moment the air was growing more dense and a darkness was settling down which was lit up, toward the west, by a lurid glow. The heat was intense and fine ashes filled the toilers’ throats and nostrils. Birds, blinded by the smoke dashed past, almost hitting the workers’ faces. People came running from the burning forest, the old Gypsy woman and her granddaughter and other women from the Gypsy band. The men were bringing the wagons around by the road; old Adam and his wife, driving their wood cart and frantically beating the worn-out horse; and finally, the hermit, with his white locks flying. Ten Eyck Hall would seem to have been the refuge of all these terrified dwellers in the forest. They regarded it with pride and love. Even the Gypsies had sought its protection, and the gray, rambling old place appeared to stretch out its arms to them. Blind Jennie strode up and down the lawn, wildly waving her stick, while old Adam called to Miss Sallie:

“Where is the master? Where are the young masters?”

And where were the old master and the young ones? If ever they were needed, it was now!

In the meantime, the girls, leaving Miss Sallie to direct the digging of the trench, had run to the house.

“I think, Ruth,” called Bab, “we had better collect all the buckets and pails we can find.”

“Yes,” replied Ruth, “and the hose should be attached to the reserve well. John is attending to that. Mollie and Grace, run and get whatever blankets there are in

the bed rooms, and close the windows all over the house.”

While John was attaching the hose to the faucet of the reserve well, Ruth and Bab invaded the enormous kitchen of the hall. The servants had fled. Only Mary and John could be depended upon. The pumping engine had been started and the tank was rapidly filling.

“O Ruth,” exclaimed Bab, “how careless of us to have forgotten the cars! The garage is nearest to the forest and the automobiles should be run out right off. We may need them if things get very bad.”

“Of course,” replied Ruth. “Where is the chauffeur? Did you ever know any of these people to be on hand when they were needed?”

Dashing to the garage, they cranked up the two machines and ran them out onto the lawn in an open space. José’s motor cycle came next.

“The fire has come,” cried Grace and Mollie running up with their arms full of blankets. They could hear the roaring, crackling sound as the flames licked their way through the dry underbrush.

“Where is Miss Sallie?” demanded Ruth. “She will faint in this terrible atmosphere.”

“There she is,” answered Grace; “she is overseeing the trench-digging. I think she has ordered them to make it broader.”

Miss Sallie, her lavender skirts caught up over her arm, was standing near the men, giving her orders as calmly as if she were in her own drawing room.

The line of forest about a quarter of a mile distant began to glow red. The girls clutched each other.

“There it is!” they cried. “And now to save the major’s house!”

Bab organized a bucket brigade with Mollie, Grace and the Gypsy women. John was ordered to manipulate the hose, while Bab and Ruth carried wet blankets over to the garage, the building nearest the line of fire. Then a cry went up from the men who were digging the trench. The flames, which had been steadily devouring the dried grass of the meadow dividing the garden from the wood, had reached the trench. A sudden gust of wind carried them over. Instantly a group of bushes caught fire; and, like an angry animal seeking its prey, a long, forked tongue licked the ground hungrily for a moment, paused at the gravel walk, followed its edge, eating up the short, dry grass in its path, and made for the garage. All this happened in much quicker time than it takes to tell it—too

quickly, in fact for any precaution.

CHAPTER XXI—FIGHTING THE FLAMES

Never had “The Automobile Girls” displayed greater courage than at this critical moment. It was the time for quick action and quicker thought. The men who were digging the trench could not leave their work. They saw that, unless the trench were dug wider, it would be necessary to fight the flames back, and they were digging like mad to keep the fire from leaping the ditch again.

It was Mollie who saved them from a terrible explosion by remembering the house where the gasoline was stored just behind the garage, and John and Adam rolled the tank to a distance temporarily safe at least.

Bab had found a ladder somewhere. Placing it against the garage she had scaled it like a monkey, carrying under one arm a wet blanket the weight of which she was too excited to notice. She never quite knew how she shinned up the roof, but presently she found herself astride the pinnacle. Zerlina had followed close behind, with more blankets and together the two girls spread them over the smoking shingles. When the roof was covered, they let themselves down and began dashing water on the smouldering walls. The bucket brigade was working well under the direction of Ruth, and the garage was saved.

Then a line of clipped bushes running from the garden to the forest, suddenly burst into flames. A cry went up from the workers at this terrifying spectacle. To the girls, it seemed like a gigantic boa constrictor racing toward them, and, for a moment, they turned cold with fear.

“All hands must help here!” cried Bab, taking command, as she naturally did in times of danger. “Zerlina, tell the men to come from the trench with their shovels. Bring pails of water, all of you,” she called to the Gypsies, “and the rest of the wet blankets.”

There was a rush and a scramble. They tried to beat down the angry little flames, dashed water on to them, choked them with wet blankets, trampled on them, and finally fell back, stifled and blinded with smoke and ashes, only to find the gasoline house a burning mass. It had gone up like a tinder box in an instant, and was reduced to ruins.

“If we have any more gusts of wind like that last, Bab, we are lost!” cried Ruth, sobbing a little under her breath. “But, of course, if the worst happens, we can always take the automobiles. They can run faster than the flames.”

Back of the garage they could see another line of flames advancing like a regiment of cavalry.

“Great heavens!” cried Grace. “What shall we do now?”

“Don’t despair, yet,” answered Bab. “Those dividing hedges are very dry, but the flames don’t spread from them so quickly; and, besides, I believe the trench will stop them.”

“O Bab,” exclaimed Ruth, “do you think there will ever be an end to this? We are too tired to dig trenches, and the water is getting alarmingly low.”

“But there are two more cisterns,” replied the undaunted Bab.

Just then the wind, which, up to this time, except for a few brief gusts, had been merely a breeze, gathered new strength. Sparks began to fly from the burning underbrush in the wood. It had been a ground fire, owing to the long drought, and the trees still waved their green branches over the ruins at their feet.

Ruth seized Bab’s hand convulsively.

“Young ladies!” called a voice behind them. Turning, they confronted the hermit. “I am a very old man, but, if you will permit me, I will make a suggestion. Save what water is left for the roof, which should be deluged as soon as possible. The trench will stop the fire, but it cannot keep back the sparks and I see a wind has come up that is most dangerous.”

“Oh, thank you,” cried the two girls, seeing the wisdom of his suggestion immediately.

Miss Sallie, a tragic spectacle, came from around the house; her white hair tumbling down her back, her face gray with ashes and her lavender garments torn and wet.

“Girls,” she murmured, her voice trembling, from fatigue and excitement, “we have done all we could do for the major. I think we had better give it up and go while we can get away.”

“Let us have one more chance. Aunt Sallie, dearest,” begged Ruth, “and if that fails there will still be time to get away in the motor car.”

“What are you going to do now, child?” asked the poor woman distractedly.

“You go and sit down in one of the long chairs on the piazza and rest,” replied her niece, patting her hand tenderly, “and leave everything to us.”

The girls could hear the throbbing of the pumping engine somewhere below, as they dashed up the steps. John had connected all the cisterns and the machinery was working in good order. The candles and lanterns they carried hardly made an impression in the blackness of the great empty garret, but an exclamation from John called attention to the fact that the sliding partition was down.

“I never knew it to happen before,” he said, “except once when I was too small to understand.”

“How are we going to manage?” asked Grace, looking overhead.

“Through the scuttle to the roof,” replied Barbara, pointing to a ladder leading to a trapdoor.

John climbed up first, opening the scuttle, and everybody lent a hand in lifting out the hose he had brought along. Barbara and Zerlina followed to the roof, which was steep and much broken by pinnacles and turrets; yet in contrast with the attic it was quite light outside, and the girls could see perfectly where to step without slipping.

Only two people were needed, it was decided. Bab would not hear of Ruth’s coming, on account of the latter’s horror of high places. It was certain that Mollie and Grace were not agile enough for the experiment, and Bab and Zerlina had already proved what they could do when they scaled the garage roof.

The three girls left behind climbed onto a balcony just outside one of the attic windows and watched, with tremulous interest, what was happening on the roof.

Thus Zerlina and Barbara, with old John, were left alone on top of Ten Eyck Hall. They had a wonderful view of the smoking forest, the tops of whose trees were waving in the steadily rising wind. The trench had, indeed, stopped the course of the flames which had run along the meadow hedges, and there were no more lines of fire to be seen; but there was a bright glow toward the back and a sound of crackling wood. Then came a burst of flames and the onlooker saw that the stable was burning. A spark lit on Bab’s wrist; another touched her on the cheek, and presently a gust of wind brought dozens of them twinkling like shooting stars at night. They fell on the shingled roof, smouldered for a moment and went out. Others followed. It could be only a matter of a little while, thought Bab, before the hall would be in flames if they were not prompt with the water.

“It’s all right, Miss,” called John’s voice from behind the tank on the part of the

roof over the attic. There was a gurgling noise and a swift jet of water burst from the nozzle of the hose.

With Zerlina's assistance, Bab began watering the roof. But the tallest peak was beyond reach of the hose. There the sparks were smouldering into life and Bab distinctly saw a little puff of flame lick out and then go back again like a cunning animal biding its time.

Bab ran over to the tank.

"John," she called, "get a ladder and a pail."

Together they unhooked the ladder attached to the tank and dragged it over to the high center peak of the roof. There was a pail, also, which they filled with water. While the old man held the ladder Bab climbed up, taking the pail from Zerlina. Several times the brave girl dashed water over the smoking shingles until every spark was dead. Then, standing on one foot, on the top rung of the ladder, Bab braced herself with a lightning rod running up the side of the turret, and leaned over to see if all were well on its other section. Below her she could see the girls on the balcony peering up at her with frightened eyes. Lifting herself entirely off the ladder, for an instant, Bab glanced around the turret. In slipping back, her foot missed the rung. The shock made her lose her grip on the lightning rod, and like a flash she slid down the steepest part of the roof now slippery from its recent wetting. There was nothing to hold to, nothing to cling to, and she closed her eyes from the horror that was before her.

Like a Flash She Slid Down the Steepest Part of the Roof.

Like a Flash She Slid Down the Steepest Part of the Roof.

It is said that a great many things pass through one's mind at such brief, tense moments as these, when death is almost certain.

The thought that came to Bab's mind, however, was her mother's prayer, "Heaven make me calm in the face of danger."

There was, of course, a shudder of horror, a wild, ineffectual effort to save herself—a shock.

When she opened her eyes, three pairs of arms encircled her, and three sobbing faces hovered over her. She had landed upon the roof of the balcony where the girls were waiting. Except for a bruised arm, she had met with no harm.

"Why, girlyes," she said, smiling a little weakly, "were you so frightened?" and then closed her eyes again.

Zerlina and John came tumbling down the ladder. The Gypsy girl was as white as a sheet and old John was openly sobbing.

“I’m all right,” Bab assured them, standing up and shaking herself to bring her senses back. She bathed her throbbing wrists and temples, and all climbed down into the lower regions of the house. It was decided to water the side of the house, and after that nothing more could be done. The whole place was lit up with the burning stable, and sparks were flying in every direction. The wind had risen to a gale and the skies were overhung with a black canopy of clouds kindled by occasional flashes of lightning. There was a low grumbling sound of thunder. Down the avenue came the clatter of horses’ hoofs. At the same time there was a terrific clap, and the rain poured down in torrents.

“Here they are!” cried the girls as Major Ten Eyck and the boys leaped from their horses and dashed up the piazza steps. José was not with them.

CHAPTER XXII—EXPLANATIONS

The major and his nephews were shocked at the appearance of their guests, who were hardly recognizable. Jimmie Butler retired behind a curtain and give vent to one little chuckle. He would not, for anything, have let them know how funny they looked.

“I shall never forgive myself for leaving you,” groaned Major Ten Eyck. “Why did you not take the car and leave the old place to burn? How can the boys and I ever thank you?” he continued, with emotion.

Before Stephen would give an account of the search for José he made Ruth repeat the history of the afternoon from beginning to end. The major and the boys were filled with admiration and wonder for these four brave “Automobile Girls” and Miss Stuart.

“There is nothing we can do,” exclaimed Jimmie, “to show what we feel, except to lie down and let you walk over us.”

“And now for José,” prompted Ruth, when she had finished her story.

“Well,” replied Stephen, “we got news of José almost as soon as we had passed the Gypsy camp. A man on the road told us he had seen a boy who answered the description exactly, walking on the edge of the forest. We traced him back into the country to a farm house, where according to the farmer, he had stopped for a drink of water and turned back again toward the forest. It was necessary to come back by a roundabout way because of the cliffs on the outer edge, and not until we reached the hermit’s house did we realize there was a fire that must have been started by those tramps, for it was at its worst about where they were yesterday. We were frantic when we saw that it was blowing in the direction of the hall, but we couldn’t get through and had to go the whole way around. Our only comfort, when we saw the glow of the burning stable, was that you had taken the automobile and gone back to Tarrytown.”

The faithful old butler appeared with lights, and informed the major that the other servants had returned very repentant, and if agreeable, dinner would be

served in half an hour.

“But I think the ladies will be much too tired to come down again,” protested the major.

“Oh, no, we won’t,” answered Ruth. “If there’s enough water left to wash in I would rather dress and come downstairs for food.”

“So would we all,” chorused the others, except Miss Sallie, who took to her bed immediately, and dropped off to sleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

“Stephen,” asked Ruth at dinner, “do you believe poor José was caught in the fire?”

“It’s rather a horrible idea,” said Stephen, “yet I don’t know what else to think. He must have caught wind, somehow, that we had found him out and concluded to hide in the woods.”

“Old Jennie wishes to speak to you, sir,” announced John.

“Bring her in here,” ordered the major, and Jennie was ushered into the dining-room. “How are you, Jennie? I am glad to see you,” said the major, leading her to a chair. “I hope you were not injured by the fire?”

“Be there anyone here but friends?” whispered Jennie.

“No one, Jennie. What is it?”

“When the storm came up I went straight to the forest,” said the old woman. “Adam went with me and we took his horse and wagon. The fire had not touched the road and the ground was wet where we walked. As we passed by the place ——” here she put her finger to her lips and gazed wildly about, “you remember, young ladies? I went over to see if all was well. The door was open and on the floor lay the young man. He is not dead, but he is very ill here,” old Jennie pressed her hand to her chest. “He has swallowed the smoke. We put him in the wagon and he is outside.”

“José here? Outside?” they all cried at once, rushing to the front door.

In the pouring rain, Zerlina and her grandmother were leaning over a young man stretched out prone in Adam’s wagon. He wore the green velveteen suit now so familiar to “The Automobile Girls,” and through his belt gleamed the dagger he had used to slash the tires with. When he was lifted out, they caught a glimpse of his face. José it was, but José grown thin and haggard in a day and a night. The boys carried him tenderly upstairs and laid him on his own bed. Zerlina and her grandmother followed close at their heels.

“Do you know him, then?” asked Stephen of the Gypsy girl.

“Yes,” she replied defiantly. “He is my brother. Antonio is his name.”

“Whew-w-w,” whistled Stephen under his breath. “So José was an impostor after all. I must say I hoped till the last.”

“Well, well,” answered the major, “we won’t hit a man when he is down, my son, and this boy is pretty sick. The girl is his sister, you say? She and her grandmother had better nurse him, then. Send the old woman to me. I want to speak with her in the library.”

After being closeted with Granny Ann for half an hour the major flung wide the library door and called to the others to come in. His good-natured, handsome face was wrinkled into an expression of utter bewilderment, but relief gleamed through his troubled eyes.

“Children,” he cried, “come here, every one of you. José is vindicated. Thank heavens for that. The boy upstairs is not our José at all, but his half-brother, Antonio. Now, where do you suppose José has hidden himself? I trust, I earnestly hope, not in the woods.”

“It seems,” continued the major, “José’s father was married twice. A nice chap, José. I trust he is safe to-night, for his poor father’s sake as well as for his own.”

“And his second wife, uncle?” interrupted Stephen.

“Yes, yes, my boy,” continued the major, patting his nephew affectionately on the shoulder, “and the second wife was a beautiful Gypsy singer, who had two children, Zerlina and Antonio, the unfortunate young man now occupying José’s room. A Gypsy rarely marries outside her own people and this one longed to return to her tribe. One day she ran away taking her children with her, and Martinez never saw his wife again, for she died soon after. He has tried, in every way, to recover the children, but until now the Gypsies have always managed to hide them effectually. Since they were children Antonio has hated his half brother José and from time to time has threatened his life. Once, in Gibraltar, the brother almost succeeded in killing him.” (The girls remembered how much José had disliked the mention of Gibraltar.) “Antonio was a bad boy, utterly undisciplined. He ran about Europe and this country, seeing what harm he could do, but neither his father nor his brother could ever locate him. José finally heard that the children were in America and came over to try to reason with the Gypsies to let Zerlina, at least, go to school. I do not suppose he reckoned on finding them so near, and, when Antonio tried to rob and murder, José was

divided in his mind as to whether to give his brother up or let him go. He must have suffered a good deal, poor fellow. I wish José had confided his troubles to me. Now, maybe, it's too late to help him."

"And the knife?" asked Bab.

"There were two knives which belonged to the Martinez family. The Gypsy took one away with her when she left her husband."

"Will Antonio stay here to-night, Major?" said Mollie, timidly, remembering the masked robber and his murderous weapon.

"He is too ill, now, to do any harm, little one," replied the major, taking her hand. "Besides, his grandmother and sister will watch over him I feel certain, and who knows but the boy may have some good in him after all?" he added, always trying to see the best in everybody.

"Nevertheless, we'll lock our doors," exclaimed Ruth. "It's not so easy to forget that our highwayman is sleeping across the hall."

CHAPTER XXIII—AN OLD ROMANCE

Bab had hardly reached her room before she was summoned to the door by Stephen, looking so serious and unhappy that she felt at once something had happened.

“Bab,” he said, “I am afraid you are not done with your day’s work yet for the Ten Eyck family. I am about to ask you a favor, and I must confide something to you that has been a secret with us now for three generations. First, are you afraid to go with me over to the right wing? John and Mary will go, too, and you need really have nothing to fear, but the dread——” he paused and bit his lip.

“Why, no, Stephen, I am not afraid,” replied Bab, “and I promise to guard faithfully any secret you want to tell me,” she added, giving him her hand in token of her pledge. She suspected they were going to visit the old man she had seen wandering about the house and forest.

“I will tell you the secret as we go along,” Stephen said, leading the way to the end of the hall, where they found Mary and John waiting. The four started down a long passage opening into the right wing of the building. “We are going, now,” continued Stephen, “to visit a very old man who lives in the right wing. He is my great-uncle, Stephen Ten Eyck. When he was quite a young man he met with a sorrow that unhinged his mind and he—well, he committed a crime. It was never proved that he had done it, but the Ten Eyck family knew he had. However, his most intimate friend took the blame upon his shoulders.”

“Why did he do that?” asked Bab.

“Because, Bab,” replied Stephen, “they both loved a girl, and the girl’s name was Barbara Thurston. She must have been your great-great-aunt. Did you ever hear of her?”

“If I ever did, I have forgotten,” answered Bab. “You see, after father’s death, we had no way to learn much about his family and mother knew very little, I suppose.”

“Well, Barbara Thurston was engaged to marry my great-uncle. They were all

staying at the same hotel, somewhere in the Italian lake country—Barbara and her mother and my great-uncle Stephen and his friend. One day the friend persuaded Barbara to go out rowing with him. There was a storm and the boat upset, and Barbara was drowned. It was said that the friend and the boatman swam ashore and left her, but that is hard to believe. Anyway, when my uncle got the news, something snapped in his brain and he killed the boatman with an oar. The friend made his escape and the flight proved to the authorities that he had committed the crime. The Ten Eycks all knew that Uncle Stephen had done it, but it seemed of little use, I suppose, to tell the truth, because the slayer, Uncle Stephen, had gone clean crazy, and his friend could not be found. They have never seen each other since, until——”

Stephen paused.

“Until when, Stephen?”

“Until to-night, Barbara. Can you guess who the friend is?”

“The hermit?” asked Barbara, with growing excitement.

“Yes,” replied Stephen; “the poor old hermit who has lived near his friend all these years without ever letting anybody know.”

“And your uncle has been living in the right wing ever since?” asked Bab.

“Yes. It was his father’s wish that the right wing be absolutely his for life and that the secret be kept in the family. The old fellow has never hurt a fly since the night he killed the Italian boatman. His attendant is as old as he, almost, and sometimes Uncle Stephen gets away from him. Have you ever seen him?” Stephen looked at her curiously.

“Yes,” replied Bab, “several times.”

“And never mentioned it? Really Bab, you are great.”

“Oh, I finally did tell the girls, only last night. I was just a little frightened. Your Uncle Stephen called me by name. But, by the way, none of you knew about the name before. How was that?”

“To tell the truth, I had never heard the girl’s name in my life, and it was so long ago that Uncle Stephen had forgotten it. It was the hermit who revealed the whole thing. He took refuge here from the fire, and after you girls had gone upstairs he sent for Uncle John. It seems the hermit has been with Uncle Stephen most of the afternoon, keeping him quiet and away from the fire. The poor old fellow was scared, he said, but he is himself again and they both want to see you.

But that is not the chief reason you are sent for. Uncle Stephen insists that he has something he will tell only to you. All day long he has been calling for you, and Uncle John Ten Eyck thinks it may quiet him if you will consent to see him for a few minutes.”

The two had paused outside of a door at the end of the passage, to finish the conversation, while Mary and John had gone quietly inside. Presently John opened the door.

“It’s all right, sir,” he whispered. “You and the young lady may come in.”

They entered a large room, furnished with heavy old-fashioned chairs and tables. There were bowls of flowers about and Bab heard afterwards that the poor, crazed old man loved flowers and arranged them himself. Standing near the window was the hermit. When he saw Bab his face was radiated by such a beautiful smile that tears sprang to the girl’s eyes. Lying on a couch, somewhat back in the shadow, was Stephen’s uncle of the same name. His attendant, also an old man, who had been with him from the beginning, was sitting beside him.

Stephen Ten Eyck the elder opened his eyes when the door closed. He also smiled, as the hermit had done, and Bab felt that she could have wept aloud for the two pathetic old men.

“My little Barbara has come back at last,” Uncle Stephen said, taking her hand. “I am very happy. And my old friend Richard, too,” he went on, stretching the other hand toward the hermit. “Dick,” he went on, “I always loved you so. I don’t know which I loved the most, you or sweet Barbara here. Heaven is good to bring me all these blessings at once. Don’t cry, little girl,” he added, tenderly, for the tears were rolling down Barbara’s cheeks and dropping on his hand. “But I must not forget,” he exclaimed suddenly. “I have something to tell you, Barbara, before it clouds over here,” he tapped his brow. “Go away all of you. This is for her ears alone. It is a secret.”

The others moved off to a corner of the room and the old man went on whispering mysteriously. “We were the last who saw him, you and I. He followed me that night. Do you remember? He fell. He is lying at the foot of the stairs now. There is a gash in his head and—blood!” “Press the panel in the attic——” The old man’s voice died away in a gasp.

“Which panel?” asked Bab, in an agony for fear he would not finish.

“The one with the knot hole in the right hand corner,” he added and fell back on the couch.

Bab tried to make him tell more, but his mind was clouded over and he had already forgotten she was there.

“Has he finished?” asked Stephen.

“Yes,” replied Bab, “but come quickly. We have no time to lose. José is lying somewhere, dead or half dead, in the secret passage.”

Too much excited and amazed to say good-night to the hermit, the callers rushed down the passage, followed by the two servants. At the foot of the attic stairs they waited while John brought lights, and for the second time that day Bab climbed into the vast old attic.

“Thank fortune the partition is down,” exclaimed Stephen. “I suppose Uncle Stephen forgot to slide it back, he was in such a hurry to get away from José.” Bab had explained the situation, to Stephen while they waited for the candles. “Which panel did he say, Bab?”

“This must be it,” she answered; “the panel in the right-hand corner that has a knot hole in it. Here is the knot hole all right. We are to press it, he said.”

They pressed, but nothing happened.

“Press the knot hole, why don’t you?” suggested Bab.

One touch was enough. The panel opened and disclosed a long passage cut apparently through the wall. There were several branch passages leading off from the main one, marked with faded handwriting on slips of paper, one “To the Cellar,” another “To the Library” and finally the last one “To the Right Wing.”

“This must be the one,” said Stephen, as they groped their way along single file. “Be careful,” he called; “there should be a flight of steps along here somewhere.”

Presently they came to the steps. Up through the dense blackness they could faintly hear a sound of moaning.

“All right, José, old fellow, we are coming to you,” cried Stephen, while Bab’s heart beat so loud she could not trust herself to speak.

Groping their way down the narrow stairway, they came to a landing almost on a level with the ceilings of the first floor rooms. At the far end of the passage they could hear a voice calling faintly.

“He probably fell the length of the steps, and dragged himself across,” exclaimed Stephen, holding his lantern high above his head.

They found José stretched out by a narrow door opening directly into the right wing. There was a gash just above his temple which he himself had bound with his handkerchief and his leg appeared to be broken at the ankle.

“José, my poor boy,” cried Stephen, “we have found you at last!”

José smiled weakly and fainted dead away.

The two men carried him back up the flight of steps, not daring to try the experiment of the passage leading to the library.

“I suppose Uncle Stephen has known these passages since he was a child,” said Stephen in a low voice to Bab as they passed through the attic, “and when his attendant is asleep, no doubt he steals off and wanders about the house. I believe he has always had a mania that he was being pursued by the Italian boatman; and when José followed him, right on top of his meeting with you, it was too much for the old fellow.”

“He’s a dear old man,” returned Bab, “and how he must have suffered all these years; that is, whenever his memory returned.”

“And think of the hermit, too, who sacrificed his entire career for you, Miss, just because you never learned to swim.”

Bab smiled. “If my Aunt Barbara had lived by the sea as I have, she would never have had to wait for boatmen and lovers to pull her out of the deep water. Swimming is as easy as walking to me.”

“I am glad you’ve learned wisdom in your old age,” replied Stephen as they paused at the door of the bedroom given to José.

“There is one thing I cannot believe,” declared Bab, “and that is that the hermit swam off and left Aunt Barbara to drown.”

“Who knows?” answered Stephen. “People lose their heads strangely sometimes.”

It was Alfred, destined to be a great doctor, who set José’s leg that night.

CHAPTER XXIV—GOOD-BYE TO TEN EYCK HALL

Four days had passed since the exciting happenings of that eventful day that had begun with the disappearance of José, and had ended with his discovery.

“I have much to be thankful for,” said the major to Miss Sallie, who was reclining in a steamer chair on the piazza. She had not left her bed until the afternoon of the third day, and was still a little shaky and nervous.

“I can’t think what they are, John,” she replied severely. “You have had nothing but misfortunes since we came to stay under your roof. I hope they may end when we leave.”

“The first one,” said the major, smiling good-humoredly, “is that I have had the privilege of knowing how splendid American women can be in time of danger. I always admired the women of my country, but never so much as now,” he added, looking fondly at his old friend.

“Yes,” assented Miss Sallie proudly, “my girls are about as fine as any to be found in the world, I think. They are wholesome, sensible, and never cowardly. Undoubtedly they saved Ten Eyck Hall for you, Major, by their combined efforts, and by Bab’s bravery in watering the roof when the sparks began to fly.”

“You were just as wonderful as the girls, Sallie, my dear. They tell me you superintended the digging of the trench and managed your men with the coolness of a general; and that when the fire leaped over the trench you were there with the bucket brigade to put it out. The girls were no whit less courageous in your day than they are now, Sallie.”

“And what is the second blessing you have to be thankful for, John?” interrupted Miss Sallie.

“That José is the boy I took him to be—a good, honest, noble fellow.”

“I must say I liked him from the first moment I set eyes upon him,” said Miss Stuart.

“Yes,” continued the major; “his father might well be proud of him. He deserves

the highest commendation for his forbearance and unselfishness in regard to that brother of his.”

“How is the brother, by the way?” asked Miss Sallie.

“You know he was taken to the hospital the day after he was brought here; well, the boys went over in the car yesterday. Antonio is much better. His sister is tending him. He is very repentant, she says, and has consented to go to school and turn over a new leaf. In fact, I myself have had a long talk with him. I can see that there is great good in the boy. It has simply been perverted by evil associations.”

“Ah, Major,” exclaimed his old friend, smiling indulgently as she tapped his arm with her fan, “you are truly the most optimistic soul in the world. I hope all your golden dreams about this wretched boy’s future will come true. But what about his sister!”

“José is anxious for her to go to a school in America. He believes she could not endure the restraint of a European school after her free, open-air life. She is only too anxious. She wants to cultivate her voice, and the old grandmother appears really relieved at the turn affairs have taken. She was willing to concede anything to keep the grandson out of jail.”

“Then my Ruth will not be able to gratify her whim to educate the Gypsy girl,” pursued Miss Sallie.

“Not exactly,” replied the major. “José’s father is very well-to-do, as the world goes, but Ruth is to take charge of Zerlina’s education and look after her generally. She has asked José to allow her that privilege, as she put it.”

Just then the girls came around the corner of the piazza, after a stroll in the garden.

“How fresh and delicious the air is since the rain!” exclaimed Barbara. “There is still a faint smell of burning. Do you think all the trees in the forest will die, Major?”

“Old Adam says they will not,” answered the major. “A three months’ unbroken drought will dry up almost anything but trees. Now, while the underbrush and dried fern burned like tinder, the fire hardly touched the trees. It was those dead bramble hedges dividing the fields and the dried meadow grass that did the most damage, because the sparks from them ignited the garage and the roof of the stable.”

“I am glad papa and Mrs. Thurston were not uneasy about us,” observed Ruth.

“If they had read the papers before you telegraphed, Major, they would have been frantic, I suppose.”

“Make way for the Duke of Granada,” called Jimmie’s cheerful voice from the hall, and presently he appeared, pushing José, done up in bandages and lying flat on his back, on a rolling cot used by some invalid of the Ten Eyck family long since dead and gone.

“José, my boy,” exclaimed the major, going to the foot of the cot to ease it as it passed over the door sill, “do you think this is safe?”

“The doctor says it will not hurt him,” replied Jimmie. “He needs company, but we won’t let him stay long.”

José smiled up at the faces leaning over him.

“You have all been so good to me,” he said. “I want to thank you for your kindness and for believing in me when my character looked black enough to have condemned me without any more proof. And I want to thank you for my brother, too, and my poor little sister.”

His eyes filled with tears.

“There, there,” cried the major, pressing the boy’s hand. “It’s a little enough we have done, I’m sure. I only wish we could have saved you from your tumble,” he added, gazing sadly toward the right wing of Ten Eyck Hall.

“And is it really true that our friends are going to leave us this afternoon?” asked José.

“Yes,” answered the major; “all our girls and boys are going. We shall be lonesome enough when they are gone.”

There was the sound of a motor horn down the avenue.

“Ah, here comes Stephen at last. I was afraid he would be late,” said Major Ten Eyck, as his automobile pulled up at the door and Stephen, Martin and Alfred jumped out.

“I’ve got them, uncle,” cried Stephen. “They arrived this morning.” And he handed his uncle a registered package carefully done up and sealed with red sealing wax.

The major took the box and disappeared into the house while the boys exchanged significant looks.

“Stephen,” said Bab, as they strolled down to the end of the-piazza while the

others were examining the morning papers and reading their mail, “did you ever ask José where he was the morning we went to see the hermit!”

“Oh, yes,” replied her friend; “or, rather, he told me without being asked. He was to meet his brother by appointment at the haunted pool. I suppose he was there too soon, because Antonio chose to inflict us with his antics before he went to see José, who heard a great deal of the nonsense, so he said, and there was a quarrel afterwards, a very bitter one, and José threatened to give Antonio over to the authorities unless he consented to give up his lawless life. Zerlina was hovering around later, and heard the pistol shots after the fight with the tramps. She thought, of course, it was a duel between her two brothers. That is why she paid you the mysterious visit and tried to read the note.”

“How does Antonio strike you?” asked Bab.

“Just as a mischievous boy might. I think he will outgrow his vicious tendencies now that he has been taken hold of. For one thing he no longer hates poor old José. I told him, plainly, what a fine fellow his brother was, and that it was only on José’s account we were not going to have him arrested. He seemed to be a good deal impressed, I think.”

“A note for you, Miss,” said John, handing Bab a three-cornered missive on a tray.

“Will Miss Barbara Thurston grant one last interview to an old admirer?” the note ran.

“It’s from your great-uncle,” exclaimed Bab, giving Stephen the note to read.

Stephen smiled as his eye took in the crabbed, old-fashioned handwriting.

“The poor old fellow can’t quite get the proper focus as to who you really are,” he said. “You appear to represent two Barbaras to him. But you will go over for a few minutes, won’t you, Bab? I doubt if Uncle Stephen will last much longer, and seeing you may be a great comfort to him.”

“Of course I will,” Bab replied. “If seeing me can bring a ray of pleasure into his life, I am glad enough to be able to do it. I should like to take him a few flowers. I know he loves them. Suppose we get some honeysuckle and late roses out of the garden before we go.”

Together they strolled toward the major’s garden, which the flames had spared, partly because it was protected by a high brick wall on three sides, and partly owing to a daily watering it had received from the gardener.

With Stephen's penknife they clipped a bunch of dewy white roses with yellow centers, and a few sprays of honeysuckle whose fragrance was overpoweringly sweet.

The old man was watching for the young people at the window when the attendant opened the door for them. He came forward with some of the major's grace and took Barbara's hand in his.

"It was very good of you to come," he said. "I heard you were going, and I wanted to say a last good-bye. I feel happier than I have felt in many years. You have forgiven me, have you not, little Barbara?" he went on, his mind confusing her again with that other Barbara whose tragic death had bereft him of his reason. "And you have brought me the roses, too?"

She nodded her head.

"Did they come from the bush near the arbor?"

"Yes," she replied, wondering a little.

"Don't you remember that it was our bush, the one we chose when you were here on a visit? Our white rose bush, Barbara. That you should not have forgotten, after all these years!" Then his memory came back. "But what am I saying?" he exclaimed. "My mind often gets confused. It was the likeness, I suppose. I want you to see this portrait of your grand-aunt."

He went over to a desk near the window and drew from one of its drawers an old daguerreotype.

"It is very, very like," he murmured, as he handed it to Barbara.

It was, indeed, even more like the present Bab than the miniature which the hermit had treasured during his years of solitude.

"I want you to keep this picture, Barbara," said Stephen's uncle. "I have another one, and it will be a pleasure to me, at the last, to know that it belongs to another Barbara Thurston. This ring must also be yours." He drew from the desk a little black velvet case. "It was a ring I gave to her after we were engaged. Will you wear it for me!"

Barbara opened the case and slipped the ring on her finger. It was a very old ring of beaten silver with a sapphire setting.

"Thank you," she said and gave him her hand.

"Good-bye, little Barbara!" cried the old man. "You have brought peace to me at

last. You and my dear friend, Richard. I have changed a great deal, you see," he was lapsing back into the old mania, "but you are as young and pretty as ever, Barbara."

"It is time to go," whispered Stephen, hurriedly. The attendant had already opened the door for them and they slipped out together.

"The hermit has promised to come and see him every day," said Stephen, as they hastened through the passage. "Indeed, Uncle John has invited the hermit to live at Ten Eyck Hall for the rest of his days, and he has all but consented. He is a wonderful old man, I think, and whether he swam off and left 'you' or not, he has atoned for it after all these years."

"Stephen," replied Barbara, "I shall never believe that he did that, no matter if he were to tell me so himself."

They reached the piazza just in time to hear Miss Sallie saying:

"Girls, I think we had better go up and get ready for the trip, before luncheon is announced. We want to start promptly, this time, even if we shall have such an excellent guard of young men. José, I am sorry you are not well enough to come in to our last meal," she added, turning to the sick boy and taking his hand. "But we shall run up and say good-bye to you before we leave, and if ever you go as far west as Chicago, I want you to come and see us. Perhaps Ruth and I shall see you and your father this autumn when we are in Europe."

"Indeed, I hope you will come to Madrid and visit at my home," cried José. "Will you not arrange it?"

"That would be delightful" said Miss Sallie, "but we shall be over only for six weeks. We must return in time for Ruth's school, you know."

The last luncheon at Ten Eyck Hall was a very gay one. The dangers of the previous week were over and the mysteries cleared away.

The major fairly beamed on his guests across the hospitable board.

"It must have been Miss Sallie's fault," thought Mollie, watching his handsome face with a secret admiration. "He is certainly the dearest old man alive. I wonder if she isn't sorry now?"

And as if in answer to her unspoken question, she heard Miss Sallie saying:

"John, I hope this is not the last visit you will let us make to Ten Eyck Hall. In spite of its fires and tramps I should like to come again."

“I should be the happiest man in the world if you only would,” he answered. “I am greatly relieved that you haven’t got an everlasting prejudice against it.”

“When I settle down for the winter,” Jimmie Butler was heard to remark above the hum of conversation, “I mean to take up a certain study and not leave off studying it until I have graduated with diploma and honors.”

“What is it, Jimmie?” demanded the others.

“Prize fighting,” he replied. “I intend to learn wrestling and boxing, likewise just plain hair-pulling and scratching. Prize fighting in all its varieties for me before another year rolls round.”

“You will have to go into training, then, Jim,” exclaimed Alfred. “You will not be permitted to eat anything you like and not too much of anything else.”

“No more hot bread for you, Jimmie,” continued Stephen. “No more waffles and Johnnie-cakes. You will have to punch the bag mornings, when you would rather be sleeping, and give up theatres in the evenings for early bedtime. It’s a fearful life, my boy.”

“Be that as it may,” persisted Jimmie, “I’m going to learn how to deal a blow that will give a man a black eye the first time, and if ever I get hold of that wiry individual who gave me these in the woods, yonder,” he pointed to his red nose and discolored eye, “he’ll get such a ‘licking’ as he’ll remember to his last hour. Even Stephen’s giant won’t be a match for me.”

There was joyous laughter at this, followed by remarks from Martin and Alfred of a rather sarcastic character, such as “Give it to him, Jimmie! Give him a bump in the ribs!”

“I am going to have the woods patrolled, hereafter, in the summer time,” observed the major, “and all dangerous characters will be excluded. The next time we have a house party there will be no tramps to threaten my guests.”

“By the way,” said Stephen, “the giant tramp is in the hospital now. He was drunk when the fire started, and fell asleep. He was badly burned and almost suffocated, but his poor, long-suffering wife managed to save him somehow. The other two had left him to die.”

“Will you have him arrested when he gets well, Major?” asked Ruth.

“No,” replied the major, somewhat confused. “I suppose I should, but he tells me he was despoiled of his living by a dishonest master, and I have concluded to make it up to him for being richer than he is by giving him something to do. We

have several farms back in the country and I have put him in charge of the smallest one. It seems that farming is the very thing he wants to do more than anything else in life. He will have to travel a good distance before he can get anything to drink, and his wife is the happiest woman over the prospect you ever saw.”

“Major, major!” protested Miss Sallie. “What will you do next?”

“Ah, well,” exclaimed the major, “it is good to be able to give a man a chance to earn an honest living, especially if he wants to take it. And, when this poor wretch heard about that bit of land and little cottage back yonder in the hills, he looked as if he had had a glimpse of heaven. His wife told me that he had really tried, again and again to find something to do; but indoor life was very irksome to him because he had been brought up on a farm, and working in factories and foundries had been his undoing.”

“Stephen, how do you feel about it?” asked Alfred. “He was your opponent in the fight, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” replied Stephen. “He didn’t give me a black eye, and I am glad for him to earn an honest living. Uncle’s a brick.”

When the meal was over Major Ten Eyck rose from the table, clearing his throat as if he were about to make a speech, which indeed he was.

“I have something to say before this party breaks up, for myself and the boys. We want to express to you, how deeply grateful we feel to you, Miss Sallie and ‘The Automobile Girls,’ for what you have done for us.

“You have saved our old home for us, at the risk of your own precious lives, and there is nothing we can really do or say to show how much we appreciate it. The place has been in the family ever since there were any Ten Eycks to live in it. I was born here and I love it, and I hope to end my days here——”

“Don’t speak as if you were on the brink of the grave, Major, I beg of you,” protested Miss Sallie. “You are not many years older than I am, and I certainly will not allow such mournful thoughts to trouble me so soon.”

“You will always be young, Sallie,” replied the gallant major.

“You are nothing but a boy yourself, John,” replied Miss Stuart, blushing in spite of herself, while the young people exchanged stealthy smiles at these elderly compliments.

“I was saying,” continued the major, who remained standing to finish his speech,

“that there was nothing we could do, the boys and I, to show how we feel in this matter. But when you wear these little ornaments” (here the major handed Miss Sallie and each of the girls a little jeweler’s box) “we hope you will remember that we are your devoted friends always. It was Stephen’s idea, and there was not much time to get them, but the jeweler undertook a rush order for us, and I hope they are all right.”

“Hurray!” cried Jimmie, rolling his napkin into a ball and tossing it into the air.

There were cries of pleasure when the boxes gave up their treasures, small gold firemen’s helmets studded with pearls and a row of rubies on the curve of the brim.

As if this were not enough, John came in with a tray of bouquets, each one different, as on a former occasion. The major had picked and arranged the flowers himself for Miss Sallie and “The Automobile Girls,” as a last reminder of Ten Eyck Hall, he said.

“It is worth while going into the firemen’s business, if one is to be so well repaid,” exclaimed Ruth.

Bab felt particularly rich in souvenirs of her visit, with a picture of a new and hitherto unknown great-aunt, a ring and a beautiful pin.

“We are all much too excited to thank you properly, Major,” she said.

“I don’t want any thanks, my dear child,” replied the major. “I wish to avoid them.”

“Somebody should make a speech,” cried Jimmie’s voice above the jollity. “I think I’ll be the one.” He cleared his throat. “Major John Ten Eyck,” he said bowing toward the major, “I know these young ladies appreciate deeply the handsome souvenirs you have bestowed upon them, but youth and inexperience have tied their tongues. However, mine is loosened and I wish to thank you a thousand times for the souvenirs which I also am carrying away from Ten Eyck Hall, namely my beautiful ruby nose and my blue enameled eyes.”

There was more laughter and more exchange of jokes and fun, when Martin who had slipped out of the room for a moment, returned with a small bundle which he handed to Jimmie.

“We’ll give you a booby prize, Jimmie,” he said, “since the ladies have been awarded the first prize.”

Jimmie opened the bundle and drew forth a boxing glove which he put on

immediately and chased Martin out of the room. This was the signal for the breaking up of the lunch party.

The boxes and suit cases were already piled in their accustomed place on the back of the car and there was nothing for the girls to do but to pin on their hats and veils, slip on their silk dusters and go.

The servants had lined up in the hall to say good-bye. José had begged to be permitted to remain downstairs until after the visitors had gone. As the automobiles sped down the avenue, the major, standing by the sick boy's cot, waved good-bye from the piazza.

Only Bab saw another handkerchief waving its pathetic farewell from a window in the right wing. She gave an answering wave with her own little handkerchief which she hoped the old man would not miss.

"Good-bye to Ten Eyck Hall," she said to herself as she looked back at the beautiful old house. "You are full of tragic memories, but I love you and I would have risked much to have saved you from crumbling to a heap of ashes."

As they passed over the bridge and came to the crossroads by the woods, they were stopped by blind Jennie, who silently presented Bab and Ruth each with a small cross she herself had carved from wood. Then to Bab she gave a beautiful bunch of yellow roses, which the hermit had begged the girl to accept with his best wishes.

CHAPTER XXV—CONCLUSION

In spite of the strange chain of events following so closely on each other's heels, "The Automobile Girls" had only pleasant memories of Ten Eyck Hall and its occupants.

Among their trips they counted this as one of the most interesting, but Ruth, who was ever planning future surprises, had a plan that would outdo all other visits. This was nothing less than a journey to her own home, Chicago.

This excursion, every moment of which was to throb with interest for our four girls, involved the attempt to discover a hidden treasure buried in what had once been the prairie home of an old Illinois family. These adventures, with exciting scenes on the Stock Exchange where Barbara Thurston learned of a plot to ruin her friends, and much more, all is vividly described in the next volume of this series:

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