

FICTION

Laura Lee Hope

The Outdoor Girls at Wild Rose Lodge

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT WILD ROSE LODGE

OR

THE HERMIT OF MOONLIGHT FALLS

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

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OUTDOOR GIRLS AT BLUFF POINT," "THE MOVING
PICTURE GIRLS," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS,"
"BUNNY BROWN AND HIS SISTER SUE,"
"SIX LITTLE BUNKERS AT GRANDMA
BELL'S," ETC.

CONTENTS

- I. [Just Fun.](#)
- II. [The Falling Tree.](#)
- III. [The Queer Little Man.](#)
- IV. [Good News.](#)
- V. [Betty Takes a Dare.](#)
- VI. [Nearly Wrecked.](#)
- VII. [Bad Tidings Confirmed.](#)
- VIII. [Premonitions.](#)
- IX. [A Visitor.](#)
- X. [Hurrah for Allen.](#)
- XI. [The Hold-Up.](#)
- XII. [Sheep!](#)
- XIII. [The Enemy Routed.](#)
- XIV. [Nothing Human.](#)
- XV. [Wild Roses.](#)
- XVI. [The Whirlpool.](#)
- XVII. [The "Thing".](#)
- XVIII. [Surprised.](#)
- XIX. [Like Old Times.](#)
- XX. [Very Much Alive.](#)
- XXI. [Out of the Dark.](#)
- XXII. [Tragedy.](#)
- XXIII. [A Moonlight Apparition.](#)
- XXIV. [Recovered.](#)
- XXV. [The Old Crowd Again.](#)

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT WILD ROSE LODGE

CHAPTER I

JUST FUN

"Did you ever see a more wonderful day?"

The four Outdoor Girls, in Mollie Billette's touring car and with Mollie herself at the wheel, were at the present moment rushing wildly over a dusty country road at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

Grace Ford was sitting in front with Mollie, while Betty Nelson and Amy Blackford "sprawled," to use Mollie's sarcastic and slightly exaggerated description, "all over the tonneau."

"You look as if you had never done a real day's work in your life," said Mollie, with a disapproving glance over her shoulder at the girls in the tonneau.

"We never have," returned quiet Amy, with a grin.

"And we are proud of it," added Betty, as she defiantly settled her feet still more comfortably on the foot rail. "Why should we be energetic when it is so much easier to be lazy?"

"There the proper spirit speaks," applauded Grace Ford from the front. "I think I shall have to change places with you, Betty. It's far too exciting up here with Mollie. She insists upon staging near collisions every few feet--thus keeping me awake!"

"Great heavens!" cried Mollie, pressing an impatient foot upon the accelerator to which the great car responded with an eager purring, "did any one ever give us the mistaken title of Outdoor Girls, I wonder? They should have called us the Rip Van Winkle club, instead."

"Now she's getting sour-castic," commented Grace lazily. "Have some candy, honey, and sweeten up."

She passed the ever-present box of delicacies over to Mollie, to which overture the young driver responded with so indignant a stare that Grace quickly withdrew the box, tucked it behind her, and strove to look unconscious.

"Please, ma'am, I didn't mean to do it," she said meekly.

"Well, don't do it again, that's all," returned Mollie, uncompromisingly, her eyes once more on the road ahead, "I've eaten so many chocolates this week that I've had indigestion and mother threatened to cut down my allowance."

"Goodness, it's my allowance that suffers," retorted Grace, ruefully, "since it is my candy that you eat."

"Stop quarreling, girls, and answer my question," said Betty, sitting up straight and regarding delightedly a vista of flying hills and woodland greenery. "I asked you a few minutes ago if you had ever seen so wonderful a day?"

"Yes, plenty of 'em," returned Mollie, as she took a sharp curve on two wheels. "If you weren't too lazy to notice anything, Betty Nelson, you would see that there is a storm coming up. Look at those clouds over there in the east."

"Oh, you're a kill-joy!" cried Betty, cocking an optimistic eye up at the sky. "It's only one teeny little cloud anyway, and who cares for clouds when the boys are coming home?"

Both Amy and Grace felt a breathless little tug at their hearts at the joyful challenge in Betty's words, but Mollie, with a perverseness that was sometimes characteristic of her, refused to be too happy.

"Who says they're coming home?" she asked. "Now you're only guessing."

"Guessing!" cried Betty indignantly. "What do you mean--guessing? The war is over, isn't it?"

"Yes; and has been for quite a while," Mollie responded dryly. "But that doesn't say that the boys are coming home right away."

"We don't care about the right away," interrupted Amy, with a quiet happiness in her face that made Betty hug her impulsively. "We can wait patiently, now that we know they are safe."

"It's all right for you to talk about patience, Amy," retorted Mollie, throttling her engine and sliding at breakneck speed down a long hill without the thought of using a brake. A brake to Mollie meant something to be used at the last minute when she couldn't think of anything else to do. "You're an angel, but I'm not----"

"No, indeed!" said Grace, so emphatically that the girls in the tonneau chuckled and Mollie looked at her threateningly.

"For goodness' sake, don't waste time looking at me," Grace pleaded, as they bounced into a hole in the road and out again, fairly jouncing the breath from the girls' bodies. "Keep your eyes on the road, Mollie dear. We're not ready to die yet."

"Well, look out, or you may--ready or not," threatened Mollie darkly, as the car skidded around another precipitous turn and the girls saw with relief a long stretch of flat road before them.

"Just the same the boys must be coming home before very long," said Amy, quietly returning to the subject. "And when they do come we'll have to give them some sort of big party or something, girls."

"Of course we will," said Grace, munching contentedly on a chocolate. "Something that will make the people in Deepdale sit up and take notice."

"We-el--I don't know," objected Betty thoughtfully. "They say that the few soldier boys who have come home object to any sort of fuss being made over them. They seem to want to forget everything that has happened 'over there,' and any sort of celebration brings the whole thing vividly before them again."

"Yes, that's true, too," Mollie agreed. "I remember our doctor telling mother that if people only wouldn't try to force confidences from the boys and would try to keep all thought of the awful things they had been through out of their minds, there would be fewer cases of nervous breakdowns."

"Pop!" said Grace, snapping her finger resignedly. "There go all our hopes of a good time, Amy. When the boys come home all we shall be allowed to do will be to smooth their fevered brows and hold their hands."

"Well, we might do worse things even than that," said Betty, with a light laugh, and Mollie shot her a malicious glance.

"Just watch Betty objecting to that" she said wickedly. "Before we know it she will be sighing that Allen has only one fevered brow to smooth!"

Amy and Grace looked at Betty mischievously--at Betty who could not for the life of her look as unconcerned as she would have liked.

"Don't be so foolish" she said hastily, at which the girls only laughed the more.

"Never mind, honey," said Amy, putting an arm fondly about her chum. "I guess we will all be crazy with joy to get the boys home again."

"Well, you needn't think you can hold hands with Will and smooth his fevered brow all the time," said Grace unexpectedly. "Because I really have some share in him myself, you know. Remember, mine was one of the three pictures he kept under his pillow."

Readers of previous volumes in this series may recall that joyful letter written to Betty not so long ago in which Sergeant Allen Washburn--now Lieutenant Allen Washburn--had spoken of the three pictures which Will Ford had kept under his pillow during his long convalescence in one of the army hospitals over there. These readers may also remember that one of the pictures was of the boy's mother, another of his sister, Grace, and the third of shy little Amy Blackford, who now was blushing so furiously at the mere mention of it.

"How about poor Frank and Roy?" asked Mollie, mentioning the other two boys who made up the quartette of the girls' boy chums. "Who will attend to their fevered brows?"

"Oh, you and Grace can take turns at that," said Betty, lightly adding, with a little sigh: "Try as we can, Amy and I never know quite how to pair you four off. We can't for the life of us find out which of you likes Frank best and which inclines to Roy."

"That's right, kid--keep 'em guessing," said Mollie slangily, as she turned on power and challenged a steep grade. "Grace and I believe in scattering our favors--as 'twere. See that hill just ahead of us? What do you bet I make it without changing gears?"

"If you make it without changing our looks, I'll be happy," said Grace ruefully, as they bumped and rumbled to the top of the steep grade. "Look out, Mollie!" she added suddenly, indicating a big pile of brushwood that jutted out almost into the center of the road. "For goodness' sake, slow down!"

But Mollie did more than slow down. She stopped--and with such suddenness that the girls were all but thrown out of the car and Betty bumped her nose on the seat in front.

They had scarcely regained their poise when they were startled by a shrill cry from Amy.

"Girls!" she almost screamed, clutching Betty's arm in a grip that hurt, "look at that tree. It's going to fall! Oh, we'll be killed!"

The girls followed the direction of her pointing finger and looks of horror sprang to their eyes. Slowly, its descent retarded somewhat by the branches of other trees, a towering giant of the forest tottered and crashed its destructive way downward. And they were directly in its path!

CHAPTER II

THE FALLING TREE

For a moment the Outdoor Girls sat fascinated, paralyzed, without the power to move a muscle. Then suddenly Grace seemed galvanized to action. She leaned toward Mollie, grasping the steering wheel of the motionless car frantically.

"For heaven's sake, Mollie, get out of the way! Start the car!" she screamed.

"I can't!" Mollie answered, tight-lipped. "Something's wrong. The motor's dead."

But with Grace's scream, Betty had come to her senses and had scrambled out of the car, dragging the still paralyzed Amy after her.

"Grace, get out! Mollie, are you crazy?" she shouted wildly. "You'll be killed--"

Automatically Grace started to clamber to the road, but Mollie still fussed with brakes and levers, her lips in a tight line, her eyes blazing.

"Something's wrong--but I'll get her started," she muttered over and over to herself while Betty raged at her from the road.

"Get out! get out!" fumed the Little Captain. "Jump, or I'll come after you and we'll both be killed. Mollie!"

Luckily for Mollie's suicidal stubbornness, the great tree had been halted for a moment in its downward plunge by some particularly heavy foliage and branches, but the girls could see that it was only a matter of seconds until the giant should tear itself loose and come plunging down upon them.

And still Mollie fumbled with levers in a vain and foolish attempt to save her beloved car at the risk of her own life.

Betty had just jumped upon the running board in a wild attempt to drag her chum from the car when suddenly help came to them from an unexpected quarter.

An elderly man came running from the woods, evidently attracted by their excited cries. He gave one look at the toppling tree, even now tearing itself loose from the impeding branches, another at the machine with the two girls still in it, and then, with a speed and decision which seemed to belie his age, went to the rescue.

"Come--help me push!" he cried to Amy and Grace, who were still standing dumbly in the middle of the road. A moment later he had thrown himself with all his might against the machine, striving to push it out of the path of the falling tree.

In an instant of time the girls had added their strength to his and the automobile was moving slowly down the road. Luckily the car was on a down grade or they never could have managed it. As it was, there was just time to get out of the way when the great tree came crashing down, its outermost branches just brushing Amy's skirt. The giant had fallen on the very spot where the car had been only a moment before!

"Girls," breathed Betty, with a shaky little attempt at a laugh, "I guess we've never in our lives been nearer death than we were just then."

And while the girls are marveling at their almost miraculous escape from a terrible death, time will be taken to introduce the Outdoor Girls to those readers who have not yet met them and also to review briefly a few of the exciting and interesting adventures they have had up to the time of this present narrative.

There were four of them. Betty Nelson, or the "Little Captain" as the girls often called her because she had such a decided talent for knowing just the right thing to do at just the right moment, was eighteen, dark-haired and dark-eyed. She had a fund of vitality and more than her share of sense and good judgment--all of which went toward making her what she was, the most popular girl in Deepdale.

Grace Ford, tall, slender and willowy, was almost the same age as Betty, but that fact and her love of the outdoors were

the only things she had in common with the "Little Captain." Her father, James Ford, was a lawyer, and her mother, Mrs. Margaret Ford, a rather dressy lady who spent a good deal of her time at clubs, was quite a figure in the society of Deepdale. However, all through the war Mrs. Ford had worked with an untiring enthusiasm for the "cause," a fact which had made her many more friends than her social popularity could ever have done.

Next in the little quartette came Mollie Billette. Mollie was seventeen, French-American, and impulsive, with a quick temper that made more trouble for herself than for any one else. She and Betty were alike in their splendid vigor and vitality. Mollie, or "Billy" as she was sometimes called by her chums, had a very lovely widowed mother and an extremely mischievous young brother and sister, Paul and Dora (nicknamed "Dodo"), who were twins and six. Although the twins were pretty nearly always in trouble, they were really adorable children, whom everybody loved.

Amy Blackford, shy, sweet, pretty, completed the quartette. There had been a mystery about her past which had recently been cleared up, and it may have been this mystery that caused the girls to treat her with a little more consideration and gentleness than they did each other. Her guardian was a broker in the city who knew very little of the past except through letters.

The four boys who were close chums of the girls and had added to the interest and excitement of more than one of their adventures were Allen Washburn, who was very much interested in Betty, and in whom Betty was very much interested; Will Ford, Grace's brother, who had carried Amy Blackford's picture all through the war; Frank Haley, Will Ford's closest chum, and Roy Anderson who had not much distinction of any kind except that he was "lots of fun" and a chum of the other three boys.

In the first volume of this series the girls went on a camping and tramping tour, tramping for miles over the country and meeting with many adventures on the way.

Later they had more fun at Rainbow Lake, in a motor car, in a winter camp, in Florida, at Ocean View, then at Pine Island where the girls and boys together had cleared up a mystery surrounding a gypsy cave.

Later the girls and boys found themselves caught in the meshes of the great war, as many hundreds of thousands of others had been. The boys responded eagerly to the bugle call, and the girls, too, were eager for Army service and finally went to a hostess house at Camp Liberty. Though the girls had never worked harder in their lives, they found that the task had a stirringly romantic side as well.

Then in the volume directly preceding this, entitled "The Outdoor Girls at Bluff Point" the girls had had perhaps the most exciting adventure of all.

The Hostess House at Camp Liberty having burnt down, the chums found themselves forced to take a much-needed, although not entirely welcome, vacation and had decided to spend it at a romantic spot near the ocean called Bluff Point. The cottage on the bluff had been loaned to the girls by Grace's patriotic Aunt Mary, who declared that she owed something to the chums for having worked so hard for the good old Stars and Stripes. Mrs. Ford, worn out with war work, had gone with the girls to chaperon them.

Bad tidings at first threatened to overwhelm the chums. The Fords received word that Will was seriously wounded "somewhere in France" and later Mollie received a telegram from her mother saying that the twins, Dodo and Paul, had disappeared. Still later, while everything was at its blackest, Betty read Allen Washburn's name among the missing. However, everything cleared up later when the twins, who had been kidnapped, were recovered and their kidnapper sent to justice. Still later Allen proved that the report that he had been missing was an error by writing to Betty himself and in the letter he also spoke of Will Ford and the fact that he was getting over his wound splendidly. Of course there had been great rejoicing and the vacation had proved a happy one after all.

And now, at the time of this story, the war was over and the first regiments of soldiers had arrived from the other side and the girls were expecting a joyful reunion with the boys at any time.

They had not yet made definite plans for the summer and were just in the position of waiting for something to happen when something had happened with a vengeance--but not at all the kind of something which the four girls had expected.

"I think you are right, my dear," said the man who had saved the lives of at least two of the girls, rubbing his hands fussily together and peering out of small, near-sighted eyes, first at the tree and then at the girls. "It was a close call--a very close call. I declare, it was very nearly the closest call I ever saw!"

For the first time the girls really looked at him. He was a rather small man, slenderly built, with long sensitive hands and a very bald head, in the center of which a tuft of hair stood comically upright. These characteristics, coupled to the squinting eyes, gave the man a very odd appearance.

He was so queer a figure standing there in the center of the road that the girls found themselves staring unduly. Realizing something of this, Betty jumped down from the running board where she was still standing and held out her hand to the little man, thanking him in a voice that still trembled a little for the great service he had done them. The other girls followed suit and so overwhelmed their rescuer that he seemed quite embarrassed and looked around nervously as if for some means of escape.

Betty, seeing his embarrassment, was about to take pity upon him when something happened that they had not bargained for. It began to rain, not gently, but in a deluge, taking the girls completely by surprise.

Instinctively they turned toward the car, but Mollie suddenly began to laugh in a half-hysterical manner.

"This is what I call fun" she said. "Engine dead, caught in the rain, and I've even left the side curtains at home! I guess we're in for it, girls."

CHAPTER III

THE QUEER LITTLE MAN

While the girls stood looking wildly at each other their unknown rescuer seemed suddenly galvanized to action.

"This won't do at all!" he cried, raising both hands to his bald head which was by this time very wet and more shiny than ever. "You will get your death of cold, young ladies, you surely will. You must come with me. Here, right along this path I have a cottage--" All the time he was talking he was hustling them fussily ahead of him, for all the world like some old hen with a brood of chickens.

The girls, not knowing what else to do and being in rather a bewildered frame of mind, allowed themselves to be hustled. The rain was sheeting down in a terrific cloud burst, so that their clothes clung to them damply and they began to shiver.

They circled the fallen tree which had so nearly been their undoing, and a moment later found themselves upon a narrow footpath which seemed to lead into the very heart of the woods.

"I wonder where he is taking us," whispered Grace in Betty's ear. "Maybe he's a murderer or something."

In spite of her discomfort, Betty giggled.

"Did you ever see a murderer with a bald head like that?" she asked.

It seemed to the girls as if the path must be at least a mile long, but just as they were despairing of ever reaching the end of it, they came out into a partially cleared space and through the trees caught a glimpse of something that looked like a house.

Their new acquaintance, who up to this time had been bringing up the rear, now took the lead and led them over tangled underbrush, stones and foot-bruising rocks, to his strange little dwelling.

"It's a house, it's a house!" cried Grace thankfully, as they hurried after the little man. "I guess somebody will have to wring me out when we get inside. I'm soaked through!"

"Goodness, why don't you tell us something we don't know?" grumbled Mollie, but nobody was listening to her. They had reached the house and the man had swung the door open hospitably.

"Step inside, step inside, do," he urged with a nervous gesture that reminded the girls once more of the proverbial hen. "You will find it dry at least, and I will have a fire for you in a hurry. Just a moment till I get some wood--just a moment--"

And while he rambled on, suiting his words with quick nervous action, the girls crowded inside the cottage and looked about them curiously.

The room they had entered was large and scrupulously neat. At first glance it seemed a queer combination of hunting lodge and museum of natural history. The rough clapboards and beams of the ceiling and walls had never been plastered, and this very crudity seemed somehow to give the room an air of warmth and home-likeness that was very inviting.

Hung on the walls were several fairly large skins of animals, a gun or two, and over the huge open fireplace, which very nearly covered one end of the room, hung the magnificent head of a buck.

On the wall opposite the fireplace was a set of rudely-erected shelves, one beneath the other, and these shelves were covered with specimens of butterflies, beetles and other bugs of every size and description. That the specimens had been mounted by an expert even an inexperienced eye could see.

The girls, who had been regarding the oddities of the room with growing interest, were brought back to a realization of the discomfort of wet clothes by the owner of the place himself.

The latter had brought firewood from somewhere, and, with the aid of half a dozen matches, had succeeded in getting a fairly good blaze.

Then with a smile of satisfaction he turned to the girls, rubbing his hands together genially.

"Come nearer to the fire--come closer--do," he urged in his quick nervous way. "I am sure you are chilled through--quite chilled through. I will bring chairs." He stopped abruptly and looked about him with an embarrassed air, his gaze coming to rest on the only chair which adorned the room.

Betty, seeing his confusion, was trying to think of something helpful to say, when the little man suddenly found a way out of his quandary.

"Ah, I have it!" he cried, seizing enthusiastically upon a long bench that stood on one side of the room. "Four can sit upon this quite easily, I am sure. A happy thought--a very happy thought--" and he pulled and tugged at the bench until he succeeded in moving it close to the fire.

Afterward it occurred to the girls that they might have helped him, for it was a very heavy bench and he was rather a frail old man. But at the time they were too interested in this unusual place and their rather extraordinary host to think of anything very rational.

However, they seated themselves dutifully in a row upon the bench, "for all the world like an orphan asylum out for an airing," as Mollie said later, and gratefully stretched out their sodden shoes to the blaze.

They were cold and they were wet and they were fast becoming very hungry, all of which might have been expected to form a very good reason why they should have been miserable. But they weren't miserable--not at all. To the Outdoor Girls the thrill of an adventure always more than counterbalanced the possible discomforts attending it.

Their host started to draw up the one chair in the room, hesitated a moment then, as though he had just thought of something, turned and darted through the door, closing it with a little click behind him.

For the space of half a second the girls looked after him. Then they looked at each other. Then they drew a long breath and let loose the flood of curious questions which had been struggling for expression for the past twenty minutes.

"Well, isn't this a lark?" cried Mollie, her eyes dancing, "Half an hour ago we were awfully bored, and now look at us."

"Yes, look at us," said Grace with a little sniff. "I'm sure we're not very much to look at right now with our hair wet, and our clothes--"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, who cares about such things?" cried Betty gaily. "I think this is a darling place and I'm having the time of my life. I wonder who he is?"

"He seemed kind of scared just now, didn't he?" chuckled Mollie, feeling her shoe to see if it was drying out any. "It was funny the way he bolted out of the room."

"Poor old dear--no wonder he was scared," commented Grace, as she took off her hat and tried to do something with her hopelessly bedraggled locks. "The way we look we're enough to scare anybody. Oh, dear, hasn't any one a comb?"

"Why, of course, we carry a complete beauty parlor outfit just for your benefit, dear," giggled Mollie. "The rest of us don't need it though, We are too beautiful naturally."

"You know I like him a lot, the queer little man, I mean," said Amy, evidently following out her own train of thought. "He seems kind of fussy and peculiar but he has an awfully nice smile."

"Trust Amy to find the smile," said Betty, putting an arm fondly about the younger girl. "And of course we all like him," she added seriously. "If it hadn't been for him we probably wouldn't be feeling so happy right now."

"Yes, we would probably be in some hospital with our unhappy relatives weeping over our mangled remains," said the irrepressible Mollie, and laughed at the shriek that went up at her gruesome remark. "There probably wouldn't have been enough of us left to recognize," she added by way of good measure, and they shrieked again.

"For goodness' sake, let's talk of something pleasant," said Grace, rising suddenly and going over to the window. "If you want to sit on that old bench all day, you can."

It appeared that the girls had no intention of sitting on the bench all day. They got up and sauntered about the room, examining the skins on the walls and looking, but without much curiosity, at the rifles. They lingered longest before the shelves of butterflies and beetles, for some of the specimens were really beautiful and very rare.

After they had examined everything in sight they began to grow restive. They must have been in the place nearly an hour and it suddenly occurred to them to wonder where their host had been keeping himself all this time.

"I wish we could get started," worried Mollie, looking out upon the sodden landscape. The rain was apparently coming down just as hard as ever. "I hate to leave the car all by itself out there. Somebody might steal it."

"I wish I knew where that man was," said Grace nervously. "I never trust strange men. He may set the house on fire for all we know."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when the door opened and the topic of conversation himself entered, carrying a tray so big and heaped so high with sandwiches that one could scarcely discover the man behind it.

Betty and Amy ran to his assistance, and between them they got the tray safely to the bench. In one delighted glance the girls saw that not only sandwiches, but a steaming pot of coffee and the remains of what had been a great, three-layer chocolate cake were on the tray.

At thought of the fussy little man taking all this time and trouble, for it must have taken a good deal of work to make all that formidable array of sandwiches--the girls were sincerely touched and regarded their host with a new interest.

"There, there," he was saying, regarding the heaped-up tray with evident pleasure, "you must sit down and eat at once. You must be nearly starved--famished. I hope this will be enough."

He looked at them so anxiously that Betty felt like hugging him--and nearly did it.

"Enough! Well, I guess it is enough," she said heartily, as the other girls seated themselves on the bench either side of the tempting tray and began enthusiastically to help themselves. "It would be plenty for an army. We can't thank you enough."

"Indeed we can't," added Mollie.

"It's awfully good of you," said Grace, as she took a bite of her ham sandwich.

"Awfully good," added Amy, like an echo.

The little man waved aside their thanks and drew up the one chair in the room, talking all the time in his quick, jerky fashion.

"It was no trouble, I am sure,--no trouble whatever," he said, adding as though he wished to change the subject: "You didn't tell me your name--" he hesitated, looking at Betty, who of course did tell him her name on the spot. This proved a signal for mutual introductions, and the girls learned that their new friend was a college professor, Arnold Dempsey by name. They also learned that he had taken up woodcraft in the hope of recovering his health.

And while they contentedly munched sandwiches and sipped steaming coffee the girls learned a good deal more about Arnold Dempsey, and the more they learned of him the more they felt drawn to him.

And when he started to tell them of his two sons who had fought so nobly in the army of democracy, their eyes began to shine and they leaned toward him with an interest that was intensely real.

"Oh, it must be wonderful to have two big soldier sons," cried Amy, forgetting her shyness in her enthusiasm. "Aren't you dreadfully proud?"

A gleam came into Professor Dempsey's eyes and his thin shoulders straightened.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Of course I'm proud of my boys--very proud. And I hope," a look of absolute happiness came into his eyes and he smiled contentedly, "that before very long I shall see them."

"Oh, I'm sure you will!" cried Betty eagerly.

"That's what we are all hoping for, anyway," said Grace, adding with a sigh: "The boys have been gone so *dreadfully*

long."

"Look," cried Mollie presently, rising suddenly to her feet and pointing toward the window. "We have been so busy talking that we never noticed the sun had come out."

"And doesn't it look good!" exulted Betty.

In spite of their reluctance to leave their new-found friend, the girls were anxious to be off, for they knew their parents would be worrying about them.

Professor Dempsey insisted on seeing them safely back to the road although they protested that there was absolutely no need of it.

"There are two or three paths that lead to the road," he explained, as he flung wide the door, letting in a flood of sunshine, "and I wouldn't have you lose your way for the world--not for the world!"

The woodland was beautiful after the rain, and the girls sniffed the fragrant air eagerly as they followed Professor Dempsey along the path. It was not till they had almost reached the road that Mollie had a disquieting thought.

"How do we know but what we're stuck here for good?" she asked the girls. "The car stopped dead, you remember, just under that horrible tree, and I'm sure I don't know what in the world made it. If I can't find out the trouble--"

"Oh, but you've got to find it," protested Grace, while Betty and Amy looked worried. "We can't stay here all night, and it may be a dozen miles to the nearest garage."

"I know that just as well as you do," grumbled Mollie. "But if I can't, I can't, that's all."

By this time they had reached the road and Mollie went straight to the car. While she and Betty were trying to find out what was wrong the other two girls and Professor Dempsey looked on anxiously.

"Well, as far as I can see there is absolutely nothing wrong with it," snapped Mollie at last, lifting a face flushed with exertion. "Get in, girls, and I'll start the engine--or try to. Then if she won't go we'll have to make up our minds to stay here all night or walk to the next garage."

Accordingly the girls got in and Mollie pressed the self-starter. To her great surprise, the engine purred a response, and as she shifted her gears the car moved slowly forward.

"Oh, goodie, we're going," cried Amy, and the faces of the other girls showed relief.

"Must have been a drop of water in the gasoline," hazarded Mollie, and then she throttled the engine once more while she and her chums turned to say good-bye to Professor Dempsey. The latter was still standing in the road, looking up at them rather wistfully.

"I'm glad that I had an opportunity of helping you, young ladies--very glad," he answered, in response to their repeated thanks. "You conferred a great favor on me also, for I have little company. Good-bye--and good luck to you."

The girls responded gayly, and as they started forward Betty leaned far out of the machine to call back an encouraging: "Keep hoping hard for your boys to come home. I am sure they will be back soon."

"Thank you, young lady, thank you," said Professor Dempsey, but the words were too low for Betty to catch and she was too far away to see the mist that sprang suddenly to his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

GOOD NEWS

Deepdale, the home of the four Outdoor Girls, is a thriving little city with a population of about fifteen thousand people. It is situated on the Argono River, a pleasant stream where a great many of the young folk of Deepdale, and some of the older ones too, keep motor boats and canoes and various other types of pleasure craft.

Farther on, the Argono empties into Rainbow Lake, which is picturesque in the extreme. It has several pretty and romantic looking islands, chief of which is Triangle Island--so called because of its shape.

There is a boat running from Deepdale to Clammerport at the foot of Rainbow Lake, and this boat is almost always crowded with pleasure seekers. In addition to this Deepdale is situated in the heart of New York state and is only a hundred-and-fifty-mile run from the city of that name. Thus one can easily see that Deepdale is a very desirable place in which to live.

At least that is what the four Outdoor Girls thought. And since they had spent most of their lives there, they certainly ought to know!

On the morning of this day, some ten days or so after their strange encounter with Professor Dempsey, the girls were gathered on Betty's porch, talking over their plans for the summer.

"I am only waiting to hear from Uncle John," Mollie was saying, as she swung lazily back and forth in the couch swing. "The last time I saw him he said that he was almost sure to go north this summer and he told me that as soon as he made definite plans he would let me know."

"You told us that two weeks ago," Grace reminded her. "And we haven't heard from him yet."

"It does seem to take him a long time to make up his mind," sighed Amy.

Betty, who had been trying to read a novel, closed the book and turned to them with a laugh.

"Goodness, you all sound doleful," she told them. "It seems to me that we ought to be able to live through it, even if we don't get Wild Rose Lodge for the summer. There are plenty of other things we can do."

Mollie turned upon her indignantly.

"How you talk, Betty Nelson," she scolded her. "As if we could possibly have as good a time anywhere else as we could at Wild Rose Lodge. Think of being in a real hunting lodge out in the woods away from everybody! Why, it will be a real adventure--"

"All right. I surrender--don't shoot," laughed Betty, coming over and perching on the railing beside Mollie. "I admit we should probably have more fun at the lodge than we could anywhere else. I was only trying to look on the bright side of things in case our plans should fall through. Hello--who's this?"

"This" proved to be Mollie's little sister Dora, or "Dodo," as she was called by almost everybody. With a sigh of relief, the girls saw that Dodo's twin brother, Paul, was not with her, for together the children were a simply unconquerable pair.

The twins had been spoiled by their widowed mother, Mrs. Billette, even before the time when they had been kidnapped and spirited off by a hideous Spaniard. But since their recovery, their joyful mother had indulged them in every way until they had become well nigh unmanageable.

Yet in spite of everything, the twins were very lovable, and every one loved them, even those whom they annoyed most.

And now as Dodo tore up the street toward them, waving something white in her hand, the girls instinctively glanced about to see what they ought to put out of sight before the cyclone struck them.

"Thank goodness, Paul isn't with her," murmured Grace. "Then we would be in for it."

"Dodo," cried Mollie as the child started up the walk, "scrape some of that mud off your feet before you come up. You will get Betty's porch all dirty."

"Name's Dora--not Dodo," the little girl answered, paying not the slightest heed to Mollie's caution about the mud. "Dodo's a baby's name--don't like it. Got something for you."

She stumbled heedlessly up the steps, leaving a trail of mud behind her, and almost breaking her neck in the bargain.

"Now just look at Betty's porch," Mollie was beginning in exasperation when Betty laughingly interfered.

"Oh, let her alone, Mollie," she coaxed. "The porch was dirty anyway and--what's that you have in your hand, Dodo?"

"Sumfin' for Mollie," answered Dodo, leaning sulkily against the rail while the girls regarded her anxiously. "An' if Mallie aren't nice to me she can't have it."

"Oh, for goodness' sake be nice to her and get it over with, Mollie," urged Grace, uneasily conscious of the candy box she had shoved hastily behind her. She was afraid one corner of it might show.

So Mollie got down from her perch on the railing and went over coaxingly to the little girl.

"Give it to Mollie, honey," she begged. "I'll even call you Dora, if you will."

"*Always Dora--never Dodo?*" asked Dodo eagerly, for she was growing out of babyhood just enough to resent being called by her baby name.

"Always Dora," Mollie promised.

For answer Dodo held out the white thing she had waved at them from the street, and with a little cry of excitement Mollie saw that it was a letter addressed to her in her Uncle John's firm hand.

At her exclamation the girls crowded round her eagerly. She hastily tore open the envelope and devoured the contents. Then she turned to the girls with a glowing face.

"It's all right, it's all right!" she cried, waving the letter round her head like a flag and nearly upsetting her chums. "Uncle John says it is settled. He is going to Canada for a couple of months and we can have the lodge for the whole time he is away or a part of it, just as we wish. Hooray! How's that for luck?"

The girls were so excited over their good fortune that they forgot all about Dodo. She, finding herself unobserved, had slipped around the girls to the swing, snatched the box of candy which Grace had exposed when she got up, had taken the steps two at a time and was flying off down the street before the girls saw what she was up to.

Then it was Grace who, with a dreadful premonition, thought of her candy. She turned quickly, saw that the box was gone, and uttered a wail of woe.

"That little Turk of a sister of yours has done it again," she cried, turning to Mollie, while Betty and Amy began to laugh. "You just wait till I catch her. I'll get my candy back if I have to--spank her," this last with a fierce scowl.

Betty put an arm about her excited chum, led her over to the swing and put her down in it.

"By the time you caught Dodo there wouldn't be any of your candy left," she said, adding soothingly: "Never mind, honey. We will get you some more if we have to take up a collection."

"Makes me feel like an orphan's home," grumbled Grace, but she laughed nevertheless with the rest and immediately forgot both her candy and Dodo in renewed excitement over Wild Rose Lodge.

"Just where is this place, Mollie?" asked Amy. "What is it called?"

"Oh, that's the very best part of it," said Mollie, with a mysterious smile. "It has the most wonderful, most romantic name. Come closer while I whisper it--Moonlight Falls. There, isn't that a real name for a place?"

"Wild Rose Lodge at Moonlight Falls," sighed Grace ecstatically. "If we don't have a wildly romantic time in a place

with a name like that, it will be our own fault."

"But we will have to have a chaperon--" Amy was beginning when Betty interrupted her eagerly.

"I have fixed that," she said, and while they all looked in astonishment she went on quickly to explain. "I met Mrs. Irving in the street the other day--you know she has been away ever since that last time she was with us on Pine Island--and I asked her then if she would chaperon us this summer."

"But you didn't even know then that we were going to Wild Rose Lodge, Betty," Mollie interrupted.

"I knew we were sure to go somewhere. We always--" Betty was arguing when Grace cut in impatiently.

"Never mind about that," she said. "Did Mrs. Irving say she would go?"

"She said she was very sure she could manage it," Betty answered. "She seemed awfully surprised and said it would be great fun to be with us girls again."

"It will be great fun for all of us," said Amy happily. "I'll never forget the wonderful time we had on Pine Island with Mrs. Irving and the boys."

"Yes--and the boys," Betty repeated a little wistfully. She was thinking of Allen Washburn and the wonderful time they had had that never-to-be-forgotten summer--before the war had come to separate them and make their hearts ache. Oh, it would be unbelievably happy to have the boys back again--Will, Roy, Frank and--her Allen. The old crowd together once more. She looked around at the girls, who had also fallen into a thoughtful mood, and suddenly she smiled, the old bright, happy smile that was peculiarly Betty's own.

"Oh, cheer up, everybody," she cried gayly. "How do we know but what the boys will be home in time to join us at Wild Rose Lodge? Then think of the fun!"

"Oh, Betty, if we could only believe that!" they cried.

"Well," said the Little Captain stoutly, "you never can tell. Stranger things have happened, you know."

"But nothing so joyful," added Mollie.

CHAPTER V

BETTY TAKES A DARE

It would be a week or two before Wild Rose Lodge would be ready for the girls' occupancy, and as a relief for their impatience they filled in the time in hiking, motoring and put-putting up and down the Argono in their natty little motor boat.

But whatever it was they were doing, their conversation almost invariably returned to one of two subjects--the return of the boys and the good time they would have at Moonlight Falls.

They spoke often of Professor Arnold Dempsey. They took a real interest in the queer little old man, both because of the service he had done them and the fact that he was watching and waiting for his two big sons, even as they were anxiously awaiting the return of their boys.

"It must be dreadfully lonely for him in that little cabin or house or whatever you call it in the woods," Amy said one day as she and the girls sauntered down to the dock where their motor boat was anchored. "And he said he hardly ever had company."

"Goodness, I should think he would go crazy," Mollie commented. "Why, I go almost mad when I don't have any one to talk to for an *hour*."

"I wonder if he lived in that little house all during the war," said Betty thoughtfully. They had reached the dock and were walking slowly out upon it. "If he did, it must have been dreadfully hard for him. It makes me shiver to think of him sitting there all alone, reading the casualty list, terrified for fear the next name would be that of his son----"

"Oh, Betty," cried gentle Amy, all her sympathy quickly roused by the picture Betty had drawn, "what a dreadful thing to think of!"

"But he never did find their names among the missing or killed," Mollie reminded them soberly. "We know that because he said he expected to see them soon."

"Of course. And all we can do is hope with all our hearts that he gets his wish," said Betty brightly, adding with a sudden change of subject: "But away with dull care. The sun is shining and here's our fairy ship waiting to carry us off to fresh adventure. What more could any one want, I'd like to know."

"Humph," grunted Mollie, eyeing critically the trim little boat in which they had had so much fun and adventure, as the other girls tumbled aboard. "I'd say she didn't look very much like a fairy boat just now. She needs considerable polishing and scrubbing. Why don't you girls get busy, anyhow?"

"Just hear who's talking," yawned Grace, disposing herself lazily in a comfortable chair on deck. "I haven't noticed you waving a broom and mop frantically around these parts lately, Mollie dear."

"In fact," Betty added with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "I think I remember suggesting that the *Gem* needed grooming the other day. Whereupon some one who shall be nameless suggested a motor ride instead."

"She's got you there, old dear," drawled Grace, taking the inevitable box of chocolates from her pocket and opening it lovingly. "I remember the incident pre-zactly as it has been described."

Mollie, who was still standing on the dock, regarding them frowningly, started to reply but Betty interrupted her with a shout. She had started the engine and the boat began to move slowly away from the dock.

"Better hurry up," suggested the Little Captain wickedly. "We'd rather not leave you behind, but if you insist--"

However, Mollie had not the slightest intention in the world of being left behind. With a gasp of mingled surprise and dismay she made a jump for it, cleared the foot of space between the dock and the boat and landed square in the middle of Grace's astonished and outraged lap. She would have sat on the candy box, too, and would, in all probability, have ruined it and her dress as well, had not Grace, with rare presence of mind, whipped the box out of danger just in the nick

of time.

"Well," said Mollie, too surprised and indignant to move for a moment, while, at the comical picture she made, both Betty and Amy laughed merrily, "I surely like this!"

"You do, do you? Well, I don't!" cried Grace, recovering both her breath and her dignity at the same moment. "If you don't stop sitting on my lungs this minute, Mollie Billette, I'll--I'll--stick this pin into you."

With a yell Mollie stumbled to her feet and shook out her dress belligerently.

"You had better not. I'm stronger than you, Grace Ford, and I've a good mind to let you see what the bottom of the river looks like."

She advanced toward her prospective victim, and Betty stopped laughing long enough to call to her.

"You'd better change your mind, Mollie," she cautioned merrily. "You can't give Gracie a ducking without ruining her dress and she might charge you damages. Reconsider--I beg of you, reconsider!"

Mollie condescended to reconsider and plumped herself down cross-legged on the deck, disdaining a chair.

"Oh, very well," she said, adding as she glared darkly at Grace: "You will probably never know, woman, how near to death you were."

To which Grace replied with unexpected ferocity.

"And you may never know, woman, just how near to death you are this minute. Look at what you have done to my best sport skirt. I don't believe I will ever be able to get those wrinkles out."

"If you two will stop quarreling just long enough to tell me where you want to go," Betty requested, "I should be very much obliged. Up or down the river?"

"Anywhere," answered Grace, still regarding her crumpled sport skirt gloomily. "We are just trying to kill time this afternoon anyway, so I don't see that it makes much difference where we go."

"Suppose we take her up to the Point," suggested Mollie, getting up from the deck and going over to Betty who still had the wheel. "Maybe we can get some ice-cream and a drink of ice water. I am getting dreadfully thirsty already."

Betty looked tempted but a little doubtful.

"You know it is pretty dangerous to run in there, Mollie," she protested. "There are so many other boats driven by Percy Falconer's crazy lot who don't care whether they capsize you or not--"

"Goodness, Betty, it isn't like you to be afraid," Mollie started, but stopped at the look in the "Little Captain's" eye.

"I'd rather you didn't ever say that again, Mollie," she said. "I'll take you in there since you want it, but if anything should happen remember that I warned you."

"Goodness, Mollie, I don't see why you ever wanted to go and suggest that for," said Grace nervously. "We all know there is danger of a collision over at the Point, and I'm sure I don't want to spoil my clothes, even if you do."

"Your father said that he would rather we kept to this side of the river, Betty," urged Amy. "Please don't go over to the Point now."

"There's no use talking to her," snapped Grace. "You ought to know Betty well enough by this time to know that she would take us over to the Point now, after what Mollie said, if she knew we would all die of it. Might as well save your breath."

Mollie said nothing, but down in her heart she was more than a little bit anxious and was beginning to regret that she had deliberately egged Betty on.

Percy Falconer, of whom Betty had spoken, had once been a rather dudish, affected boy and had later developed into an exceedingly fast young man. He had an immensely rich father and a mother who denied him nothing so that he had been able to gather together a few kindred spirits among whom he was the leader. All the regular boys and girls in town

thoroughly disliked "the set," but there were a few girls who were willing to put up with Percy Falconer and his crowd for sake of the long motor rides, dances, dinners and motorboat picnics that the boys were able to give them.

There were always some of this wild crowd over at the "Point," and it was for this reason as well as the very real danger of a collision with a recklessly driven boat that Betty's father had rather discouraged the chums going over to that side of the river.

However the day was fine, the water of the river was as calm as a lake and the *Gem* flew across the sparkling water like a gull, bringing a flush of pure excitement and pleasure to the faces of the girls. Danger--what danger could there be in this staunch little craft, with Betty at the wheel?

They were half way across the river, now--three quarters. The gay pleasure craft flaunting up and down the river were becoming more numerous and Betty slackened speed. Her breath came more quickly and her hands tightened on the wheel. She could drive a boat as well as any boy, but here, she knew, was a situation to test her greatest skill.

Craft of all sizes and descriptions seemed to the excited girls to be piling up about them. Most of the boats were being navigated carefully, but now and then a small, fast speed-craft would shoot out from behind another so suddenly that Betty would be forced to swerve sharply to one side, fairly grazing the stern of the racing boat.

On one of these occasions, when it had seemed impossible to avoid a collision, Amy called out sharply:

"Oh, Betty, don't you think we had better go back?"

And Betty replied with a queer little laugh:

"Might just as well go ahead as back now. We'll be there in a minute. Don't worry."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when two craft running neck and neck and driven recklessly slipped out from behind a sailboat and drove directly down upon the *Gem*. It seemed impossible that the Outdoor Girls could escape disaster.

CHAPTER VI

NEARLY WRECKED

The girls did not scream. Perhaps they were too frightened or perhaps it was just natural pluck.

They did jump to their feet though as if with some wild thought of leaping overboard. But there they remained, staring with fascinated eyes at the fate that was bearing down upon them.

As for Betty, after one breath-taking minute when all the blood in her body seemed to rush to her head, she simply sat there and tried in the second that was given her to think what to do.

Almost automatically, she wrenched the wheel around, nearly capsizing the boat with the sudden turn. At almost the same second, as though the thing had been prearranged, the boys in the racing craft swung around in the opposite direction.

A slight scraping as the side of the *Gem* slid along the side of the nearer of the racing craft, and they were safe, with no harm done with the exception of a little paint scraped from the side of the boat.

It was a moment before the girls could realize what had happened to them. Then a voice hailed them from the boat alongside. In a glance the girls perceived that the voice belonged to no other than Percy Falconer himself.

"Hello," called Percy, adding boisterously as he recognized the girls: "Well, by all that's holy, if it isn't the Outdoor Girls! Thought you never came over to this side of the river."

"We don't," Betty answered, the hand that still gripped the wheel shaking nervously now that the danger was over. "And I don't believe we ever will again, either!"

"I say, your teeth are chattering," cried Percy, looking at Betty in open admiration. In the old days, Percy had tried hard to win favor in Betty's eyes, but the latter had always treated him with a good-natured indifference not unmixed with contempt that had been very hard for the young dude to bear. During the years he had still admired Betty from afar and hated Allen Washburn for being the "lucky one." So now he hastened to make the most of what he thought was an opportunity.

"Come on over to the Point with me and Derby here," indicating the young fellow in the other racing craft who had drawn his boat up close to them and was looking on with interest. "We will get you something to steady your nerves a bit. We had a pretty narrow squeak that time, and it's no wonder it upset you a little."

He was supposedly addressing all the girls, but his eyes were only for Betty. As for her, she suddenly had a startlingly clear mental picture of what her father would think were some one to tell him that his daughter and her chums had been seen at the "Point" with Percy Falconer and a friend of his.

In days gone by Percy had been very insipid, his mind entirely on his clothes; now he had become a sport, and the report was that he caroused around not a little.

Betty turned to the youth with a decided little shake of her head, though her eyes were smiling.

"I think we shall have to go right back," she said. "It looks as though it were going to rain. Thank you just as much," and she began to ease her motor boat gently away from the other craft.

"Oh, I say," Percy cried, disappointedly and a little angrily, for out of the corner of his eye he could see that his friend was laughing at him, "we would only keep you for a moment or two. You needn't be afraid of us. We won't bite, you know."

"We don't know you well enough to be sure even of that," said Mollie, coming suddenly and flippantly into the conversation.

But Percy took not the slightest notice of her and, as Betty was slowly but surely widening the distance between the

Gem and his boat, he leaned forward eagerly.

"Betty, let me see you some time. How about to-morrow night?"

And because Betty was always kind to every one and was sorry for Mollie's flippant speech, she said, quite unexpectedly, even to herself, "All right."

Then she turned the *Gem* around and started for home, conscious that her chums were gazing at her in speechless amazement.

"Betty!" cried Grace, horrified. "You are never going to let Percy Falconer come to see you, are you?"

But Betty turned on her irritably. She was tired and nervous and angry at herself for having anything to do with that conceited dude, Percy Falconer.

"You heard me say he could come, didn't you?" she said in response to Grace's incredulous question, Amy's wide-eyed stare, and Mollie's grin. "And if you are going to ask me why I said so," she added desperately, "I'm not going to tell you. And if anybody speaks to me before I get back to the dock, I'll--wreck 'em, that's all."

The girls exchanged glances and wisely decided to change the subject, for the present at least. For the time they had plenty to do anyway, just watching out that somebody else did not run into them!

By the time they reached comparatively clear water they were all tired and they were glad for once when the *Gem* scraped against the home dock and the "cruise" was over.

"Well," said Mollie as they climbed on to the dock, "we surely did have some excitement, but we didn't get what we started out for after all."

"What's that?" asked Grace, as she tied the ribbon round her candy box and adjusted her hat at a more becoming angle.

"Ice-cream and a drink of ice water," said Mollie ruefully. "I've just remembered that I am dying of thirst."

"Come on around to my house," Betty invited. Her wrist was lame from gripping the wheel so hard and she felt it gingerly. "Mother said she would make a big pitcher of lemonade for us and leave it in the refrigerator."

"Whew," whistled Mollie, taking Betty's arm and hurrying her forward. "By any chance did you girls hear what I heard? *Me for it*, Betty Nelson."

The girls talked little on their way to Betty's house, but they thought a good deal. They were tired and disgruntled, and it seemed to them in their pessimistic mood that everything they had tried to do that day had gone wrong. And the climax of it all was their meeting--if it could be called a meeting--with Percy Falconer. Worst of all, Betty was going to allow him to call!

With something of this in her mind, Mollie glanced sideways at her chum and, curiosity getting the better of her discretion, ventured to remark upon it.

"I wonder what Allen will say," she said, "when he learns about Percy."

It was an unfortunate remark, as Betty very soon showed by turning upon her chum angrily.

"I don't know that Allen has a right to say anything at all about what I do," she said. "And as I don't intend ever to see Percy Falconer after to-morrow, I think we had better forget about him. But there," she added, bringing herself up short and giving Mollie's hand a little conciliatory squeeze, "I didn't mean to be cross. I'm just kind of mad about the whole thing--and tired, and hot--"

"I know," said Mollie generously. "I guess we all are--tired and hot, I mean. We will feel better after we have had something cold to drink."

Betty's mother had left not only the lemonade but some sandwiches of chopped nuts and cream cheese. Jubilantly the girls carried these delicacies out on the front porch and proceeded to devour them without further delay.

As they ate and drank, their ill-humor vanished and they began to feel once more like their cheerful, optimistic selves. They even began to laugh a little about the close shave they had had with Percy and his friend.

"It was mighty clever work of yours, Betty, swerving around like that," Mollie said reminiscently, as she patted the Little Captain's hand approvingly. "I'm sure I would have been so scared I'd have gone right ahead and then there would have been a nasty smash."

"I do hope the folks don't hear about it," worried Grace. "It would only make them nervous and they might even refuse to let us go out in the *Gem* any more."

"I don't see how the folks are going to know anything about it," said Amy calmly.

"Unless our dear friend Percy blabs it all over town," added Grace.

"I think we ought to tell the folks," Betty spoke up suddenly. "I know they would rather hear about it from us than from any one else. Hello," she broke off, as her eye lighted on a newspaper lying on the table, "this looks like the evening edition. Maybe it has some news of Allen's division."

"My, just listen to her," yawned Grace. "Allen's division, indeed. As though he were the only one we were interested in--"

But her words were cut short by a startled exclamation from Betty.

"Oh, girls, look here!" she cried. "Look at these names. Oh, I hope it isn't true! I hope it isn't!"

CHAPTER VII

BAD TIDINGS CONFIRMED

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," said Mollie, pausing with a sandwich half-way to her mouth, while Amy and Grace regarded the Little Captain with astonishment. "What names? Where?"

But Betty was paying no attention to them. She was reading hastily the column that had caught her startled attention.

"Listen to this," she said, reading out loud. "Among those who were killed in the last great Allied offensive are the names of these brave soldiers. James Browning of Columbus, Ohio--No, that isn't what I mean--Look, here they are--James Dempsey and Arnold Dempsey, Junior. Girls, do you suppose --" and she looked at them with widening eyes.

"Arnold Dempsey, Arnold Dempsey," repeated Mollie, searching in her memory, but Amy interrupted excitedly.

"That was Professor Dempsey's name, wasn't it?" she asked. "Oh, Betty, do you suppose it could be his son?"

"Why, of course it is his son--how could it be any one else?" cried Grace, the excitement beginning to communicate itself to her. "Arnold Dempsey, Junior--and the professor said his sons were over there."

"Didn't it say something about James Dempsey, too, Betty?" asked Mollie, fairly snatching the paper from her chum. "Yes, here it is. Do you suppose that can be his other son?"

Betty shook her head soberly.

"I don't know," she said. "Of course he didn't tell us the name of his other son, but it might easily be James. Oh, I hope it isn't so!" she added, her heart aching for the lonely old man whose one big interest in life was his boys. "I do hope there has been some mistake."

"I guess we all do," said Amy gently, adding with a sigh: "But I'm afraid there isn't very much hope of it. The Government is usually right when it comes to things like that."

"Not always," Mollie retorted quickly. "Look at the time they reported that Alien was among the missing and he wasn't at all. That is the only mistake we happen to know about, but I fancy there are plenty of others."

At mention of that dreadful time when she had read Alien's name in the long list of the missing, Betty experienced again something of the emotion she had felt at that time.

She saw again in imagination the dark room where she had gone to be by herself, she heard the thunder of the surf on the rocks outside and the rumble of the thunder overhead. She saw once more the vision of Alien as she had seen it then. Allen stretched out cold and dead perhaps on some shell-ridden battlefield or perhaps, more terrible still, a prisoner in the hands of the Hun, suffering unspeakable torture--

"But this is not as bad as though the boys were missing," she said suddenly, speaking her thought aloud. "At least the professor will know that his sons are dead."

The girls started and looked at Betty queerly.

"I was thinking of Allen," she explained in response to their rather startled glances, "and the time when we thought he was missing. If this thing is true about Professor Dempsey's sons I think I shall be able to sympathize with him, almost better than any of you."

"I guess you will, honey," said Mollie soberly, putting an arm about her chum. "It was a terrible time for us all--there at Bluff Point. But it was almost worth the suffering when we found out that Allen was alive and well and never had been missing at all. Do you remember how happy we all were then?"

"Happy," Betty repeated, shaking off her depression and smiling at the memory. "I'll say we were the happiest girls on earth--especially after we recovered the twins. But what," she said, coming back to the present subject, "are we going

to do about Professor Dempsey? We ought to do something, you know."

"I suppose we ought," said Grace, a little vaguely, "but I'm sure I don't know just what."

"I think," suggested Amy practically, "that the best thing would be to try to find out first of all whether these poor boys who were killed are really Professor Dempsey's sons or not."

"Humph, that sounds all right," observed Mollie. "But has any one here any suggestion as to just how we will go about it? I'm sure I don't know any one who is acquainted with Professor Dempsey--or his family either."

"I've got it," said Betty, leaning forward eagerly. "It may not be much of an idea, but then again it may."

"Speak up, speak up, what's on your mind?" urged Mollie slangily.

"Well," said Betty, "there is Mr. Haig, principal of Deepdale High. He knows pretty nearly every one at the university where Professor Dempsey used to teach and he is more than likely to know whether the professor has any sons and what their names are."

"Yes, that is all right as far as it goes," broke in Mollie impatiently.

"We all know Mr. Haig--" Amy began, but this time it was Grace who interrupted.

"Yes, we all know him," she said. "But I'd like to know if there is any one of us--except Betty perhaps--who would have the nerve to go to him and ask him a question like that--"

"Say, who's telling this story I'd like to know," broke in Betty impatiently. "I'm not asking any one to go to Mr. Haig with that question or any other--although I would be perfectly willing to brave the lion in his den if there were no other way. My plan is this. Dad knows Mr. Haig, you know--went to school with him--old college chums and all that. I'm sure that if we asked him real pretty he would go to Mr. Haig and find out about Professor Dempsey for us."

"Then suppose we find out that Professor Dempsey hasn't any sons by the name of James and Arnold?" suggested Grace.

"Then we shall be mighty glad we took the trouble to find out and set our minds at rest," answered Betty soberly.

"And if we find out that they are really his sons, what then?" queried Grace, and this time Betty looked puzzled and Mollie and Amy completely beyond their depth.

"Why then," said Betty hesitatingly, "I'm sure I don't just know what we ought to do. But don't you think," she added, brightening, "that it might be a good idea to wait until we have found out definite facts before we try to solve any more problems?"

Rather reluctantly the girls agreed and, after making Betty promise that she would let them know the very first minute she found out the names of Arnold Dempsey's sons, they said good-bye and started for home.

Of course Betty had already told her father and mother about Professor Dempsey and the part he had played in actually saving their lives; so when she told them that night of what she had read in the paper and begged her father to help her find out whether the dead soldiers were really Arnold Dempsey's sons or not, he readily consented to do what he could.

"I'll drop in and see Haig to-morrow," he promised. "I have often heard him speak of Professor Dempsey as being one of the best professors of zoology up at the university and I am sure I will be able to find out what you want to know. I hope you have been mistaken in your conclusions, for it would be a horrible blow to a man to lose both his grown sons at once and like that. Now run off to bed and tomorrow I may have some news for you."

With this Betty was forced to be content. She went to bed of course, there was nothing else to do, but she tossed restlessly all night and what sleep she got was checkered with horrid dreams and she woke up in the morning feeling as though she had not been to sleep at all.

The next day was a long one to live through, even though the girls did keep calling her up at frequent intervals to see if she had any news for them yet. She became so tired of hearing the telephone bell ring at last that she stuffed a handkerchief between the bell and the clapper and sat down to read a novel and while away the time as best she could

till her father came home.

Luckily for her--and him too, perhaps--Mr. Nelson did get home early, and he was no sooner inside the door than Betty grabbed him by the arm, led him over to a divan in the corner of the living room, and let loose upon him a flood of questions.

"Did you see him? What did he say? Why didn't you let me know sooner?"

These and various other queries were hurled at Mr. Nelson so fast that it is no wonder the poor gentleman appeared slightly bewildered. But knowing his impetuous young daughter of old, he merely pinched her cheek fondly and waited for her to give him a chance to speak.

"If you will wait just a moment I will try to tell you about it," he said at last, mildly.

"There's only one thing I really want to know, Dad," said Betty soberly. "And that is the name of Professor Dempsey's sons."

Her father shook his head slowly, regretfully.

"I am afraid it is as you have feared, dear," he said. "Professor Dempsey has two sons--or rather, had--and their names were James and Arnold."

"Oh, Daddy!" Betty was quiet for a minute, letting the full consciousness of what her father had said sink into her heart. Then her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "I--I was pretty sure it was true. But, oh, I was hoping so hard that it wouldn't be!"

CHAPTER VIII

PREMONITIONS

Betty kept her promise and called up the girls to tell them the news. Like the Little Captain, they had felt almost sure of the identity of the two Dempsey boys who had been killed in France, yet the confirmation of their fears came as a distinct shock.

They waited for a couple of days, undecided what to do, if indeed it was their place to do anything at all. Vaguely they felt the need of comforting the queer little professor in his hour of greatest trouble, and yet they were at a loss to know just how to go about it.

Meanwhile, the occupations that had ordinarily filled their days to overflowing with fun, seemed dull and uninteresting and they found their thoughts reverting again and again to the bereaved father in his lonely little cabin in the woods.

Percy Falconer had called at Betty's house the day after the incident on the river as had been arranged, and Betty had conceived the plan of having all her chums there to meet him.

Her hope was that the gay Percy, seeing four, where he had expected only one, would be overwhelmed with numbers and would flee the premises early--to return no more.

Her faith in her plan was more than justified. Percy had always been a little afraid of the Outdoor Girls--Betty in particular--but it is probable that if he had been able to meet them one at a time, he might have come off victorious. As it was, he was routed, completely and ignominiously, leaving the girls to laugh at his discomfiture.

"There, I guess that is the end of *that* pest," Mollie had said when she had recovered a little from her mirth. "I imagine we won't see him around these parts again."

"I hope not," Betty had answered with a satisfied little yawn. "Wasn't he too funny in that checked suit and awful green necktie? Poor old Percy! I suppose he can't help it. He probably just grew that way."

She had been comparing him all evening with her splendid, upstanding Allen, and poor Percy had certainly not gained by the comparison.

The amusing incident served to divert their minds somewhat from the thought of Professor Dempsey, but the picture of him haunted their minds so continually day and night that the Outdoor Girls finally decided that something must be done about it.

"I can't stand it any longer," Betty confided to them one morning when they stood on Mollie's porch discussing what course of action it would be best to take. "I have a queer feeling that the poor professor is in desperate need of friends, and I don't believe I'll be able to sleep another night until I find out something definite about him."

"Won't he think we are sort of 'butting in'?" asked Grace, hesitating a little. "He might think we came just out of curiosity."

"I don't think he would," said Mollie. "You know he invited us to come back some time when we could stay long enough for him to tell us something about those bugs and butterflies and things he sticks pins into--"

"That's the idea!" exclaimed Betty quickly. "We won't have to tell him we know anything about his trouble. If he tells us--why, all right, but if he doesn't, of course we won't try to force a confidence. Anyway," she finished soberly, "we'll have the satisfaction of knowing we have done our best for him whether it really helps him any or not."

"And we owe him a very great deal," spoke up Amy softly. "He really saved our lives, you know."

So it was settled, and while the other three girls ran home to put on coats and hats and get ready for the drive, Mollie ran around to the garage and brought her big car to the front of the house.

She waved good-bye to her mother, who was trying rather wildly to keep Dodo and Paul from running under the wheels

of the car and getting killed, and purred off down the street in the direction of Betty's house.

When she arrived there she was a little surprised to see that Betty was backing her fast little roadster down the drive.

To Betty the little car was almost alive, and she talked to it as she would have to some loved horse or dog. She scrubbed it and scoured it and shined it so that it always looked like a brand new car.

"Hey, look out!" cried Mollie, for Betty, not noticing her and being a little worried about the sound of the engine, had backed the small car down the drive and almost into Mollie's big one. "What kind of driving do you call that? Do you want to buy me a new mudguard?"

"Oh, pardon me," said Betty, laughing back at her. "You were so small and insignificant, I came near not seeing you."

"Well, you would have *felt* me in another minute," grumbled Mollie, as she shut off the engine and got out of the car. "What's the idea of your little peanut, anyway? Thought you were going to ride in a regular car."

"That's why I chose mine," Betty laughed back impishly, still intent on the sound of the engine.

It was part of their fun to be always throwing insults at each other's car but the thrusts were invariably good-natured.

Only once had there threatened to be any trouble between the chums on account of rivalry over the cars. That had been when Mollie had taken Betty's "dare" to a race and Betty's little roadster had won the day, racing like a streak of light along the country road and leaving Mollie's high-powered but more clumsy car far behind.

But Mollie had taken her defeat like the little sport she was--even though it must be admitted she had been considerably disappointed and taken aback by her failure--and in her ever since there had been a great respect for Betty's car.

But now she eyed with impatience the bent figure of the Little Captain as she still leaned over the wheel, her ear tuned to the purr of the engine.

"For goodness' sake, what's the matter with you?" she cried. "I thought you were the one who was in a hurry to be off and now look at you--sitting there like--"

"Engine is missing," Betty informed her briskly. "Guess I had better have a look--"

"If you start fussing with bolts and screws now, you can count me out," said Mollie, resolutely climbing back into her car. "It is ten o'clock already, and we won't be home before night if we don't hurry."

"Oh, all right," laughed Betty. "But if the car gives out before we get back don't blame me, that's all."

"It would give me the greatest of pleasure," said Mollie with a diabolical chuckle as her machine moved off down the street, "to have everyone in Deepdale see me towing your poor little flivver through the town."

"Huh," sang back Betty scornfully as the roadster responded eagerly to her touch, "they will have a great deal better chance of seeing me in the lead with your great big jumbo tottering feebly at the end of a rope."

They picked up Amy and Grace on the way and were soon flying swiftly down the road in the direction of Professor Dempsey's tree-surrounded home.

They were in rather good spirits at first, for now that they were really on the way to doing something, though they were not quite sure what, they felt relieved and almost gay.

But as the distance shortened between them and their destination, a strange depression that they could neither explain nor brush away settled down over them.

Once, Grace, who sat beside the Little Captain in the roadster, sighed rather dolefully and Betty looked at her out of the corner of her eye.

"Do you feel that way too, Grade?" the latter asked.

"What way?" asked Grace uncertainly. "That sigh, do you mean?"

"Yes," nodded Betty. "You sounded rather mournful and that is exactly the way I feel. What's the matter with us, anyway? Where are our spirits?"

"I suppose we couldn't expect to feel joyful," said Grace after a little pause. "We aren't going, so far as I can see, on a very happy errand, you know."

"But I don't think it is that alone," said Betty, with a shake of her head. "I feel as if we were going to see something perfectly dreadful--"

"Betty," Grace looked at her in sudden alarm, her eyes wide, "you don't suppose that the professor could have done anything--anything rash, do you?"

"You mean--" said Betty, hesitating before the ugly word. "Oh, Grace, you don't mean--suicide, do you?"

Grace nodded and tried hard not to look as frightened as she felt.

"No, I--I don't think so," said Betty, grasping the wheel with hands that somehow seemed suddenly weak. "If I thought anything like that had happened I wouldn't have the courage to go on."

"Well, I don't believe I have--the courage, I mean," said Grace, irresolutely. "Don't you think we had better go back, Betty? It's so lonesome here and--and--everything--"

Her voice was rising to something like a wail, and Betty, striving to throttle her own misgivings, spoke in a voice that was intended to be reassuring.

"We wouldn't think very much of ourselves if we turned back now," she said. "And probably we are worrying a great deal about nothing. He didn't seem like the kind of man who would do a thing like that."

Grace said no more about turning back, and they were silent for the rest of the way. But instead of lightening, the cloud of depression became deeper and more foreboding until even the stout Little Captain began, almost to wish that they had not come.

CHAPTER IX

A VISITOR

When they came to the scene of what was so nearly a terrible accident a week or so before they found that the big tree which had extended clear across the road was gone and that the underbrush also had been cleared away.

They stopped the cars a little the other side of the path that led into the woods and slowly stepped down into the road.

When they caught sight of each other's faces they began to laugh shakily.

"We certainly look as if we were going on a ghost hunt," Mollie said. At this Grace uttered a little cry of protest. The thought had struck too near her own disquieting thoughts to be comfortable.

"For goodness' sake, somebody say something cheerful," she begged. "I've got to get up my courage some way."

"Well, I haven't any to lend you," grumbled Mollie, as she linked her arm in Betty's and the two went along toward the path. "I don't like this job a little bit."

"Don't you think," suggested Amy, holding back a little, "that somebody ought to stay here and take care of the cars?"

"No, you don't!" said Mollie, catching her by the hand and pulling her along after them. "If one of us goes we are all going."

"Oh, come along," urged Betty, eager to get the thing over with. "I think we are all acting like a lot of geese. It might help some if we tried to remember that we are Outdoor Girls."

This challenge did a great deal toward bolstering up the girls' courage and they hurried along the path more confidently.

Their pace slowed a bit, however, when they reached the cleared space where the little cottage stood and they paused for a moment in the shelter of the trees to discuss what to do next.

"Do you think we had all better go?" asked Grace nervously. "Perhaps the four of us would frighten him--"

"No, we will all go together," said Betty decidedly. "There is nothing to be gained by standing here talking about it. Come on, girls."

She started across the cleared space and the girls followed slowly. The little cottage looked deserted and forlorn and the dreary aspect of it served to increase the girls' uneasy sense of disaster.

Betty knocked gently on the door which had, upon that other occasion not so very long ago, been hospitably opened to them. But, though they waited breathlessly for a response, none came--the house was as silent as a tomb.

"Do it again, Betty. He might be asleep or something," suggested Mollie, with a glance over her shoulder at the quiet woodland. "Knock harder this time."

Betty obeyed, but with no better success than the first time. Everything was as silent as before.

"Isn't there a bell, I wonder?" suggested Amy, wishing ardently that they were back on the road once more. "Perhaps your knock isn't loud enough for him to hear."

"We might tap on the window," suggested Grace. "If I use my ring on the window pane he surely ought to hear that."

She started to suit her action to the words when an exclamation from Betty made her pause. The latter had tried the door and found to her surprise that it gave to her touch.

"The door is unlocked," she said. "I don't believe the professor is in here at all and if he has gone into the woods to hunt his butterflies and beetles I am sure he wouldn't mind our going inside. What do you think?"

She was about to push the door open, but Grace detained her with a nervous hand on her arm.

"Oh, I don't think we had better go in, Betty!" she cried. "You know what we were speaking of in the car. Suppose we should find that he has--that he has--"

"That he has what?" asked Amy, her eyes wide. "For goodness' sake, what do you mean, Grace?"

Betty tried to stop her, but Grace hurried on heedlessly.

"He may have committed suicide," she cried, adding, in response to Mollie's and Amy's cry of horror: "You know he must have been desperate enough to do anything, poor old man, out here all alone."

At the conviction in Grace's tone, Betty felt her own nerve slipping. She did not want to go into that silent house any more than the other girls did. Every instinct in her commanded that she run from the place to the commonplace safety of the road. She was afraid of what she might find on the other side of that unlocked door. And yet--

"I'm going in," she cried, and, suiting the action to the word, pushed the door quickly open and stepped over the threshold.

Emboldened by her example, the other girls followed and stopped short with a cry of dismay. They had not found what they feared--but something almost as bad.

The room, which had been so neat and orderly when they had last seen it, was now the scene of such utter confusion as one might only hope to see depicted in a cubist's nightmare.

The animal skins which had adorned the walls had been torn down and lay in a tattered heap upon the floor. The shelves upon which had rested the professor's botanical specimens had been swept clean and their contents also were scattered about the floor.

The bench upon which the girls had sat and partaken of the queer little man's hospitality was overturned and the one chair in the room was upside down on top of it. The whole room looked as though a cyclone--or a maniac --had been at work.

The girls stared for a minute and then drew closer together as if seeking protection from some unseen menace. They had some vague conception of what had taken place here in this lonely little cottage. The elderly and already nervous professor, reading the tragedy of his sons' death, all alone perhaps, with no one to comfort or restrain him, had lost his mind, temporarily at least, and had found an outlet in ruthlessly destroying everything which came within reach of his hand.

And if this were so, might he not even now be hiding about somewhere, watching them, perhaps?

This thought seemed to strike the girls at the same time, for after peering for a second about the room, they turned and made a concerted dash for the door.

Once outside the room, in the reassuring sunshine, they turned and looked at each other sheepishly. Then Betty wheeled about and started for the door again.

"Betty, you are never going back into that place again?" cried Amy wildly, holding to her skirt. "I won't let you! Do you hear me? Come back here!"

But Betty had no intention of coming back. She turned and faced the girls calmly, though inwardly she was trembling.

"Of course I am going back," she said. "Professor Dempsey may be in one of the other rooms and he may be sick. If nobody will go with me, I'm going in alone."

Of course the three girls could not let her go in alone, so they trailed back at her heels into the house, being very careful, however, to leave the door wide open behind them, in case a hasty retreat became necessary.

Cautiously Betty opened the door at the other end of the room and stepped into what had evidently been a sort of rough kitchen. Now it was nothing but a nightmare like the other room, and she shuddered as she looked about at the desolate confusion.

There was a door at the farther end of this room, and after some hesitation and an inward struggle Betty crossed hastily

to it and flung it wide open.

What she half expected and feared to find there nobody but Betty herself ever knew, but whatever it was, she gave a great sigh of relief at not finding it there. The room was upset, though not quite as badly as the other two, but there was no sign of human occupancy anywhere.

She turned to the girls who had come up behind her and were eagerly and half shudderingly peering over her shoulder.

"There's nothing here," she announced, the relief she felt showing in her voice, "and as there doesn't seem to be any other room in the place, I suppose we might as well go back."

Echoing her suggestion heartily, the girls started to retrace their steps when a slight sound in the other room made them stop short in a panic.

"What was that?" Amy questioned, but Mollie held up her hand impatiently.

There came the sound of some one stumbling over something. This was followed by a muttered exclamation.

While the girls looked about them wildly for a means of escape Mollie began to laugh hysterically.

"We have a visitor," she announced in a strangled voice. "And he is between us and the only door in the place. Come on, girls, let's see who it is."

They stepped out into the cluttered living room and came face to face with a young man who seemed more startled at seeing them than they had been at sight of him.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed, and at sound of the commonplace phrase the girls could have hugged the speaker in relief. Also they felt a rather hysterical desire to laugh long and foolishly.

As it was, the stranger stood staring at the girls and the girls at him so long that the funny side of the situation struck Betty and she really did begin to laugh.

"We haven't the slightest idea who you are," she told the astonished young man. "But I am sure of one thing, and that is that we were never so glad to see any one in all our lives as we are to see you."

CHAPTER X

HURRAH FOR ALLEN

The young man stared for a moment longer. Then the humor of the situation seemed to strike him too, and he smiled pleasantly.

"It surely is a pleasure to be as welcome as all that," he said pleasantly, and the girls noticed that he was a well set up young fellow and that he wore his uniform easily, as if he had been used to wearing it for a long, long time. "I am Wesley Travers," he went on. "I live in a cottage down the road and I came over this way to see if the old professor had come back yet. I saw the door open--came in--and found you."

He smiled again pleasantly and looked as though he considered that he had fallen into rather good luck. But at his mention of the professor Betty had sobered instantly.

"Oh, then you know something about Professor Dempsey?" she questioned eagerly.

"Please tell us what happened to him," added Amy breathlessly.

"Did he do this?" asked Mollie, with a comprehensive sweep of her hand about the cluttered room.

"I'm afraid he did," answered the young fellow, sobering instantly. "You see, I just returned from overseas about a week ago and a couple of days later my dad read in the paper about the death of this queer old man's two sons. The pater had always been interested in the lonely old boy, so he sent me over to see if I could do anything for him. I found the place like this and--the bird had flown. Went dopy I suppose about the bad news and tore things up a bit."

Though the boy's words were slangy, there was real sympathy in his tone and the girls liked him the better for it.

"And you haven't heard anything from him since?" asked Betty softly.

"Not a word or a sign," answered the boy, with a shake of his head. "Just clean cleared out, that's all. Pretty hard luck, I call it. Just at the end of things too--when he had a right to expect the fellows home. Pretty tough luck. I wish I could find the poor old duffer and do something for him."

The girls heartily echoed the wish. Before leaving the place for good, they looked about the rooms once more for some sign or message that might give them a clue to the whereabouts of the professor. They found nothing, however, and finally were forced to give up the search.

As the young people stepped outside once more and closed the door after them upon the desolate house a great wave of pity swept over Betty. Somehow it did not seem right to go off like this as though they were abandoning the old man to his fate. Yet what could they do more than they had done?

"Girls," she said, a little quiver in her voice, "I would give almost everything I own to find the poor old professor and help him back to happiness. If I only could," she added after a pause. "Well," said Wesley Travers, as he looked admiringly at Betty's flushed, sympathetic little face, "I imagine if any one could find him and bring him happiness, you would be that one."

The young soldier accompanied them back to the road. After thanking him for the information he had given them, the girls climbed into their cars and headed toward home, leaving Wesley Travers still standing in the road and looking after them thoughtfully.

"A mighty nice bunch of girls," thought the latter. "Especially the little brown-haired one. They seemed rather interested in that dotty old professor too. Lucky fellow to have four girls like that interested in him!" After this remark he started off toward home.

Luckily for the girls, the next few days were so crowded with preparations for the trip to Wild Rose Lodge that they had not much time to dwell on the poor old professor and his misfortunes.

Only at night would they sometimes dream queer dreams in which wild-eyed men went around smashing everything in sight and a little cottage stood lonely and desolate and ghostlike amid a silent forest of trees.

After a night like this the girls were always glad to awake and find the sunshine streaming cheerfully in their windows. And they would throw themselves with more than usual energy into the activities of the day. Yet try as they would, they could never quite blot the tragedy from their minds.

On the afternoon of the day before they were to start for Moonlight Falls, the girls were gathered in Betty's garage at the back of the house, where the Little Captain was giving her car one last overhauling to make sure that it was in perfect condition for the trip. Mollie suddenly espied the postman coming down the street.

Now the postman was a very popular man with the girls, for the reason that he brought almost daily some message from the boys on the other side. He sympathized with the chums so fully in their desire for letters with the red triangle in one corner that he actually confessed to a guilty feeling when he had no missive of the sort for them.

So now, as Mollie ran toward him with outstretched hand, he held up to her delighted gaze not only one letter, but four.

"One for each of you," he said beamingly, as Mollie reached him. "I thought that probably I would find all four of you at one place, so I kept the letters together."

"Oh, thanks, it is awfully good of you," said Mollie absent-mindedly, as she took the welcome letters and hurried with them back to the garage. "One for each of us, just think of that!" she cried to the questioning girls. "It looks as if the boys had all written at the same time. Put down your duster, Betty, for goodness' sake, and read what Allen has to say. Maybe," she added hopefully, as she ripped her envelope open, "they will tell us something definite about coming home."

So down the girls sat in the midst of dust cloths and more or less dirt to find what the boys had written. For a moment only the crackling of paper broke the silence. Then Grace gave a little joyful cry.

"Will says he is almost sure to be home soon--"

"And he has been made a sergeant," Amy interrupted, or rather added, her eyes shining with pride. "Just think of that--Will, a sergeant!"

"I was just going to tell them that if you had waited a minute," said Grace, rather crossly. There was quite a little jealousy between Grace and Amy over Will. Grace had declared more than once that whereas she had known her brother all her life, Amy had only known him for a couple of years--or--or more. Grace loved her brother devotedly and once in a while she resented Amy's place in his affections.

So now to change the subject and avert a possible quarrel, Mollie jumped into the breach.

"Listen to this," she said. "Roy and Frank have been made corporals and Allen--oh, look at Betty blush!" She looked gleefully across at the Little Captain and Amy and Grace followed her glance.

Betty was not blushing, but she felt as uncomfortable as though she had been.

"Tell us what Allen says," Mollie dared her wickedly. "Come on, honey--dare you to."

"You can go on daring all you like," said Betty defiantly. This time she was blushing--from the fact that she knew she could not, or would not, tell the girls what Allen had said in his letter. Not for anything in this world!

"I don't mean what you mean," said Mollie, enjoying her confusion immensely, while Grace and Amy looked on laughingly. "I just thought that maybe you would like to be the one to tell us about his promotion."

"His promotion!" cried Amy and Grace together, and Betty looked quite as bewildered as any of them.

"Mollie, for goodness' sake tell us what you mean," she demanded.

"But didn't he tell you about it, Betty?" Mollie insisted.

"Wait a minute," said the Little Captain as she hastily scanned the pages of her long letter. Then, down near the end of the last page she found it, just a little paragraph, put in as though it had been an afterthought. "Why," cried Betty, her eyes beginning to shine with excitement, "girls, listen to this. Allen has been promoted. He's an officer now--a

lieutenant! Think of it--leather leggings and all!"

It was too much for the girls. They laughed and cried and hugged each other and tried to imagine Allen in his new uniform to their hearts' content, for the young new-made officer was a favorite with them all.

"Goodness," said Amy happily, "I suppose when he gets home he will be altogether too high-toned to notice common folk like us."

"Oh, I don't know," said Grace happily, adding with a sly little glance at Betty, "I imagine he will make an exception of one of us at least."

"I wonder," drawled Mollie as she picked up her unfinished letter, "which one of us you can mean."

CHAPTER XI

THE HOLD-UP

The girls were glad that the letters had come from the boys just as they had, for it helped them to bridge over the tediously long wait till the next morning.

They read the missives with the little red triangles in the left hand corner over and over again and--whisper it!--at least two of them slept with the precious letters under their pillows.

And then--the morning was upon them. It was a beautiful morning too, and as the girls dressed hurriedly they were glad that they had arranged to start early. In that way they could take their time and enjoy to the full the glorious ride to Moonlight Falls. It was only fifty-five miles, but by driving slowly they could make it seem like twice that.

It was barely half past nine when Betty, having finished breakfast and put the last finishing touches to her new white hat, ran around to the garage to get the car out.

Ten minutes later she had drawn up in front of Mollie's house, her ears still ringing with the hundred and one instructions of her anxious mother, and was tooting the horn of her little car furiously.

The summons had the desired effect. Mollie came running from the house, straightening her hat with one hand and lugging a valise in the other while the twins trailed at her skirts.

"For goodness' sake, let go of me, Paul. Dodo, if you touch that bag again, I'll spank you. Mother," she wailed, looking back pleadingly over her shoulder, "won't you please make these little pests go into the house?"

Whereupon Mrs. Billette suddenly appeared at the door, smiled at Betty, grabbed Paul with one hand, Dodo with the other, while the twins roared a protest.

Released, Mollie dropped her bag, sped round to the garage, and in a moment more was backing the big car round to the road.

The girls had decided to about live in their khaki tramping suits on this trip, merely packing in a good dress or two to wear on dress-up occasions. In this way they had to take less luggage and could have more space to "spread out" as Mollie said.

"Put your grip in here, Betty," Mollie suggested, as she slung her own grip into the tonneau of the big machine. "There is more room, and Mrs. Irving said she wouldn't mind in the least being entirely surrounded by suitcases."

Betty laughed, did as she was bid, and a moment later they were off, speeding down the road to Grace's house where they were to pick up the other two girls and Mrs. Irving.

They found the three waiting for them, and it took scarcely any time at all to add the extra grips to the growing pile in the tonneau of Mollie's car. Amid great fun, Mrs. Irving, who was rosy-cheeked and matronly and as jolly as the girls, was wedged into the remaining space, Amy climbed to the front seat beside Mollie and Grace took her seat with Betty.

They were off! The sting of the wind was in their faces, and the sun beat warmly down upon them as they rolled along, passing familiar houses, and sometimes familiar people, to whom they waved, and so on and on till they left the town behind them and started out on the open road.

"My, this is something like," commented Grace, stretching her feet out before her for all the world like a lazy, comfortable cat. "I feel awfully sorry for all the poor people who haven't cars to ride in to-day and Wild Rose Lodges to visit. By the way, why is it called Wild Rose Lodge, Betty?"

"Because they say there are lots of wild roses around it, of course," Betty responded, her hands resting easily on the wheel, her eyes bright with the joy of the moment. Grace, stealing a sideways glance at her, could not help thinking that Betty looked not unlike a wild rose herself.

"You look awfully pretty, honey," she said then, for Grace was always generous with praise where her friends were concerned. "I would give the world to have a color like yours."

"Goodness," remarked Betty, turning to look at her chum, her face a little brighter pink because of the honest compliment, "you have a lovely color--as you very well know. Mine is too red sometimes."

"Nobody thinks that but you," said Grace, squeezing Betty's hand affectionately while she dived down in her pocket for some candy. "The only time I have noticed you get very red," she added, "is when some one happens to mention a certain young gentleman by the name of Lieutenant Allen Washburn."

Betty could feel that her face was burning, but she did not care. She was awfully proud of Allen and desperately fond of him and for the moment she did not care if the whole world knew about it.

"Isn't it wonderful, Grade?" she cried, her heart pounding joyously. "About Allen being an officer, I mean. I have to pinch myself several times a minute to make myself realize that it is really true."

"It surely is great," Grace answered slowly, adding after a moment, while a faraway expression crept into her eyes, "I don't blame you for being crazy about him, honey. I could almost be foolish myself. Oh, don't worry," she went on quickly as Betty turned amazed and rather startled eyes upon her. "I'm no fonder of Allen than I am of any of the other boys. I just said that I didn't blame you, that's all."

Betty turned her eyes to the road once more, but in her heart she was troubled. There had been a note in Grace's voice that she had never heard before. Could it be possible that she really cared for Allen? But she pushed the thought from her mind resolutely. If such a thing could have been possible, she certainly would have discovered it before this. The mere thought was nonsense of course. And yet she was troubled.

"Have some candy," Grace invited, breaking in upon her thoughts. "You needn't stick up your nose at it to-day for I bought this fresh from the store this morning."

"Who said I was going to stick up my nose?" said Betty, helping herself to a chocolate that looked as if it might contain a nut and thankful for the break in her not-too-pleasant reflections. "If you will think back just a little, I think you will admit that I have been guilty very seldom of sticking up my nose at anything--"

"Except Percy Falconer," finished Grace drolly, and they both laughed merrily.

"Poor Percy!" said Betty, chewing her candy contentedly. "I suppose he will hate us more heartily than ever now."

They were running some eight or ten miles from the town along a quiet stretch of road, never dreaming of danger, when Betty's little racer nosed around a bend in the road and came smack into it! Not twenty feet ahead of them a man sprang into the middle of the road and leveled a revolver at them! In one electrified instant they saw that the fellow wore a mask and a slouch hat and looked for all the world like a brigand straight out of some sensational moving picture.

Betty, more surprised at first than alarmed, put on her brakes and came to a standstill, at the same time putting out a hand to warn the car behind them.

"Oh, Betty, we are being held up!" moaned Grace, who evidently was frightened enough for both of them. "For goodness' sake, hold up your hands. He may shoot."

Still feeling rather dazed with the suddenness of the thing, Betty raised both hands above her head, at the same time feeling a rather hysterical desire to laugh. It was so absurd, being held up by a masked stranger in broad daylight.

Nevertheless, she gave a little gasp of fright as the man waved his big revolver menacingly and came close to the car. She wished frantically that he would not point that firearm at her. Suppose it should go off!

"Come on, hand over what you got," the robber demanded in a gruff threatening voice. "The quicker you move, the better it will be for you."

"Wh--what do you want?" asked Betty, in a weak little voice that did not sound like her own at all. She had thought of her pocketbook beside her in the pocket of the car. The purse contained a whole month's allowance. She was sparring desperately for time--help in some form or other might come at any moment. But the ruffian in the road was evidently in no frame of mind to be fooled with.

He waved his revolver once more, eliciting a terrified gurgle from Grace and commanded roughly that they get out of the car.

"No funny business," he snarled. "Get out!"

Betty was about to obey when she had a brilliant thought. Her pepper gun! She had bought it the day before from the son of her father's chauffeur, thinking it was an undesirable plaything for a nine-year-old boy and had put it, as the most convenient place, in her car. And the pepper gun was filled--as it should have been--with good red cayenne pepper!

CHAPTER XII

SHEEP!

For a moment Betty hesitated, almost afraid of what she was going to do. The pepper gun might work, but if she were not quick enough or clever enough, her little trick might also result in a tragedy.

Her hesitation was only momentary, however, for Betty was a born fighter. Suddenly she cried out as if in joyful greeting to an unexpected arrival.

"Here they come! here they come!" she called, and in the moment that their captor turned his startled eyes from her to the road ahead, Betty acted.

She snatched the pepper gun from its hiding place in the car and as the man once more turned furiously upon her let him have the full contents directly in the face.

It was a dreadful thing to do. Choking and sputtering, the ruffian dropped his revolver and raised both fists to his tortured eyes.

"I'll get you for this!" he cried between great sneezes that threatened to tear him apart. "You just wait--"

But Betty refused to wait. As soon as the fellow had dropped his weapon she had started the engine, and now she guided the car past the stuttering robber and raced off down the road.

Mollie, who had only half understood what was going on but who had caught enough of it to be considerably alarmed did not stop to ask questions, but sped off down the road after Betty.

It was half a dozen miles farther on that Betty finally slowed the car and waited for Mollie and the others to catch up with her. Grace, who had been gradually recovering from her fright, had not yet recovered enough to ask any questions. She had been too much concerned in putting miles between them and the scene of their adventure.

As Mollie came up alongside, Betty drew her first free breath.

Of course Mollie and Amy and Mrs. Irving wanted to hear all about it, and Betty told them what had happened, her account interrupted by hysterical laughter.

But when she came to the pepper gun, the girls' expression of utter bewilderment changed to admiration of Betty's quick thought and quicker action.

"Why, Betty," cried Amy, incredulously, "I don't see how you ever had the courage to do it. Why, that man might have shot you!"

"He probably would have if I hadn't got him first," said Betty, half-way between laughter and tears. "It was taking an awfully big chance, but," with a flash of spirit, "I wasn't going to sit there calmly and have him take away all our money. Not if I could help it."

"Betty, I think you were simply wonderful," said Mollie in heart-felt admiration. "Why, if he had taken our money it would have completely spoiled our trip."

"How they talk," said Grace hysterically. "Any one would think it was only the trip that mattered when we might very easily have been *killed*."

This remark served to bring Mrs. Irving to a realization of the present, and she suggested that they start on again.

"Not that I am particularly nervous," she hastily added, as the girls looked at her suspiciously. "Only I will feel just as well when we have put a dozen miles between us and that highway robber, instead of only half that. I wish there was a town handy where we could notify the authorities."

They started on again, and as the miles slid past them they became less nervous and even began to laugh a little at thought of the robber's consternation when he received the contents of Betty's pepper gun full in his face.

"He was probably the most surprised crook ever," commenced Grace with a chuckle. "He never will get over cursing you, Betty. How did you ever happen to have it? The pepper gun, I mean," she added curiously.

Betty explained how the gun had come into her possession. "I didn't know," she added ruefully, her foot on the accelerator as they sped up a steep hill, "when I bought it, that it would come in so handy. How much further do you suppose we have to go?" she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Why," said Grace, looking at her wrist watch and realizing suddenly that she was getting rather hungry, "we have been riding since ten o'clock and it is now after noon. We must be very nearly there by this time. Goodness, I hope there will be something to eat around Wild Rose Lodge. I'm getting famished."

"Mollie's Uncle John said he would attend to that--stocking the cabin with good things, I mean," said Betty, herself suddenly conscious of a disturbingly hungry feeling. "He said we would find enough canned things to last us at least a week."

"Canned things, yes," pouted Grace. "But who in the world wants to live on canned things? I don't see why we didn't bring a chicken along, at least."

"Well, maybe we can manage to run over one," chuckled Betty, as they passed a farmhouse and several chickens scuttled squawking across the road. "Then we can have one good and fresh. For goodness' sake, what is Mollie tooting that horn for?" she added, as the raucous signal came from the car behind them, "Has she stopped the car, Grace? Look and see."

"It's stopped deader than a door nail," said Grace, obligingly screwing about in her seat and fixing on the road behind them a disapproving eye. "Now what do you suppose can be the trouble this time? If she has had a blowout or something, I'm not going to help fix the old thing--"

"You couldn't fix the blowout, dear, but you might help with the tire," Betty said, with a laugh, as she stopped the roadster and jumped to the road. "Come on, she seems to be excited about something--"

"Goodness, I hope it isn't another highway robber," said Grace anxiously, stopping in the middle of the road at the dreadful thought. "I don't see any, but--"

"You don't see any because there *isn't* any," Betty assured her, taking her by the arm and leading her decidedly forward. "You don't suppose there is a whole Robin Hood's band in this woods, do you?"

Mollie and Amy and Mrs. Irving came running to meet them excitedly--or at least, Mollie and Amy did the running, while their chaperon followed more slowly.

"There are blackberries in there, whole bushels and bushels of them!" Mollie called. "You could see them from the road, and there you girls passed right by them without even looking."

"Blackberries!" repeated Grace resignedly, as she felt in her pocket to see if she had any candy left. "Just listen to her speaking of blackberries when what I'm dying for is a good big steak with onions on top of it--"

"Stop it," cried Mollie indignantly, while the others felt their mouths begin to water. "The idea of mentioning steak--But here," she broke off, seizing Grace's hand and dragging her toward the woods, "come with me and pick berries if you value your life. Lucky we brought those tin pails along."

"But why," protested Grace patiently, as she was dragged along, "should we want to pick berries?"

"To eat," replied Mollie, attacking a bush that was fairly black with the luscious ripe fruit. "And besides," she added, lowering her voice to a confidential pitch, "Mrs. Irving said that if she could find some flour and baking powder in the lodge she would make us a steamed blackberry pudding for supper."

Grace stared for a moment then, without another word, set to work on the loaded bush.

"You might have told me that before," she grumbled, her mouth full of berries. "You always did have a mean disposition, Mollie."

To which Mollie's only reply was a chuckle and a sly wink at Betty, who was working close at her side.

They worked on happily for a few minutes, then suddenly Amy straightened up and stood quiet as though she were listening to something.

The girls, whose nerves were still a little on edge from their recent adventure, demanded to know in no uncertain tones what was the matter with her.

"N-nothing," Amy answered a little sheepishly. "I thought I heard a little rustling among the leaves, that's all."

"Probably a breeze coming up," said Betty matter-of-factly, and they went on with their berry picking.

But it was not long before a second disturbance came, and this time they all heard it. It was, as Amy had said, a rustling sound. However, it was louder this time, as though several heavy bodies were pushing through the underbrush on the other side of the road.

"Perhaps we had better go and see what is making all the noise," said Mrs. Irving, her light tone successfully hiding an undercurrent of nervousness. "I guess we have picked enough berries for our pudding, anyway."

The girls picked up their pails and started for the road, Betty in the lead. But when the latter reached the outer fringe of bushes she started back, almost treading on Mollie's toes and causing her to drop her pail in alarm.

"It's sheep!" cried the Little Captain. "Dozens and dozens of them! Come and look!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENEMY ROUTED

Mrs. Irving pushed forward beside Betty, and the girls stared unbelievably over her shoulder. Then they saw that she was right.

While they had been picking berries in the woods a flock of sheep had wandered down to the road from the other direction and had completely surrounded their two cars.

The big-eyed, innocent looking animals were circling around and around the machines as if examining them with a sort of ovine interest and curiosity.

But to the girls the sheep had a rather terrifying aspect. There were so many of them and they had so completely taken possession of their automobiles! How in the world were they ever to get back their property?

"Goodness!" Grace whispered plaintively in Betty's ear, "I expect they will try to climb into the cars next. What ever are we going to do?"

"Sh," cautioned Amy fearfully, as some of the flock, attracted by the noise in the bushes, turned their heads in the direction of it. "Suppose they should come in here?"

"Well, they are not lions, you goose," said Mollie, coming out of the trance into which surprise had thrown her. "They are only sheep, and they couldn't hurt you if they tried."

"Not unless they stampeded," said Betty quietly. "In that case I wouldn't care to be in the way."

"But we can't stay here all night," Mollie protested impatiently.

"Held up by a lot of silly old sheep," added Grace, still more uncomfortably conscious of a growing appetite.

"It must be almost two o'clock," added Amy with a sigh.

"Yes, if things keep on this way it will be night before we reach the lodge," said Mollie, adding with decision, "I vote that we get some sticks and stones and scat 'em out of the way."

"I think I have a better suggestion than that," put in Mrs. Irving, speaking for the first time. "I think we had better wait for a short time before we do anything. The sheep will probably get tired in a little while and wander off of their own accord."

"Oh, all right," said Mollie, with rather bad grace as she seated herself on a convenient rock. "But all the time we are waiting for them to be tired, we will be getting tired ourselves and, goodness, Mrs. Irving, I'm being starved to death."

At the desperation in her tones the girls had to laugh, though they were as reluctant to sit with folded hands and wait as she was. Still, Mrs. Irving was their chaperon and probably knew best.

So with admirable resignation they disposed themselves beside Mollie on the big rock and settled down to watch for developments.

But after waiting for an everlasting five minutes they decided that there were to be no developments. The foolish sheep continued to circle lazily about the cars, nibbling now and then upon the grass by the roadside but showing not the slightest intention in the world of moving from there for some time to come. "Oh, what shall we do?" moaned Grace, moving restlessly on her uncomfortable seat. "My foot is going to sleep and I'm trying to sit on a pointed stone or something."

"And it looks as though those crazy sheep were going to stay there all night," added Betty, herself growing restive at the apparent futility of waiting for something to happen. "Can't we do something, Mrs. Irving?"

"Wait just a few minutes more," begged the lady, who was afraid of the sheep, but was reluctant to confess her fear to her young charges. "Look, there seems to be a movement among them now," she added hopefully, as one sheep pressed against another and sent it scampering a few feet along the road. "We won't have to wait much longer, I am sure."

And so, both to break their chaperon's authority, the girls fidgeted and fumed, getting more impatient and hungrier with every leaden minute that dragged itself by until almost three-quarters of an hour had passed.

Then, when they began to think that they must scream if they were forced to wait another minute, their chaperon rose of her own accord and with a decided movement flicked the dust from her skirt.

"I think we have waited long enough," she hazarded, to which each girl said a fervent though silent "amen." "I suppose we shall have to follow Mollie's suggestion and gather sticks and stones. Perhaps we can scare them away."

"Hooray!" shouted Mollie, jumping to her feet with relief. At the unexpected sound the sheep in the road started and looked about them uneasily. "Come on, girls, I'm mad enough to attack Jem single-handed. All who are with me, say Aye."

"Aye!" they yelled, scurrying about to find sticks and stones.

Betty, flourishing a branch at the frightened flock, yelled: "We are wild, wild women, old sheep. You had better get out while the going's good. We eat little fellers like you alive!" and with a whoop of wild spirits she danced down to the edge of the wood waving her stick wildly about her head.

Her fun was contagious and, smothering their laughter, the girls waltzed after her, throwing sticks and stones and all sorts of improvised weapons into the midst of the now thoroughly frightened flock.

Mrs. Irving strove to caution them, but her voice was lost in the babble, and for once in her life at least she found herself utterly ignored. With a little sigh she picked up a stick of her own and followed after the girls.

For a moment it looked as though the panic stricken sheep would rush straight for the shouting girls, and in that moment what was little more than an exciting game to the girls might have turned into a rather dreadful tragedy.

But, luckily, half a dozen sheep broke through and, led by an old ram, started down the road and the rest of the flock, as is the habit of sheep, followed after.

In a moment the entire flock was galloping off down the road with the excited girls in pursuit. There is no telling how far they might have followed the sheep had not Betty become suddenly possessed of a grain of common-sense.

Panting and laughing, she came to a standstill while the girls rushed past her.

"Come back here!" she cried, her voice choked with laughter. "There's no use of our being as silly as the sheep. Mrs. Irving will think we have deserted her."

So reluctantly the girls abandoned the chase and started back to rejoin their much relieved but slightly dazed chaperon.

"Now if we had only done that an hour ago," said Mollie, as they climbed back into the machines determined to make up for lost time, "we would have been that much nearer the lodge and--something to eat."

"Goodness, it will be almost dark when we get there now," wailed Grace, as she slipped into the seat beside Betty. "And we haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"What with highway robbers and sheep," laughed Betty, as she started the engine, "we shall be lucky if we get there at all."

"Oh, Betty, if you love me don't mention that awful highwayman again," begged Grace, looking uneasily into the shadows of the wood. "I don't want to have any more thrills like that as long as I live."

"Let's hope we won't," said Betty fervently.

"It's a pity there is no telephone along this road--we could notify the folks at Deepdale," remarked Mollie.

"Humph, if we did that they might get so scared that they'd send for us to come home," came from Amy.

"That's so!" came from the other Outdoor Girls quickly.

"Well, as I said before, no more thrills like that for yours truly," repeated Grace.

But little did the girls know that in the weeks to follow they would have more and more startling thrills than they had ever experienced before.

CHAPTER XIV

NOTHING HUMAN

They might have reached Wild Rose Lodge before dusk, in spite of Grace's gloomy prediction, if everything had gone well then. But it seemed that the evil genius of bad luck was not yet through with them.

They were scarcely five miles from their destination when, bang! went a report that made the girls clutch at each other wildly. At first they jumped to the conclusion that they were being held up again, but close on the heels of the first thought came the conviction of the truth. Mollie had had a blowout!

Betty, looking behind, saw the big car stop and brought her own little roadster to a standstill once more. "There is nothing wrong with our tires, is there?" she asked of Grace. "Look over your side, Gracie, and see."

Finding nothing amiss, they jumped out and ran back to Mollie to offer assistance. Mollie was eyeing the flat tire gloomily and saying things under her breath that none of the girls could catch. Then as Betty spoke to her she seemed to come to life and ran around to the back of the machine.

"Of course you can help," she answered, working to release the extra tire. "I would like to see you get out of it. Lucky I bought an extra tire before we started, though I did hope," here she glared at the girls as if it were all their fault, "that I wouldn't have to use it so soon. We've had more trouble on this ride than any I can remember. A hold-up, sheep and--this!"

"Well, there is no use talking about it," Betty reminded her cheerfully. "The less we talk, the harder we can work and the sooner we shall get started again."

"Yes, that's all very well," grumbled Mollie, as she fumbled for her tools; "but you don't know this place as well as I do."

"You talk," said Amy, her eyes widening, "as though there were wild animals or something in the woods. I didn't know they came as far east as this."

"They don't, goose," said Mollie grumpily, as she pulled at the tire. "I didn't say anything about wild animals, did I? Only we have to ride about two miles through the woods before we get to the lodge and I must say I didn't want to do that in the dark."

"But there is some sort of road, isn't there?" asked Grace.

Mollie, bending over the lifting jack, shot her a withering glance.

"Of course there's a road," she said shortly. "How else could we expect to use the cars?"

"It must be a sort of wagon road," suggested Betty as she deftly helped her chum. "And I don't blame you for not wanting to try it at night, Mollie. I don't much like the idea myself."

"I believe if we hurry that we can get there before dusk," said Mrs. Irving confidently, though it might have been noticed that she kept her eyes rather anxiously on the fast sinking sun.

At last, after what seemed an eternity to the impatient girls, the new tire had replaced the old one, the old one was safely strapped on the back of the car, the tools were put away, and they were ready to start once more.

"Give her plenty of gas this time, Betty," Mollie sung after her as the Little Captain climbed into her car. "If we can manage to get to the woods before dark we will be doing good work. Let her go."

With which advice she settled herself behind the wheel of her own car and they were off once more.

Betty did "give her plenty of gas," the result being that they succeeded in reaching the wagon road that led into the woods to the lodge just on the edge of dusk.

However, when they started along the road they were dismayed to find that what was only dusk outside on the road became almost dark in here, and Betty had all she could do to keep to the road at all.

"Hadn't you better put on your lights?" Grace suggested uneasily. "We might run into a ditch or something. Betty, I'm half scared."

For answer Betty switched on the lights and the woods and the road ahead of them were suddenly flooded with a weird radiance. It brought out branches and leaves and stones in such sharp contrast to the dark background that the effect was startling.

"Oh," gasped Grace, "turn them off again, do, Betty. It is positively ghastly."

"Don't be foolish," said Betty, striving to make her voice sound matter-of-fact, her eyes glued to the road ahead of them as it twisted and turned through the woods. "I don't see why lights should make a perfectly harmless wood look ghastly. And, anyway, I couldn't turn them out now. I don't believe I could find my way. You don't want me to run into something, do you?"

"No, of course not," Grace said more firmly, rather ashamed of her fears. "I didn't mean to act in a silly fashion. But," she turned to Betty quickly, "that hold-up and all--don't you feel a little queer yourself, Betty? Tell the truth."

"Yes," said the Little Captain truthfully. "I feel," she added slowly, as though searching for words, "I feel as though the woods belonged to somebody and that we were sort of--sort of--intruding."

"Why, Betty!" said Grace, staring at her, "what a funny thing to say."

"I suppose it is," said Betty, shaking off the illusion with a shrug of her shoulders. "I am getting foolish in my old age I guess. We shall all feel better when we get something to eat."

"If we ever do," said Grace gloomily, adding as a sudden turn in the woods shot them deeper into the gloom of it: "Do be careful, Betty. I feel as though we were going over a precipice."

But Betty was too busy keeping the road to listen to her.

"Look behind," she directed Grace, "and see if Mollie is following close to us."

"She is right behind," reported Grace, as two eyes of light shot their glare in her eyes. "She is following us closer than a poor relation."

Betty giggled at this, and then for a long time--or at least it seemed a long time to their strained nerves--they went on in silence, following the winding road wherever it led and getting deeper into the forest with every moment.

Then suddenly something loomed up dark against the shadows only a few hundred feet ahead of them, and with a great feeling of thankfulness they realized that they had reached their destination. Directly ahead of them stood Wild Rose Lodge. They had arrived!

But just as they were about to break into wild jubilation something happened that tightened Betty's hand on the wheel and made Grace cry out with dismay.

Out from the shadow of the lodge a second shadow detached itself, a hunched up, bulky, fearful shadow that seemed neither beast nor man, but a combination of both of them.

For a moment, while the girls watched, paralyzed with fright, the thing seemed about to spring into the path of the moving car. But in another instant it turned, wheeled, and disappeared into the thick bushes about the house.

Then and only then did Betty recover presence of mind enough to stop the car.

"Betty! Betty!" cried Grace in a horrified whisper, grasping Betty's hand as it clung to the wheel. "What was it? Oh, what was it?"

"I don't know," Betty answered mechanically. "I only know it was horrible."

Then quite suddenly and without warning Grace broke down and cried.

CHAPTER XV

WILD ROSES

"We will go into the house," Mrs. Irving answered to their concerted cry of "What shall we do?" "Whatever it was that has frightened us has disappeared now, and we shall certainly be safer inside the house than out here. Come on, girls, I have the key."

And so, leaving the cars where they were, the girls approached the house with shaking knees and hearts that hammered their fear aloud. The Outdoor Girls were ordinarily afraid of nothing real and human, but to be held up at the point of a pistol would unnerve almost any one, and the struggle the girls had made not to give way to their fears at the time had made them more nervous still. And this thing that had startled them now, added to what had gone before, seemed a little more than could be borne. It seemed, in fact, like nothing human.

Mrs. Irving turned the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped inside the dark place, motioning to the girls to follow her.

Fearfully the chums obeyed and Betty and Mollie pulled out their electric pocket torches, filling the place with a weird light. Mollie, being acquainted with the place, naturally took charge of the situation.

"There are matches over there," she said, "and candles over the fireplace. For goodness' sake, let's get a regular light, folks. Perhaps that will make us feel more natural."

"So say all of us," echoed Amy. "The dark makes everything worse, when you are not well acquainted with a place."

Mollie touched a match to the candles, and in the answering flare turned to face her chums.

"Girls," she said, determinedly, "I don't know how you feel about it, but I vote that before we do anything else we get something to eat. We all look like ghosts just now and I'm sure we feel much worse than that. But a little food makes a monstrous lot of difference."

"You know it does," cried Grace, relaxing into one of the big chairs that were scattered about the room and covering her face with her hands. "I think if I don't get something to eat soon, I'll die, that's all."

"Well, we are none of us going to die," said Mrs. Irving vigorously, as she threw aside her coat and hat. "Show us the way to the kitchen, Mollie, and if there is anything there to eat, we will get it."

Accordingly Mollie took one of the candles and led the way into a little room beyond while all the girls but Betty crowded in after her.

For the Little Captain slipped back for a moment and very quietly closed the door, shutting out definitely the shadow beyond it.

"I suppose it is foolish," she said to herself, "because if there is anything out there that really wants to get in there are plenty of ways that it can do it, without coming in through the door. But," and she turned the key in the lock, "it certainly makes one feel more comfortable to have the door closed." Then she followed the girls into the other room, and the sight that met her eyes was certainly more cheering than anything she could have imagined.

Mollie's Uncle John had surprised them. In the exact center of a table set for five lay a young pig, roasted whole and browned to a turn! Nor was this all. The table was littered with covered dishes of all sizes and descriptions, and as the contents of each one of these dishes was disclosed, the girls became more and more excited and hilarious.

There was apple sauce in one, salad in another, mashed potatoes that had become quite cold in another, and a boat of gravy which had also become quite cold.

"But we don't mind," cried Mollie joyfully, as she took the gravy-boat in one hand, the dish of potatoes in the other, and ran with them over to a great stove in one corner of the room. "We need only some matches to have this blazing hot in a minute. No, not that way, Grace," as the latter tried to help by lighting the burner. "This isn't a gas stove, you

know; it's an oil stove and you had better look out or you will blow us all up."

It is small wonder if Betty was so dazzled by this joyful scene that she could neither move nor speak for the space of two seconds or so. Then, recovering her powers of locomotion, she went over to the table and picked up a note that, in their excitement, the girls had overlooked.

"See what this says," she called to them, and they looked at her rather impatiently. Just at that moment the only thing they cared to consider was food--and more food--and then some more!

But as Betty read they became more interested, and even stopped long enough to hear her through. It was a brief note. This is what it said.

"My dear young ladies:

"I am a neighbor of Mr. Prendergast," (this was the dressed-up name of Mollie's Uncle John) "and he axed me to get your dinner ready fer you. I tried to keep it hot but you wus so long comin' I had to go home to get dinner fer my old man. Hope things is all right.

"LIZZIE DAVIS."

"So she is the one who has done all this," said Betty, looking around at the good things with dancing eyes. "I bet she is nice and plump and has rosy cheeks."

"Lizzie Davis? Lizzie Davis?" repeated Mollie, bringing the steaming gravy back and plumping the dish triumphantly down on the table. "Rather a funny name for a fairy godmother, but she sure does know how to cook. Don't forget the potatoes, Grace. Come on, girls--let's sit down."

So down the girls sat and acted like ravenous pigs--or so Grace described their conduct afterward. Mrs. Irving set to work carving the delicious pork, but they could not wait for her.

They seized slices of bread, spread apple sauce and butter on them, and ate like what they were, four famished girls and one equally famished chaperon who had been out in the open all day and had had nothing to eat since morning.

It was some time before they showed any considerable signs of slowing up. Then Grace put down her fork, leaned back lazily, and called for dessert. The latter was a huge cherry pie, and before the girls were through with it there was not enough left to color a robin's egg.

After the pangs of hunger had been satisfied they found to their great surprise that they were dead tired and sleepy.

"We will get the dishes out of the way and then Mollie can show us where we sleep," said Betty. "Oh, girls, did you ever in your life taste such a dinner?"

It was not till the dishes had all been cleared away and Mollie took up her candle to show them their quarters that the unwelcome thought of the thing that had so frightened them again crept terrifyingly into their minds. Try as they would to forget it, they could not.

There were three small sleeping rooms in the lodge, but, small as they were, they were comfortable and contained beds that seemed the height of luxury to the tired girls.

Because of the indistinct and flickering candle light the girls could make out very little of what the rooms really looked like, and they postponed any close examination until the morning. Back of the lodge was a shed for the cars.

The bedrooms were all joined by doors, which gave the girls a safe and sociable feeling. Mrs. Irving, of course, had one room to herself, Betty and Mollie slept together and Grace and Amy paired off.

They wasted little time in getting ready--Betty and Mollie had appointed themselves a committee of two to bring in the grips from Mollie's car--and before long they tasted the exquisite restfulness of comfortable beds after a long nerve-trying day in the out-of-doors.

"I don't believe I shall close my eyes all night," said Amy with conviction. "I'm too horribly nervous."

But three minutes later she was sound asleep!

The sun had been up a good two hours before any one stirred in Wild Rose Lodge. Betty was the first to awake, and in fifteen minutes she had the rest of the sleepy-eyed and protesting girls up and nearly dressed.

"What's the idea, anyway?" yawned Grace lazily. "I could have slept at least a good two hours more."

"On a day like this?" sang Betty, breathing in deep breaths of the wood-scented air. "And isn't this just the dearest room you ever saw?" she added, wheeling about and regarding the apartment delightedly. They were in Grace and Amy's room, for, as usual, Mollie and Betty had been the first dressed and had gone into their churns' room to hurry them up --if such a thing were possible.

Betty's summing up of the room they were in was indeed well deserved, for the place was charming. There was a dresser, a bed, and three chairs, and all of these articles of furniture had been rough-hewed out of logs, giving the place a delightfully rustic appearance. There was a grass rug on the floor and in one corner a little table covered with books.

"Isn't it darling?" cried Mollie, following Betty's glance about the place. "Uncle John built the lodge and made all of the furniture himself, you know. And he bought the grass rugs from the Indians."

They were still exclaiming about the place when Mrs. Irving called to them that breakfast was ready. With a whoop of delight they answered the summons, and a moment later sat themselves down to a most satisfying meal of omelet and toast and coffee with real cream in it. Also Mrs. Irving set on the table a yellow-topped pitcher of milk fresh from the cow.

"Our friend, Lizzie Davis, brought it," their chaperon answered with a smile, in response to the girls' curious questions. "Also some fresh butter and eggs. I have an idea," she added, as she got up to refill the butter plate, "that we shall live on the fat of the land while we are here."

"Lizzie Davis," repeated Betty, pausing in the act of filling her glass with fresh milk and regarding Mrs. Irving with dancing eyes. "Tell me, chaperon dear. Didn't she have nice red cheeks, and wasn't she delightfully plump?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Irving, smiling at Betty's flushed prettiness. "She was all of that, my dear. I don't believe I ever saw a more cozy looking person in my life."

"I knew it!" cried Betty triumphantly, adding with a suspicious eye on Grace: "Hand over that plate of toast, Gracie. You needn't think you can eat it all up!"

After breakfast they sallied forth to "view the country o'er." They would have stayed and helped Mrs. Irving clear up, but that good woman declared that she could do better by herself on this first morning. After she had become better acquainted with the place they could help her all they liked. Finally, after some protest, they had to let her have her way.

As they stepped out on the porch, Betty paused and held up her hand for silence.

"Listen," she said. "That murmuring sound and the splash of water--"

"It's the river and the falls," explained Mollie. "Let's go down and have a look at them."

But Amy, giving a little gasp of delight, fairly tumbled down the steps and into a riot of gorgeous pink wild roses. The lodge was fairly surrounded by them.

"Oh, you darlings!" cried Amy, putting both arms around a bush of the fragrant flowers as though she would gather in all their beauty at once. "I never saw anything so wonderful in all my life! Oh, girls, I'm glad I came!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE WHIRLPOOL

All the spirit and joy of the woods seemed to have entered into the Outdoor Girls. For the next half hour they romped in the woods and the beautiful flowers for all the world like little children whose first glimpse it was of the country.

They took down their hair and made wreaths of wild roses for crowns, and when, faces flushed with exercise and fun, they had finished, one might easily have mistaken them for real fairies come to life.

"But I want to see the river," Betty called to them, stopping once more to listen to the rhythmic sound of splashing water. "Come on, girls. It can't be more than a few hundred feet away, even though we can't see it for the bushes. Lead on, Mollie Billette, I wouldst hie me hence."

But when Mollie laughingly obeyed and started into the woods, Amy held back.

"What's the matter?" Grace asked, turning to her curiously.

"I--I was just thinking," stammered Amy, ashamed of her own weakness, "about last night."

"About last night," Betty prompted, still at a loss.

"You haven't forgotten, have you?" she asked, incredulously. "That--thing --on the porch."

"Oh!" they said, and a shadow fell over their bright faces.

"Why, yes," said Betty, slowly, adding as though she could not quite explain the phenomenon herself: "I suppose we did forget all about it."

"Or if we didn't, we should have," said Mollie, ungrammatically but decidedly. "Come on, girls, we aren't going to let any silly old thing like that frighten us out of a good time."

"It seems," said Grace thoughtfully, while Amy still held back, "almost as if we had dreamed the whole thing. The memory of it is so vague--and indistinct."

"Well, it isn't vague to me--or indistinct either," said Amy, feeling rather abused because the girls did not seem to share her feelings. "I hardly slept all night long just thinking about it."

"Oh, Amy Blackford!" said Grace accusingly, while Mollie and Betty turned twinkling eyes upon her. "If that isn't the biggest one I ever heard. Why, I woke up once or twice in the night and each time I found you almost snoring."

"Oh, I did not," protested Amy, flushing indignantly, but here Mollie and Betty stepped laughingly into the fray and peremptorily put an end to it.

"Let's not fight about it," said Betty, when she could make herself heard. "We don't care whether Amy snored or not. What we want to know is this: Who is coming with us for a look at the falls?"

"Now you're talking, Little Captain," said Mollie approvingly. "All in favor please say Aye." Amy still showed some inclination to hold back, but Mollie and Betty each took an arm and hurried her willy-nilly with them into the woods.

"You had better take the lead, Mollie," Betty suggested after they had gone some little distance along the path. "I can manage Amy alone now, I guess. She seems pretty well tamed."

"Tamed, but scared to death," Amy came back, with a wry smile. "Really, Betty," she turned to look at the Little Captain closely, "aren't you the least little bit nervous about what happened last night?"

"No, I don't think I am now," said Betty, adding candidly, "I must say I was last night though--just frightened to death. It seemed so awfully uncanny--coming upon that thing in the dark after what we had gone through with that bandit. But then," she added more lightly, "everything seems so much worse in the dark, you know."

"Yes," said Amy slowly and looking very serious. "That all may be very true. But I think that as long as we are sure we didn't dream it last night and that the skulking thing really dodged out from the corner of our porch that we ought to be on our guard against it. And how," she finished most reasonably, "can we be on our guard in the woods?"

Betty was at a loss to know just how to answer such a question. By this time Mollie and Grace were some little distance ahead of them and Amy's nervousness was beginning to communicate itself to her against her will.

She felt again the creeping sensation that had traveled up and down her spine at sight of that crouching, sinister figure that had sprung out from the shadow of the porch.

It had disappeared into the bushes last night, and, for all she knew--and the thought made her tingle weirdly--it might still be hiding in them, crouching, ready to spring--

With an effort she shook off the mood and turned to Amy brightly.

"There is no use in our making a mountain out of a mole hill," she said, plucking a wild rose as they swung by and smelling of its delicious fragrance. "Last night, I admit, it seemed very terrifying to us, but that was probably because we couldn't see what it was that frightened us. It may just have been a large dog or something."

"Humph," sniffed Amy, sceptically, "it must have been a monster dog. Sort of a ghost hound."

"Goodness, that's going from bad to worse," laughed Betty, as they rejoined the other girls. "Let's hope it isn't anything like that, Amy dear. Hello, what are you waiting for?" she hailed the girls cheerfully. "We almost fell over you."

"Watch your step," cautioned Mollie, adding as she cleared aside some bushes and motioned Betty to a place beside her: "We've reached the river, Betty, and a little farther up is the falls. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Oh, it is beautiful," rejoined Betty, a sentiment which Amy heartily echoed, and for a few minutes they stood there, drinking in the beauty of the scene, entirely unmindful of the lovely picture they themselves made with their loosened hair and wreaths of wild flowers.

The river was not very wide, but the water was deep and clear and swift and the continual swish-swish of its passage over rocks and between foliage-laden banks made a pleasant, even sound that was deliciously restful and refreshing.

"Oh, if we could only get down right into the very middle of it and let those little ripples wash over us forever and forever!" sighed Grace ecstatically.

"She would a little mermaid be!" sang Betty, as she slipped down to the very edge of the water and leaned over to catch her reflection in the bright depths of it. "But honestly, Mollie, isn't there any place in the river where we can swim?"

"It looks too swift for good swimming to me--" began Grace, but Mollie stopped her with a mysterious finger to her lips.

"Hush, my pretty one, not a word," said the latter, beginning to pick her way daintily along the river bank. "Follow me and you will wear diamonds, or seaweed, or whatever it is that mermaids wear. And don't fall over, whatever you do," she turned around to caution them. "The river is so swift here that I don't believe even the strongest swimmer would have a chance."

Accordingly the girls "watched their step," and for some distance followed Mollie uncomplainingly. Then, as there seemed no sign of their getting anywhere, Grace started to protest.

"Say, do you suppose she has any idea where she is going?" the latter asked of Betty in a tone that was designed to reach Mollie's ear. But before she could say anything more, Mollie herself swung jubilantly round upon them.

"Here we are, girls!" she cried. "Now see if you ever saw anything so pretty in all your lives."

Once more the girls stood spellbound by the natural beauty of the scene. As they walked they had become more and more conscious of the roaring noise made by rushing water, and now, ascending a small rise of ground, they came full upon the majestic beauty of Moonlight Falls.

The falls fell full thirty feet, and at the foot of it the river was churned into swirling, liquid foam that whirled around and

around again in a sort of mad race and then went rushing off down the river in a shower of lacy spray.

It was wildly inspiring, exhilarating, and the girls thrilled with a strange new emotion as they watched. It was so free, so gloriously unchained!

"There is our swimming pool over there," Mollie said, raising her voice to make it heard above the roar of the water.

"You see there is a sort of little back eddy below the falls and to one side of it, and right there we'll find the best swimming of our lives. But," she added, and her voice was impressively solemn, "heaven help any one of us who gets in the path of the falls."

"Look!" cried Amy suddenly, her voice ringing out full and clear and startled above the uproar. "That--thing--over there. It is going into the falls--no, under them!"

"Where?" cried Mollie eagerly, leaning far forward. "Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Oh, girls, I'm slipping!" Her voice rose to a terrified wail. "Betty! Catch me!"

But Betty was too late. She sprang forward just in time to see Mollie slide down the slippery bank and plunge into the maddened water of the river!

CHAPTER XVII

THE "THING"

It took the girls a moment to realize the extent of the awful thing that had happened. Then Betty, obeying her first impulse, raised her hands above her head as though to dive, but Amy screamed to her to stop.

"You will only be lost too!" she cried frantically. "Look--that flat stick--the long one--"

Instantly Betty saw what she meant and stooped to pick up a long broken branch that was lying at her feet. At the same instant Mollie came to the surface several feet away from the spot where she had fallen and threw her strength desperately against the rushing might of the river.

Betty ran along the river bank, Amy and Grace at her heels, shouting encouragement to Mollie as she ran.

"Hold tight!" she cried, adding with fresh dismay as she saw that the girl was being swept further from the shore: "Over this way, honey. Swim to your right--to your right--"

Blinded, chilled to the bone with the cold water, her hair in her eyes and her skirts clinging tight about her legs, Mollie struggled wildly, unable to hear the shouts of her chums above the ringing in her ears.

It was taking all her strength to hold her own against the rush of the river--and now she was not even doing that! Slowly, very slowly, she was being pushed backward; in a little while more she would be sucked downward, and then--

She closed her eyes, and then, as though the obliteration of one sense made more clear the other, she heard Betty calling to her above the roar of the falls.

"Mollie! Mollie!" it came, faint but distinct, "take hold of the stick and we'll pull you in. Mollie, do you hear me?"

The girl in the water was still struggling hard against the current that was dragging at her cruelly, and at the sound of Betty's words she shook the water from her eyes and looked about her dazedly. She had forgotten the girls.

Then she saw something that sent a tingle of renewed hope through her tired body. What she saw was a long branch bobbing on the water not two feet from her outstretched hand, and at the other end of the stick was--Betty.

With a sigh that was half a sob she struck out for it, reached it, and clung to it as only the drowning know how to cling.

Then she felt herself being drawn through the water, and once more she closed her eyes. When she opened them again she was on a warm grassy bank with Amy chafing one hand, Grace the other, while Betty was busy unfastening the clothes about her waist.

As Mollie was never under any circumstances expected to act as people thought she should act, so this occasion was no exception to the rule. She pushed Amy and Grace aside, glared at Betty, and sat up with a little jerk.

"For goodness' sake, stop undressing me, Betty Nelson!" she said. "I'm not dead yet."

"So we see," said Betty, while her eyes lost their anxious expression and began to twinkle instead. "But you might have been, you know, if we had left you to yourself."

Mollie looked down at her dripping clothes ruefully and then out at the rushing water.

"I guess you are right," she said with a little grimace. "It wasn't very pleasant while it lasted, either. Whew, but that water was cold!" She shivered involuntarily and Betty sprang to her feet.

"We had better be getting back to the lodge," she said. "You can put on some dry things, Mollie, and we girls will get you some hot soup. You are chilled to the bone."

"Nonsense," denied Mollie grumpily. "I'm beginning to feel fine and warm. Besides," she added, trying to cover a chill that fairly made her teeth ache, "I want to stay and find out about that thing that got us into all this fuss."

"Nonsense," Grace put in. Up to this time Grace had been made speechless by Mollie's sudden recovery. "You are shivering so you can't sit still."

"It makes me cold just to look at you," added Amy.

"Don't be foolish, honey," said Betty impatiently. "You can't sit there all day in dripping clothes, and besides you will really get cold."

"Humph," grunted Mollie, getting to her feet rather unsteadily and shaking out her sodden skirts. "I guess this isn't the first time I have taken a dip in cold water. And besides," she added impatiently: "I don't know about you girls, but I would like to know just what that thing was that we saw dart beneath the falls."

"That was what made you fall into the water, wasn't it?" asked Betty, her forehead wrinkling thoughtfully. "You leaned so far out to see--"

"Yes, yes," Mollie interrupted impatiently, all her curiosity revived. "That was what made me fall into the water all right. But what I want to know is--what was it?"

"I don't know," said Betty, shaking her head. "I didn't see it."

"Neither did I," Grace added.

Mollie looked from one to the other of them open-mouthed. Then she turned to Amy.

"You saw it, didn't you?" she asked. "You screamed, you know."

"Yes," said Amy, nodding her head very solemnly. "And it looked to me a lot like what we saw last night."

"Thank goodness, you saw it too or the girls would surely think I had been dreaming or was crazy," said Mollie, with relief. Then she suddenly turned and started off into the woods. "I'm going all alone to find out what that was," she told her stupefied chums. "I've got to clear up the mystery before I'm an hour older."

But this time Mollie found that there was some one stronger than she, and that was Betty. The Little Captain ran after her and brought her back, protesting but captive. "We are going back to the house now and get you something hot to eat," said Betty, as they rejoined Amy and Grace and started off toward home. "Afterwards if everybody's willing we will hunt this strange beast that jumps out from porches and leaps into rivers just for the fun of the thing. But just now, Billy Billette, you are going home."

But Mollie had been more severely shocked than she was willing to admit by her experience, and it was some time before the girls visited the falls or the river again. Meanwhile they contented themselves with exploring the country about the lodge, taking short trips in the cars and wondering whether the boys would really be home before the summer was over.

Their days were not altogether happy, however, for the thought of that weird thing prowling around in the woods and ready, for all they knew, to spring out at them at every turn, refused to be banished from their minds.

Then, too, they thought a great deal about poor Professor Dempsey and the little ruined cottage in the woods. Somehow, they had an uneasy feeling that if they had gone to him at the very first minute they had heard of his trouble they might have helped him. Whereas, they had waited and--he had fled.

For a while the idea of a dip in the swimming pool was naturally not very attractive to Mollie, but at last there came a day when she herself suggested it and the girls enthusiastically seconded the motion.

More than the prospect of a good time, was the hope, unexpressed, that they might see again that strange thing which Amy and Mollie had only glimpsed the time before. Perhaps, they thought, if the mysterious thing were faced in the open and in broad daylight, it might prove to be no mystery at all but something ordinary and commonplace enough to do away with all their vague and weird imaginings.

But in this expectation they were most completely disappointed. Nothing at all unusual occurred and although they enjoyed their swim in the warm back eddy of the pool, they came away disgruntled and with a curious feeling that they had been cheated out of something.

"I only wish the boys would come," sighed Amy, as they turned in once more at the lodge.

After that the "Thing" became almost like an obsession with them. They must find out definitely what it was that was spoiling all their fun. They began to haunt the river, especially at the foot of the falls, in the hope of seeing something, anything that would put an end to their curiosity and uneasiness.

For a long time they had not got up courage enough to visit the place at night, but at last they became curious enough to brave even that.

"We have simply got to find out something," Mollie whispered to Betty as on this particular night they stood on the porch and waited for Mrs. Irving to join them. "We can't go on this way any longer, Betty. Why, I am getting so nervous I jump if you look at me."

"I know," said Betty soberly. "It really is getting on our nerves too much. Amy and Grace are feeling it even worse than we are."

"Yes," agreed Mollie grumpily. "Last night was the third night in succession that Amy got us all out of bed to listen to some fool noise outside. I'm just about sick of it."

The other three came then and they had no further chance for conversation. As a matter of fact, they talked surprisingly little on the walk to the river.

High above them a wonderful full moon sent its silvery light filtering down through leaves and branches, making of the woods a fairyland. Somehow, the very beauty of it filled the girls with a strange dread. To them the patches of moonlight were weird, unreal, the shadowy woods held a sinister menace.

By the time they had reached the river's edge they were almost ready to turn and run. But they conquered the impulse and pressed on. Then suddenly they saw what they had hoped, yet dreaded, to see.

On the opposite bank, staring down into the rapids with a terrible intentness, stood a man, or something that resembled a man. In one awful, breath-taking minute they realized that here at last was the "Thing."

As they watched, the hunched-up crouching figure on the opposite bank made a lumbering movement forward as though about to throw itself into the water at the foot of the falls.

"Oh!" screamed Betty, the words wrenched from her dry throat. "Don't do that! You mustn't do that! Go back! For goodness' sake, go back!"

With a hoarse cry that answered her own, the "Thing" flung back from the water's edge and disappeared into the darkness!

CHAPTER XVIII

SURPRISED

The Outdoor Girls could hardly have told how they got back to the lodge after that. Blindly they stumbled through the underbrush, expecting they knew not what horrible thing, thankful for the moonlight that made it possible for them to hurry.

They did reach home somehow and there they sat until late into the night, trying to find some explanation for the thing they had seen, striving to think up some plan for hunting it down until finally Mrs. Irving sent them to bed.

That did not do very much good, for they lay awake and talked until the first rays of sunlight crept into the windows. Then they said goodnight and sank into a sleep of exhaustion.

For three days after the episode the girls never went far from the house on foot. They would take the cars and spin down the open road, but a sort of horror of the supernatural kept them from venturing into the woods again.

But when the fourth day dawned the fright of their moonlight experience had begun to wear off and they were beginning to feel ashamed of their fear.

Having a little of this in her mind, Mollie gave voice to it at the breakfast table.

"I must say," she began, buttering a piece of bread energetically, "that it isn't like us Outdoor Girls to let anything scare us into staying near the house. Why, I declare, I don't believe there is one of us who would dare poke her nose past that rose bush in front of the porch after sundown. That's a pretty state of affairs, isn't it?"

"Well, you needn't glare at me as if it were all my fault," retorted Amy with spirit. "I'm sure I didn't wish the horrible old thing on us."

"I only wish I knew who did," sighed Grace, adding, with a sudden burst of ferocity: "I would wring his neck."

"Suppose somebody suggests something we can do about it," said Betty reasonably. "I'm sure that after the other night nobody could blame us for being frightened."

"No. But there is one thing I can blame you for," said Mollie, glaring morosely at her chum. "And that is for not letting the horrible old thing drown itself when it so very evidently wanted to. If that had happened all our worries would have been over."

"Goodness, Mollie, what a horrible idea!" Betty protested.

"I don't think it was a horrible idea," Grace put in. "I think it was just about the finest idea I ever heard of."

"Yes," added Amy with a deceptive mildness, "if you hadn't called out just then, Betty, the whole thing would have been over and the Thing would have been drowned. And then," she added plaintively, "we would have been able to enjoy our summer."

"It really wasn't any of our business, you know," Grace finished, moodily.

For a moment Betty sat and stared at them, undecided whether to be amused or indignant. However, the latter emotion won and she turned upon the girls with flashing eyes.

"I think you are all perfectly horrid," she said. "And I would think you were worse if I weren't perfectly sure that you don't really mean what you say. Why, just suppose," she went on earnestly, "that we had willingly permitted that man to commit suicide? Why, we would have been just as guilty as if we had murdered him!"

"But he may have done it since anyway," muttered Mollie stubbornly. "He didn't have to wait to ask our permission, and there are plenty of times that he can commit suicide when we are not around--if he really wants to do it."

"What he or anybody else does when we are not around, is not our business," answered Betty. "We can't help what

happens in our absence."

"You seem to take it for granted that it is a man," Mollie continued, still stubbornly argumentative. "But I am not so sure about that. The several times that we have seen the--the--Thing--it has looked as much animal as human to me."

"Well, we won't argue that point," said Betty, rising and beginning to clear away the dishes, "because we don't know anything about it."

"That is just exactly what I am getting at," said Mollie earnestly, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table while the girls watched her interestedly. "We don't know anything about it, but that is no reason why we should sit back and twiddle our thumbs and start at shadows."

"Well, for goodness' sake, tell us what's on your mind," prompted Grace impatiently. "We haven't sat back and twiddled our thumbs and started at shadows because we enjoyed it, you know."

"Now my plan is this," said Mollie, ignoring Grace, who shrugged her shoulders and reached for her candy box.

"Suppose we take a tramp through the woods to the head of the falls? It is a beautiful hike and the scenery at the falls is magnificent. But aside from that we will have a chance to find out something about this thing that will do away with the mystery."

"If it doesn't do away with us at the same time," said Amy so ruefully that they had to laugh at her.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Mollie, looking around the circle of thoughtful faces--her glance a dare.

For a moment it looked as if they all might refuse to go, but then their sporting blood came to the fore and they decided for the adventure.

But when they told Mrs. Irving about their project and begged her to say yes to it, she looked very doubtful and only consented at last on the proviso that she was to go with them. This they were only too glad to have, and a few minutes later the lodge hummed with excitement and preparation once more. To the Outdoor Girls, active and fun-loving by nature, to be quiet for a few days was nothing short of torture. So now, even though there was still more than a little fear of the "Thing" in their hearts, they found relief in the promise of adventure.

They put up some sandwiches and fruit in a basket in case they were not able to get home by noon. Then they locked the door of the little lodge and started down the steps. They hesitated before starting into the woods, and Mollie had a happy thought.

"We can go part of the way along the road," she said. "And then there is a path that leads directly through to the head of the falls."

The celerity with which they accepted this suggestion seemed funny to them afterward, but at the time they had other things to think about. Mostly they were wondering if they would really be able to hold on to their nerve long enough to see the adventure through.

"I wish," said Betty wistfully, as she had wished so many times of late, "that the boys were here. They could help us out so beautifully." And she sighed, for when she spoke of "the boys," she always thought of one boy most--and that one was Allen.

"Well, there's no use wishing for what can't possibly happen," Grace was saying, when there came a whistle so clear and penetrating that it made them jump--then another, and another. Was it just that they were nervous or was there really something peculiarly familiar in the sound? At any rate they stopped and turned around to see who the whistlers could be.

There were three soldiers coming down the road, broad-shouldered, vital looking fellows who swung along toward the astonished girls as though they owned the world.

"Betty, oh, Betty!" whispered Grace in a tense voice, grasping Betty's arm so hard it hurt "It can't be, oh, it can't be the boys!"

But Mollie had broken away from the group and was rushing toward the soldier lads like the wild little tomboy she was.

"Girls, it's the boys! it's the boys! it's the boys!" she yelled. "They're all tanned and they're at least ten inches taller, but

it's the boys just the same."

And before any of the other girls knew what she was about she had kissed each one of them twice and was hanging on the tallest one's arm, who happened to be Frank, laughing and crying at the same time.

Then the girls seemed to decide that she had had the lads to herself long enough, and they immediately entered the contest, all laughing at once, all crying at once, and all talking at once, until it was a wonder the boys did not lose their heads entirely.

The only one who was not absolutely and completely and deliriously happy was Betty. For the other three boys were there, but Allen had not come!

As though reading her thought, Will, who was much handsomer and more manly than when he went away, put an arm about the Little Captain's shoulder big brother fashion and drew her aside from the rest.

"You are wondering about Allen," he said, and Betty nodded eagerly. "You see," continued Will, his face lighting up in a smile that would always be boyish, "since Allen became one of the big bugs--which is another name for officer, you understand--he had to pay the penalty and stay over there with them for a little while longer. He will probably be over on the next transport, although of course you can never be sure about that. Oh, and I forgot," he put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a pocketknife, a wad of string and--a little three-cornered note. "He asked me to give this to you as soon as I saw you. So now you can tell him that 'I seen my duty and I done it noble.'"

With a twinkle in his eye Will turned back to the others and Betty was left to open her note. This is what she read:

"Gosh, some fellows do have all the luck, don't they? But never mind, little girl. I'm coming to you by the very first boat, and when I get there do you know what I'm going to do? Do you?"

Betty wanted to run away by herself and read the note over and over again. But she could not do that. With a sigh she hid the little message in a pocket of her skirt and turned back to the others.

CHAPTER XIX

LIKE OLD TIMES

It was a long time before the boys and girls woke up to the fact that they were still standing in the center of the road and that they might be ever so much more comfortable on the porch of the lodge, if any one had had sense enough to think that far.

Mrs. Irving, who had been keeping herself rather in the background during the first rapturous greetings, now came in for her share of salutations and boyish greetings. The young soldiers crowded about her, patting her hands and her shoulders and telling her how awfully fine she looked and how glad they were to find her here until the lady actually blushed with pleasure and begged them to stop their nonsense. In fact, it was she who finally suggested that they go up to the lodge again.

"I don't see why we didn't think of that before," said Mollie, joyfully slipping an arm into Frank's and turning him right-about-face. "We are due to talk all day anyway, so we might as well do it in comfort. Don't forget the lunch basket, Betty," she called back to her chum.

Betty would have forgotten the basket and left it where it stood just as she had dropped it at the side of the road--and small wonder if she had--but as she stooped to pick it up, Will's strong brown hand whipped out in front of her nose and seized the handle firmly.

"That's the idea," said Grace approvingly, adding with a sisterly pat on his shoulder: "You run along with Amy and Mrs. Irving. I want to talk to Betty."

So Will, being a well-trained brother, did as he was told, and Grace drew Betty behind the others.

"What about Allen, honey?" she asked, her blue eyes honestly worried. "We all missed him so, but we didn't like to say too much for fear--for fear--"

"He's all right," said Betty, her heart glowing again at thought of the little note hidden away in her pocket. "He has only been delayed a little, that's all. Will says he will probably be over on the next transport."

"Oh, I am relieved," said Grace with such fervor that Betty looked at her quickly. Could it be, she wondered, that what she had half sensed before could be really true? Was Grace fond of Allen? But because the idea made her unhappy, she decided that she was just trying to think up trouble and dismissed it from her mind. All the girls loved Allen of course--who could help it?--but they couldn't any of them, she told herself fiercely, care for him the way she did.

"Well, what are you thinking about? You needn't look so fierce," she heard Grace saying, and she forced a smile to her face.

"I'm not looking fierce," Betty answered gayly. "Don't you know that that is just my natural expression, Gracie dear? That's the way I make little girls like you afraid of me."

"Well, I'm not afraid of you, not one little bit," asserted Grace, squeezing Betty's arm fondly. "Oh, Betty dear, isn't it wonderful having the boys back and don't they look fine--especially Will?"

"Don't they? Especially Will," agreed Betty with a sly little glance. "If you don't look out you will give the impression that you're rather fond of that worthless old brother of yours, honey."

"I love him awfully," replied Grace, adding with a little puckering of her forehead: "But I am going to tell you something, Betty, that I wouldn't tell to any one else for the world. I'm jealous, actually jealous! of Amy."

Betty gave a merry little laugh and slipped an arm about her chum.

"Gracie dear, we never would have known that if you hadn't told us," she said dryly. "Don't you know," as Grace looked at her reproachfully, "that we have all been perfectly well aware of that ever since Will first began to make eyes at Amy?"

"I can't help it," Grace retorted, while sudden tears sprang to her eyes. "I've known him longer than she has, and we've loved each other ever since he was two and I was two weeks! Did you see the way he looked at her?" she finished dolefully.

"Yes. But of course you couldn't see the way he looked at you," said Betty quickly. "And I did."

"Oh, did he look glad to see me? Did he?" demanded Grace with pathetic eagerness.

"Of course he did, you little goose," said Betty, adding with a chuckle: "You've been spoiled, that's all. You've been so used to being the *only* pebble on the beach, dear, that you can't be content with being just one of two."

By this time they had reached the lodge and were greeted noisily by the others, who had already seated themselves on the porch as though they intended to stay all day.

"Hello," called Frank. His handsome face, though somewhat thinner than the girls remembered, was better looking than ever and he had developed a trick of flinging the hair back from his forehead that the girls thought immensely attractive.

Roy, who had seated himself on the railing of the porch and was swinging his feet, looked more unchanged than either of the boys, though the girls were soon to find out that he had changed the most.

Will, who had settled Amy in a chair and was sitting cross-legged on the floor at her feet, was gazing up at the girl with his heart in his eyes. As for Amy--well, the girls had never known she could look so radiant.

"Have a seat," invited Roy, rising lazily to the dignity of his six feet as Betty and Grace came up on the porch. "It would seem like old times to see you girls perched on the railing."

"I'll have you know, sir," said Betty very demurely, as she pulled Grace down beside her on the top step of the porch, "that we have quite grown up since you have been away. We will sit here where we can get a good view of you all."

"And we want to hear about everything you have done over there," broke in Amy eagerly. "Please, everything--right from the beginning."

The boys fidgeted, looked dismayed, and Roy burst forth in protest.

"Oh, I say!" he cried. "We'll do anything else for you, but please don't ask us to do that."

"We don't want to talk about ourselves or the war," muttered Frank, almost as if to himself. "We want to forget about it--if we can."

"You see," Will explained, and there was a stern note in his young voice, "we worked and we sweated and we fought. We lived under conditions week after week and month after month that it makes us shudder even to think of now. For months we lived in a perfect inferno--and do you know what our idea of heaven was then?"

They said nothing and he went on in a lighter tone.

"It was just to get back alive and, well, to God's country and you girls--to sit for hours, days if we could, where we could look at you and listen to you and not do a thing but just be happy. I wonder if you can understand that?"

"Of course, we can, Will!" cried Betty, impulsively reaching over and laying a hand on the boy's arm. "You have earned the right to sit and be amused, and we'll do it till you cry aloud for mercy. And you needn't tell us a single word about yourselves until you get good and ready."

"You're a brick, Betty," said Will warmly, laying his hand over her little one. "I might have known we could count on you."

"By the way," Roy broke in suddenly, his eye on the basket of eatables that the girls had prepared for their adventure, "what's in that hamper, anyway? If it's anything to eat, let's have it."

Betty pulled the basket over to her, lifted the cover and passed it over to the ravenous one.

"Eat while there is anything left," she commanded, adding with a chuckle: "Our adventure seems to be over for to-day, at least."

"Adventure?" repeated Frank inquiringly, as he reached for a sandwich.

"Yes," said Mollie, adding with a sigh: "And you boys had to come along just in time to spoil it all."

CHAPTER XX

VERY MUCH ALIVE

"That is complimentary, I must say," grinned Will, getting up from his seat on the porch and going over to join Roy on the railing. "After being away for months we are told the minute we get back that we've 'spoiled everything.'"

"'Tis rather hard lines," said Mollie with an answering grin. "But one must tell the truth, you know."

"By the way," put in Grace curiously, "I know Betty promised that we wouldn't ask questions, but there is just one thing I want to know."

"Speak, fair damsel," Roy replied, thinking meanwhile how much prettier Grace had grown. "We will promise to answer faithfully anything that is not connected with war."

"When did you get in?" asked Grace, "and how did you get here?"

"We came in yesterday," answered Roy, helping himself to another sandwich. "And of course we beat it for headquarters right away."

"Yes'm, and I'll tell you we were a disappointed lot when we found that you girls had flown," added Frank ruefully. "We were all set for a jolly reunion--"

"But we wrote you about spending the summer here," Betty interrupted. "And we were mourning because you couldn't be at the lodge with us."

"We missed your letters, I guess," said Will. "We sailed very suddenly, and there is probably a stack of them piled up there at the old service station."

"We found out where you were all rightie, though," Roy continued. "So we took the first train out this morning, debarked at the nearest station south of here, and proceeded to walk the rest of the way. It was thus that you came upon us."

"You came upon us, you mean," Amy corrected. "We ought to know well enough, because you nearly gave us heart failure."

Will looked at her as if he wanted to say something but did not quite dare in public. However, she intercepted the look and with a little panicky feeling turned her eyes away.

"I imagine," said Grace softly, looking up at Will, "that mother wasn't glad to see you or anything."

"Not at all," returned Will, a soft light in his eyes as he remembered the greeting between him and his parents. "I was a little afraid," he added soberly, "that mother and dad wouldn't like my skipping off like this the day after I'd got home. But they seemed to understand all right."

"Gee, but this is great," said Frank, stretching contentedly and looking about the group with happy eyes. "I wonder how many times we've seen this all in our dreams, fellows. Only we couldn't have imagined it half as perfect as this."

"It sure is like old times," agreed Roy, adding with a smile as he turned to their chaperon, who had been quietly enjoying herself. "We even have Mrs. Irving with us. Gee, it's just like that summer at Pine Island! All the old crowd together--"

"Except Allen," put in Will, frowning a little. "Gosh, it didn't seem right at all to leave the old fellow behind. You wouldn't know him," he added, his face flushing enthusiastically, "I've never seen a fellow change the way Allen has-- for the better."

"Was there so much room for improvement?" asked Betty demurely, and they looked at her laughingly.

"Nobody would expect you to think so," Will replied, his eyes twinkling, then added seriously:

"Of course we all know that Allen was the finest kind even before the war, but, gosh! I wish you could just see how all the fellows love him and how even his superior officers consult him and seem to value his judgment. I tell you, I'm glad to have him call me his friend."

"You bet!" exclaimed Frank, nodding soberly.

"Allen sure has come out strong," Roy agreed; and at this glowing praise of the only absent one Betty felt her heart swell with pride and she wanted to hug the boys for being so loyal to her Allen. Also, deep down in her heart, she began to feel a little trepidation about the homecoming of this hero. Who was she, Betty Nelson, to call this glorious Lieutenant Allen Washburn, *her* Allen?

So engrossed was she in these and other absorbing thoughts that it was some time before she noticed that the conversation had taken another turn. Also that the boys and girls were becoming rather excited.

"I didn't say it was a ghost," Mollie was declaring hotly. "In fact I have always thought of a ghost as wearing a sheet and pillow case sort of garb. And this thing certainly wore nothing of the sort."

"Tell us all about it," said Frank, leaning forward.

"Yes, it sounds as if it might prove interesting," added Roy.

So the girls told them all about it from that first night when they had been so badly frightened by the "Thing" that had hidden in the shadows of the porch. The boys listened with scarcely an interruption till they were through.

"Gosh, I don't like the sound of that at all," said Will, when they had finished. "It isn't a pleasant thing to have a lunatic roaming the woods while you girls are all alone here in this place. Could you possibly put us up for the night?" he asked, turning abruptly to Mrs. Irving.

"Why, there isn't any room," said the latter slowly, frowning a little as she tried to think up ways and means. "There aren't any extra beds, but there is a large settee in the living room and a couple of you can sleep on that. I found plenty of blankets stowed away."

"Fine!" cried Will enthusiastically. "Just the very thing! One of us can take turns sleeping on the floor. It won't be the first time we've slept on harder things."

"Goodness, any one would think they were going to stay a month," said Mollie in dismay.

"No, we won't stay a month," Will went on. "But we are going to stay until we find out what it is that has been bothering you girls. Do you suppose we would leave you unprotected here? I should say not!" Grace noticed that when he said this his glance was first for Amy, and, afterward, for her.

So it was settled. Mrs. Irving went inside to see about getting lunch. "Though how the boys can find any room for lunch after eating all those sandwiches, I don't know," Amy had commented wonderingly.

Mrs. Irving had refused absolutely to let any of the girls even so much as help with this lunch, saying they must stay outside and visit with the boys on this momentous occasion.

"Since you are convinced that this thing is not a ghost," Will went on, while appetizing odors began to waft toward them from the open kitchen windows, "we will take it for granted that it is a man, and a man who has, presumably, lost his mind."

"A crazy man," murmured Betty. "Worse and worse--and more of it."

"Girls," cried Amy, jumping suddenly to her feet, "I have an idea."

"Impossible!" drawled Grace.

"Why," went on Amy, unheeding Grace's remark and growing visibly more excited as she talked, "you know, Professor Dempsey went crazy--or at least we supposed he did--and ran away into the woods. Now since Will thinks this man is crazy too, why, they may be one and the same--"

"Amy!" cried Mollie, her eyes beginning to shine as she realized the possibility of what the girl had said. "You are a wonder, child! Why didn't any of us think of that before?"

"Because it is rather far-fetched and absurd, I suppose," said Grace, the suggestion of a sneer in her voice bringing a quick flush to Amy's face.

"I don't see that it is so far-fetched--or absurd either," Betty broke in quietly. "Remember, we are only a little over fifty miles from the place where Professor Dempsey had his cottage, and it would be easy for him to wander this far."

Here Frank broke in on behalf of the very much mystified boys.

"Before you stage the hair-pulling contest," he said, "would you mind telling us poor benighted males what it is all about?"

So the girls told them all about Professor Dempsey, and while they talked the boys became more and more excited. Finally Will could keep quiet no longer.

"Say," he asked, leaning forward, "did the two sons of the cracked old professor happen to bear the names of James and Arnold?"

The girls gaped at him. "Yes," they breathed. "How did you know?"

"Because," said Will, "those very same fellows were in our regiment. In fact, I was beside Arnold when he was wounded in that last engagement. Strange thing that James was wounded at the same time."

"Wounded?" repeated Betty, who like all the girls was feeling rather dazed at this new development. "Then they weren't killed?"

"Not a bit of it," Will replied vehemently. "Why, even their wounds weren't serious enough to lay them up for long. The last I heard of them they were coming over on a hospital ship and expected to be here almost as soon as we were. For all I know, they may have landed by this time."

"Oh," said Amy, still too dazed to take it all in. "Then all this time we have thought of them as dead, they were alive--"

"Very much so," said Will, with a grin, "and probably kicking too--just like us!"

CHAPTER XXI

OUT OF THE DARK

It took the Outdoor Girls a moment or two to digest this rather startling information. And when it did finally seep into their consciousness, their first feeling was one of joy for the poor professor whose sons would be restored to him after all.

But quick on the heels of this thought came another. How could the sons be restored to their father, if the father were nowhere to be found?

"You say the old chap skipped out, decamped?" Will broke in on their meditations. "That sort of complicates matters, doesn't it?"

"Rather," agreed Roy, frowning. "It is going to be rather tough on those fellows, James and Arnold, to come home, expecting to be welcomed by a rejoicing parent, only to find said parent missing."

"Humph, that's the first time I've thought of the boys' side of it," said Betty. "We have been too much occupied right along in being sorry for the poor old professor."

"Well, if you had known the boys, you would have thought of their side of it all right," said Frank seriously. "They are mighty good scouts, both of them, and they think a lot of their old dad, too, I can tell you. Why, many a night"--his voice took on a reminiscent note and the girls felt once again that they were privileged in having a brief glimpse of the life "over there"--"when a surprise attack was scheduled for the next morning or we were waiting for some such manoeuvre from the enemy, Arnold would talk to me about his dad--that was the time when fellows got chummy, you know, and got to know each other's souls--and once he gave me a note for the old chap and asked me to deliver it if I came through and he didn't. I think I have it about me somewhere." He fumbled about in his pockets while the girls waited silently.

Presently he drew forth a little slip of paper, muddy and worn and dust-stained from being carried about for a long, long time in a khaki pocket.

"He told me," Frank went on, still holding the slip of paper in his hand but making no attempt to open it, "that his mother had died when he and Jimmy were young and that since then his dad had been father and mother both to them and that he had worked himself nearly to death to give them a chance for the college education that he had had. He said that the one thing that had always threatened to floor the old boy was when either he or Jim got mad and threatened to give up school and go to work so as to take some of the load from the old pater's shoulders. So they were glad, actually glad, when the war came along and gave them a chance not only to serve their country and earn some money--even if it was only a miserable pittance--so that they could send some home to their dad and feel that they had stopped being a drag upon him. He used to tell me," Frank went on, for the spell of those old thrilling times was strong upon him again, "with tears in his eyes--and I'll tell you there was no braver man in all the American army than Arnold Dempsey; he was good for two Boches any day --that it would be the happiest moment of his life when he got back to the old country and announced to his proud and admiring pater that he had come home to turn the tables; that Jimmy and he were going to make the old fellow take a rest and do the work themselves for a change. And he asked me, in case anything did happen to him and Jimmy, to be kind to his dad and try to make up to him as much as I could. I gave him my promise that night." Frank looked about the intent group of faces soberly. "In case the boys had been killed, I would have regarded it as a sacred trust."

Something swelled in the girls' hearts and for a moment they could not speak. Then,

"I guess we all love you for that, Frank," said Betty simply. With a little nod of her head toward the slip of paper he still held, she added: "What about that--now?"

Frank looked down at the slip of paper for a moment uncomprehendingly, for his thoughts had been far away.

"Oh, the note," he said. "Why, that was only to be given to his father in case anything happened, you know. But now that the boys are coming back to him themselves, I suppose the thing is worthless." He made a motion as though to

tear the note up, but Grace stopped him with a quick exclamation.

"Don't!" she cried, adding as they all looked at her in surprise: "Don't you suppose there might be something in it that would give us a clue to the professor's whereabouts now, perhaps? Don't you think it would be wise to look, at least?"

But Frank slowly shook his head.

"Arnold Dempsey's message, written to his dad when he thought he might never see him again, doesn't belong to us," he said decidedly. "The note was given in trust to me, and since I can't deliver it--or at least, since there is now no reason for delivering it--the only thing I can honorably do is this." And very slowly and very decidedly he tore the note into little bits and threw the pieces among the wild roses at the side of the porch.

It was the first real glimpse the girls had had of the man who had come back in the old Frank's place, and with all their hearts they admired him.

Even Grace, who had seemed inclined to pout a little, could not but admit that the action was splendid in him.

"And now," said Will, "after all that, the boys will come back to find their dad gone, heaven knows where, dead perhaps--"

"Oh, I wonder if there isn't some way we can follow him and find out at least what has happened to him?" broke in Amy earnestly. "It seems dreadful just to sit back and not even try to help."

"I don't see what we can do," said Will judicially, just as Mrs. Irving appeared in the doorway. "We will postpone the discussion for the present anyway," he added, in a different tone, rising with alacrity and dusting off his uniform. "Something tells me that lunch is waiting. Come, let us eat!"

So ended all serious discussion for that day, and the girls and boys gave themselves up to the delight of being together again. Only Betty's thoughts seemed to wander at times and she had to be brought back by sundry mischievous and significant remarks from the young folks.

Worn out with fun, the young soldiers slept like tops that night in their improvised beds and rose the next morning professing to feel like "two year olds" and ready for whatever new fun and adventure the day might bring them.

And for the first night since their arrival at Wild Rose Lodge the girls slept soundly without being bothered by the haunting fear of the "Thing"--at least, so they said.

That day they wandered through the woods together, searching for some sign of their strange visitor, but found not a trace of anything unusual and alarming.

"I'm really beginning to believe that you girls have let your imaginations run away from you," Will remarked, when they sat about the living-room after a satisfying supper, just luxuriating in idleness.

"Or perhaps the gentleman has been frightened away by our coming," Roy suggested in a superior tone that made the girls want to throw something at him. "Perhaps he is afraid of the uniform of the U.S.A."

"He may be afraid of the uniform," sniffed Mollie scathingly. "But he certainly couldn't be afraid of *you*."

"Now you don't mean that, you know you don't," laughed Roy, drawing her down beside him on the couch and holding her there with an iron grip of his brown fingers. "Say you didn't, like a pretty little girl, and I'll let you go."

"I won't say any such--" Mollie began, then suddenly her gaze stiffened into such a stare of wonder, and even alarm, that it made the girls fairly hold their breath.

"Mollie, what is it?" demanded Roy commandingly.

"Over there!" she shrieked. "At the window, Roy! Do you see it?"

CHAPTER XXII

TRAGEDY

There, pressed so close to the pane of the window that the nose was flattened grotesquely, eyes wildly staring, hair disheveled, was a face that even in that tense moment the girls recognized--the face of Professor Dempsey!

It took the boys perhaps a second to fling out of the room, jump down the steps of the porch and circle the house to the window.

And yet, in that second, the man was gone, leaving no more trace than if the earth had opened and swallowed him up. For almost an hour the boys searched the woods about the lodge, refusing to allow the girls to accompany them, saying truly that they would hamper them more than they could help.

"You see, I was right after all," Amy stated for at least the tenth time. "From the moment the idea came to me, I felt almost sure that poor crazy Professor Dempsey was this thing that was frightening us."

"But did you ever see such an awful face in all your life?" said Mollie, shuddering at the recollection.

"And the look in his eyes as he stared at Roy," Grace added in a hushed voice. "I shouldn't wonder if--if we hadn't been there, he might have murdered him."

"Oh, Gracie, don't!" Amy clapped her hands to her ears. "We are frightened enough without having you say things like that."

"Suppose," said Mollie, in a sepulchral voice, "he should come back before the boys do?"

"That's just what I was thinking," said a quiet voice behind them, and they jumped and cried out in alarm. The next moment they saw it was Mrs. Irving and felt ashamed of themselves.

"I think you had all better come into the house till the boys come back," their chaperon continued. "I shall feel safer when we are behind locked doors."

The girls shivered, but Mollie protested.

"Suppose anything should happen to the boys?" she asked, but here Mrs. Irving chose to exercise her authority.

"We will talk about that when we are inside the house," she said very firmly, and Mollie had nothing else to do but obey.

The girls did breathe a little more freely when the door was locked, but they found themselves wishing even more ardently that the boys would come back.

The window against which the horribly distorted face had been pressed seemed to hold a peculiar fascination for the Outdoor Girls and they found themselves unable to turn their eyes away from it.

"Oh, I wish the boys would come back," moaned Amy, after a few moments more had passed in strained silence. "If anything should happen to them I'm sure I would die."

"Nonsense, Amy," snapped Mollie. "What could one little mad old man do to three big husky soldier boys?"

The words had hardly been spoken when the sound of voices could be heard coming toward the house, and a moment later the boys themselves stamped up on the porch.

"Not a sign of him," said Will in response to the girls' eager questions. "I don't see how he could have disappeared so completely in such a short time."

"We all took different directions, too," said Roy, taking a seat on the couch again and staring fascinatedly at the window. "If all the rest of you hadn't seen it too, I should certainly think I had been mistaken."

"You weren't mistaken," Mollie assured him grimly. "I can vouch for that."

"Didn't one of you girls call out something about Professor Dempsey?" asked Frank, abruptly.

"Yes," said Betty, going over to him and putting an excited hand on his shoulder. "That's the thing that startled us so, Frank. We are sure it was Professor Dempsey's face. But, still, it was so wild and distorted that we really wouldn't feel like contradicting any one who told us it wasn't he," she added slowly. "Do you understand what I mean?"

Frank nodded, and Will broke in excitedly:

"But the poor old codger's looks would naturally be changed," he argued, "after he had spent all this time wandering around the woods--out of his mind at that. I am inclined to think that the girls are right and that it is really Professor Dempsey."

"If only I could have gotten my hands on him!" mourned Roy. "We wouldn't have been in any further doubt."

"There is really no doubt, boys. We just want--oh, I don't know what we want!" exclaimed Mollie, who was excited and unstrung and nervous.

Soon after that they all went to bed, having first decided to make a more thorough search of the woods in the morning and take the postponed trip to the head of the falls.

They slept fitfully and were glad when at last they woke to find the sun shining in their windows. For once Amy and Grace did not have to be coaxed or wheedled or forced to get out of bed, but dressed quickly and were ready almost as soon as Mollie and Betty.

"You know I rather hated to leave the boys in that room last night," Betty confided to Grace, stopping before the mirror for one final little pat of her hair. "I was afraid that--he--might come back--"

"Oh, Betty, what a horrid idea," said Grace. "Come on, let's see if everything is all right."

But they found that their fears had been wasted. The boys were in the kitchen hilariously helping Mrs. Irving get the breakfast to the accompaniment of continual good-natured scolding from that flushed and perspiring lady. It was Amy's day to get the breakfast, but, as usual, she was late in getting down.

"You make a good deal more trouble than you mend," Mrs. Irving was saying as the girls came to the door, then added relievedly as she caught sight of them: "For goodness' sake, get these young ruffians out of the kitchen, my dears, or we'll not have any breakfast until noon."

So amid much fun and nonsense the boys were shooed forth into the bright sunshine of the out-of-doors, and all the girls fell to help their chaperon, not wanting to put the extra work the boys made entirely on Amy's shoulders.

Breakfast was good, but they ate hurriedly, anxious to get at the business of the day. They wanted more than they had wanted anything in a very long time to find Professor Dempsey and tell him the joyful news that his sons were alive.

"I'm horribly afraid of him at night," Mollie confided, as they started out at last, "but in the daytime I am only sorry for him."

"Do you think we shall find him, Will?" asked Amy, with a helpless little look into Will's self-reliant young face. "I do want to so much."

Will looked down at her with an expression that said to any one who would read it: "I would give you anything in the world you asked for, if I only could."

But all he really said was: "That remains to be seen. He proved himself a rather slippery customer last night, and the chase we put up may only serve to put him on his guard. Crazy people are tricky, you know."

"Goodness," said Grace, looking fearfully over her shoulder. "There is nothing in the world I am so afraid of as a crazy person."

"That's why she has always been so afraid of me, I suppose," grinned Mollie.

"Afraid of you," said Grace, her eyebrows raised in mock surprise. "Little shrimp--who are you?" There followed a

characteristic scene that somewhat lifted the oppression they had all been feeling, and it was not till they had nearly reached the river at the head of the falls that they became serious again.

"It was right about here," said Betty soberly, "that we saw him the night that he started to jump into the river--or I suppose it was the same one," she added.

"Let us hope so," said Mollie fervently. "I wouldn't like to think that there were two lunatics wandering round these woods. One is quite enough."

As they came closer to the river they became more and more conscious that they were not alone, that some one, hidden in the bushes, was craftily watching them.

So strong did this feeling finally become that once the boys separated, thrashing the bushes in all directions. They did not find anything, and finally continued along the path, a little ashamed of what they thought was an attack of nerves.

"Phew, this is getting a little hot for me," said Frank, running his hand through his shock of fair hair. "I don't mind fighting anything in the open--" He left the sentence unfinished, for at that moment they broke through the bushes at the river's edge upon a sight that struck them speechless.

Not twenty yards down the bank stood a ragged scarecrow of a man, so unkempt, so wild, so abandoned in its crouching attitude as to appear hardly human.

Before they had time to utter a word or move a muscle, the man threw up his arms in a gesture indescribably terrible, and with a hoarse shout disappeared in the swirling waters.

It all happened so quickly that for the space of a dazed second they wondered if they had really seen it at all. Then they recovered their powers of motion and rushed to the spot where the man had disappeared.

Though they leaned far out over the water they could see no sign of anything human, and with a creeping feeling of horror they began to speak of what had probably already happened.

"It's certain death down there," Roy muttered, as though to himself, gazing into the rushing river. "The poor old fellow! He has got his, I guess."

"Look here, fellows, here are some clothes," Will called out suddenly, and the boys rushed over to where he stood, a tattered old hat and an equally ragged coat in his hands. "Maybe there will be something in the jacket to tell us where the poor fellow has been staying and what he has been up to."

They searched through the coat and finally pulled out a wallet.

"Now if it only has some writing in it," said Mollie breathlessly.

There was a card, and the card bore the words which they expected, yet dreaded, Arnold Dempsey, Ph. D. But there was nothing else, and suddenly tears dimmed their eyes and they had to turn away.

"It will be mighty hard on Jimmy and Arnold," muttered Roy, gazing somberly at the fast-flowing river. "To have their dad go that way! They'll take it mighty hard--those boys."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MOONLIGHT APPARITION

"Let's look around a little anyway," Betty suggested. "He may possibly have been swept up on the shore farther down the river."

"If such a thing were possible he would probably be dead anyway," Frank protested, but the girls paid no attention to him. The mere suggestion that the professor might still be alive and in need of assistance was enough for them, and they set about feverishly to scour the woods on both sides of the river and for a considerable distance down its shores.

After an hour of vain search, however, they were forced to conclude that the old man was indeed dead, and so reluctantly and with heavy hearts they turned their steps back toward Wild Rose Lodge.

They talked very little on the way back, for they were too occupied with their own gloomy thoughts. Only once Betty spoke what was in the minds of all of them.

"It seems such a terrible waste--such a pity," she said. "Just a mistake on the part of the Government to have resulted in this tragedy. Arnold and James Dempsey coming home, safe and well and hopeful to find their father --dead!"

The boys stayed on for several days at the lodge, and for all the Outdoor Girls but Betty their stay was unmitigated joy. But in the heart of the Little Captain, hard as she tried to fight against it, was a little sense of injury to think that her chums had got their boys back and she had been denied hers.

To be sure, all the boys made much of her and petted her--for there was not one of them who had not competed for her favor in the old days before Allen had shouldered them all out--but no amount of attention from any one else could make up for one little word from Allen.

At each sunrise she awoke thrilling with the thought that perhaps Allen would be with her before the sun went down. And as each evening came without him she sighed and thought, "Perhaps to-morrow."

Since the tragic death of Professor Dempsey they felt that they need no longer fear the woods, although they never ventured near the river or the falls without a heartache and the fervent wish that they might have reached the poor demented man with the glad news of his sons' safety in time to avert the tragedy.

However, they did enjoy their liberty, and took long tramps with the boys through the woods and picnicked with them beside little unexpected brooks and streams, quite in the nature of old days.

Then at last came the day when the boys announced that they would have to return to town and to the military camp to obtain their formal discharge from the army.

"We may surprise you by coming back in 'civies' a week or two from now," Will laughed, as the girls prepared to spin them to the railroad station in the cars. "So you had better be prepared for the shock."

"Maybe they won't care for us any more when they see us out of uniform," grinned Roy, as he shook hands with Mrs. Irving. "You know the old saying that a uniform has made many a hero of a bootblack."

"Goodness, I hope you aren't a bootblack," said Mollie from her car, where she was "doing things" with the engine.

"I'm not," answered Roy, adding with a grin, "Nothing half so honest."

Although the girls knew that they were only saying good-bye to the boys for a few days, the parting was hard just the same, and half an hour later they watched the train wind serpent-like down the shining track with a sinking feeling at their hearts.

"Aren't we a lot of geese?" said Grace impatiently, as they climbed back into the cars. "We have done without the boys for a couple of years, and now when they have just gone as far as Deepdale for a couple of weeks, we are almost crying

about it."

"I suppose it is just because we have had so much separation that we can't bear any more of it--even a little," suggested gentle Amy, feeling as if she had just awakened from a blissful dream.

"Never mind," said Mollie, putting an arm about Betty's waist and giving it a little squeeze. "Just think how lovely it will be to see the boys in regular clothes again, and maybe," with a sly glance at Betty, "by the time they come back they will have added one to their number."

"Goodness, I hope so!" said Betty, unashamed.

In spite of some regret at not having the boys, the girls managed to enjoy themselves in the days that followed. They motored and swam and fished and hiked, and got as becomingly sun-burned and tanned as young Indians. It was not until two or three days before the boys returned that anything untoward happened to disturb their peace of mind.

Then one night the moon came out with such dazzling brilliance that Betty was seized with a strong desire to be out in it.

"Let's go for a moonlight swim," she suggested excitedly, as they all stood on the porch of the lodge staring up through the trees to where the moon shone glitteringly down. "We haven't done it since we came, and surely our vacation wouldn't be complete without one."

"Or more," said Mollie, seconding the plan with enthusiasm. "Come on. Let's tell Mrs. Irving where we are going. Maybe she will wish to go along, but I doubt it."

Mollie was right: Mrs. Irving did not wish to go, and the girls rushed upstairs to don bathing suits in preparation for the lark.

A few minutes later they were racing like slim young ghosts through the woods, laughing and calling to each other and entirely abandoned to the joy of the moment.

"Race you to the old swimming hole," Mollie called out, as they neared the river; and away they all raced in response to the challenge.

Betty won, in spite of the fact that Mollie had had a short head start, and the girls, wild in their exuberance, would have lifted her to their shoulders had not Betty herself laughingly fought them off.

"I have another challenge," she cried. "My fresh box of candy to whoever swims to the other side of the swimming hole first. Are you on?"

"We're on!" yelled Grace enthusiastically, adding: "I'd swim from here to Jericho for that box of candy, Betty."

As a matter of fact, whether it was really the thought of the candy or whether it was because the other girls were tired from the last spurt, Grace really did get to the other side of the swimming pool first, and, pulling herself up on the other bank, dripping and triumphant, demanded the prize.

"You surely did win it, and you shall have that box of candy--much as I hoped to keep it in the family," laughed Betty, shaking the water from her eyes and drawing herself up beside her chum. "Goodness, isn't that water delicious to-night?" she added, wriggling her toes luxuriously in the rippling wavelets. "Just cool enough to be refreshing and not cold enough to chill you----" She broke off suddenly and sat staring, her eyes widening and her body tense.

"Girls," she said in a queer voice, for Mollie and Amy had also drawn themselves up on the bank, "have I gone crazy, or what is the matter with me? Do you see--what--I see--up there?"

Alarmed, the girls followed the direction of her strained gaze, and suddenly they seemed to feel themselves congeal with momentary horror.

Far above them on the bank near the falls and on the other side of the river, stood the crouched-up, animal-like figure of--the "Thing!"

CHAPTER XXIV

RECOVERED

The sight was almost too much for the girls. What they felt was sheer animal panic and they wanted to run away--anywhere--just so they put distance enough between them and that figure on the bank.

"Sit still," Betty commanded them, recovering her presence of mind. "That is Professor Dempsey up there, and if we make any sudden sound we are sure of frightening him away."

"But he was killed--we saw it," moaned Amy. "That must be his g-ghost."

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Mollie, her thoughts working along with Betty's. "You know you don't believe in ghosts."

"But how----" Amy was beginning when Betty interrupted sharply.

"Listen," she said. "I came across an old derelict of a rowboat the other day when we were exploring the upper river, but I didn't say anything to you girls about it because I thought it was too much of a wreck to bother with. For all I know it isn't even water tight--"

"Betty," Mollie broke in excitedly, "I see what you mean! We can row across the upper river to where Professor Dempsey is--Were there oars in the boat?" she broke off to ask.

"A couple of old sticks that would serve for oars," Betty answered. "Of course it's taking a big chance--"

"Say no more," cried Mollie, jumping to her feet and wringing out her bathing suit. "Big chance is our middle name anyway. Lead on, Betty. Where do we find this craft?"

"I'm not quite sure that I can find it," said Betty, leading the way into the woods, "but it was down this way somewhere. Don't make any noise, girls, and let's hurry, or we won't get there before he disappears again."

Grace and Amy were now entering into the spirit of the thing, and they followed at Betty's heels eagerly, careful not to step on stick or stone that might betray their presence.

Luckily Betty managed to stumble directly on the old derelict rowboat where it lay in ancient helplessness in the concealment of a thick grove of bushes along the upper reach of the stream.

"Goody! This is almost too much luck," cried Betty exultantly. "You get in the stern, Amy, and Grace in the bow. Mollie and I will do the rowing."

"I only hope the old thing doesn't take in too much water," said Amy, as she and Grace got gingerly into the rickety old craft and Betty and Mollie pushed it off from the shore.

"That remains to be seen," answered the Little Captain as she handed one of the ancient oars to Mollie. "There is one thing we shall have to remember, Mollie," she said, as they pushed clear of the bank and glided out into the swift water of the river, "and that is to keep far enough this side of the falls to guard against being swept over it. Bear hard on your right hand, Mollie honey. It wouldn't be much fun if we upset here, you know."

"Oh!" gasped Grace, holding fast to the side of the boat and noting with dismay how plainly the roar of the falls came to them. "I wish we had another oar, I'd help----"

"You can help most, Grade," cut in the Little Captain briskly, "by keeping your nerve and helping us to keep ours. Mollie," she called in a whisper that carried the length of the boat, "can you see--It--yet?"

"Yes," Mollie telegraphed back in the same tense whisper. "It's got its back to us, I think."

"Good," said Betty softly, adding as she threw all her weight against her oar, "now let's keep still and work."

It was queer how they referred to that presence at the head of the falls as "It." Some way, in the weird moonlight, under the more than unusual circumstances, it seemed almost impossible to give the thing a name.

"Was it Professor Dempsey?" they kept asking themselves over and over again. But he had committed suicide. Or at least they had seen him fall into the river, and they could have vowed that he did not come out again. They had searched both sides of the river. How could they have missed him? And yet, if that motionless figure at the head of the falls was really Professor Dempsey, he must have been washed ashore that day and evaded them as he had succeeded in evading them so many times before.

And all the time the roar of the falls was growing louder and louder in their ears and they knew that theirs was a race with life and death.

Could they succeed in reaching the opposite bank before the deadly current of the river should suck them over the falls, to almost certain annihilation?

The answer to the question came a moment: later when, without warning, the prow of the little boat struck on an unexpected projection of the shore and they came to a standstill.

"Thank heaven!" said Betty under her breath as Mollie jumped out and pulled the craft further in to shore. "That was nearly the riskiest thing you ever did, Betty Nelson."

Once on shore again, the girls' confidence returned and they hurried silently through the woods toward the spot where they had seen the figure. Then Betty, who had taken the lead, suddenly motioned to them to stop.

She had caught a glimpse through the trees of the man, who resembled more than ever a scarecrow in his crazy makeshift garments--and at the sight of him her heart unaccountably skipped a beat.

Her thoughts had not gone beyond this moment. Strangely enough all her energy had been concentrated upon reaching the man before he disappeared. But now that they had succeeded so far she was at a loss what to do next.

But at that moment she inadvertently stepped on a dry twig that snapped sharply under her foot, and at the sound the man had turned fiercely, like an animal at bay. Then he wheeled about and made as though to flee for the shelter of the woods.

In this emergency Betty followed impulse. She ran out into the open, calling to him wildly that his sons were alive. Not to run away, because his sons were safe and well. They were coming to him---

The pitiful wreck of a man paused in his flight as the import of the words seemed to sink into his befuddled brain, but he turned upon the Little Captain a look of ferocious hatred that would have terrified a less courageous girl than Betty. But her whole heart was in her mission, and she had utterly forgotten herself.

"Won't you please believe me?" she said, advancing toward him, hands outstretched pleadingly. "I know what I'm talking about. Your sons, Arnold and Jimmy----"

As though the names of his boys had released some cord in his brain, the man cried out hoarsely:

"Jimmy and Arnold--my sons, my little boys!" Then, turning fiercely to Betty, he cried: "You're not lying to me, are you? Because I'll throw you into the river! I'll cut you into little pieces!"

As the man advanced menacingly, Grace screamed and Mollie ran forward with some wild idea of protecting her chum, but Betty waved them back.

"I'm not lying to you," she told the crazy man, looking straight into his glaring eyes. "Your boys were wounded, but not seriously, and they sailed a few days ago for this country on a hospital ship. They want to see you more than anything else in the world," she added, playing on the sudden softness that had crept into his wild eyes. "And they sent their love to their dad."

At sound of the old loving name all the fight went out of the old man and he sank to his knees on the grass, sobbing horribly.

They let him alone for a moment, then Betty motioned to Mollie, and together they lifted him to his feet. The sight of his tear-stained, unkempt old face, creased and lined with suffering, but with the wildness gone out of the eyes, stirred

a profound pity in the girls and they wished more than anything in the world to make him happy again.

"We are going to take you home, Professor Dempsey," Betty told him soothingly, as with Mollie's help she half led, half carried, him through the woods toward the spot where they had left the boat, Amy and Grace following awed and silent behind them. "And as soon as your boys reach home we will bring them to you. Be careful of this big rock. Ah, here's the boat." And talking all the time, softly and soothingly as one would to a child, Betty at last succeeded in seating the derelict old man in the equally derelict old boat.

The girls tumbled in after him, and with a prayer in her heart Betty pushed off from shore.

That ride back across the river was as weird and unreal as any nightmare the girls had ever lived through. Their queer passenger, seeming the most unreal of all, was quiet for the most part but occasionally he would sit up and look about him wildly and could only be soothed back to reason by Betty's sweet voice telling him of his boys--Jimmy and Arnold.

Somehow they reached the opposite shore, and, after pulling the boat up among the bushes once more, they started back, the old man with them, to Wild Rose Lodge.

CHAPTER XXV

THE OLD CROWD AGAIN

Mrs. Irving, who had been worried by their prolonged absence, met the girls at the door as they stumbled with the almost exhausted old man up the steps of the porch.

At sight of the latter she grew deathly pale, and leaned against the door for support. She felt that all the world was growing black---

"Oh, please, please don't faint!" she heard Betty's young voice calling to her desperately as it seemed from a long distance. "We've depended upon you to help us."

With a great effort she fought off the dizziness and drew herself away from Betty's supporting arm.

"It's all right," she said dazedly. "The shock, I guess. Betty what--who--is that----"

"Oh, please don't ask any questions now," Betty begged feverishly. "Just help us, and we will tell you all about it later. This is Professor Dempsey," she added, turning to the broken old man who stood staring at them uncomprehendingly. "He can have Mollie's and my room, can't he, Mrs. Irving? and we will bunk somewhere else."

Mrs. Irving nodded automatically, still too dazed by the suddenness of the thing even to think, and they helped the old man into Betty's room and laid him on the bed. The tired, ragged, unkempt old head had hardly touched the pillow before its owner had sunk into a heavy sleep.

For a moment the girls were startled, for it almost seemed as though he were dead, but Betty put her hand on the ragged old shirt above the heart and found that the action was strong and regular.

"Perhaps it is the very best thing that could happen to him," she said softly, and, laying a light cover over him, tip-toed from the room, followed quietly by Mrs. Irving and the other girls.

Once in the other room, with the need for action over, the girls felt weak and spent, and it was only then that they realized that they had been through a terrible ordeal.

In broken sentences they told Mrs. Irving all that had happened and as she listened she more and more appalled at the risk they had run and the danger they had gone through.

"Girls, girls," she cried when they had finished, "I was half wild about you as it was. But if I had known the truth I think I should have gone crazy. Just the same," she added and her eyes shone with pride in them, "it was a glorious thing for you to do--an unselfish, wonderfully courageous thing. I'm proud of you!"

In spite of the fact that they were tired out, the girls insisted upon standing watch and watch that night. They felt that some one should be with Professor Dempsey all the time in case he should wake in the night with his old madness upon him. It was the longest night any of them had ever spent, and the morning dawned upon a hollow-eyed, worn-out set of Outdoor Girls.

"I never," said Betty, looking around at her white-faced chums wearily, "spent such a terrible night in my life. How is the patient?" she added, taking up the subject that had not left their minds for a minute. "Who was in there last?"

"I," said Grace, brushing out her hair, listlessly. "He is still as leep."

That report continued good all morning, and it was almost noon before the ragged, unbelievably unkempt old man on the bed opened his eyes.

The girls had been looking forward to, yet dreading, this minute. It had been decided that only one of them should be in the room with him when he awoke, but the rest were hovering close to the door ready to give assistance if it should become necessary.

But they need not have worried. The magic of his long sleep, together with the glad news he had heard the night before, seemed to have transformed the man overnight to his old gentle self.

To be sure, he was amazed at his strange surroundings, and looked uncomprehendingly into Betty's face as she bent compassionately over him. But all he said was:

"I declare, this is all very strange, young lady--very strange. Would you mind--er--telling me where I am?"

At the tone, even more than the words, the girls felt a wild desire to shout aloud their relief. For the tone was the same, gentle, polite one that they remembered hearing that day when the little man had entertained them in his cabin in the woods.

Then Betty, as gently as she knew how, told him a little of what had happened to him, and the girls could see by the surprise on his face that he had no recollection whatever of the matters of which she was speaking.

"I declare it is most strange--most strange," he declared when she had finished, adding as he looked down and plucked distastefully at his tattered shirt: "And this is the result of my--er--temporary aberration, is it? Ah, but I remember," he sat up suddenly, a gleam of fear in his eyes. "It was when I read of the death of my boys. Something snapped in my brain, I think. You say"--he turned to Betty, grasping her hand imploringly--"you say that my sons are well--that they are coming to me?"

"Yes," said Betty soothingly, pressing him back upon the pillow. "They are well and safe and will be with you soon--in a few days, perhaps."

"Ah," said the little man, submitting to Betty's touch, a happy smile on his lips, "that is good. That is very--very--good--" and with a sigh like a tired child's, he fell asleep again!

"Did you hear what he said?" whispered Betty, her eyes shining as she tip-toed from the room, closed the door softly behind her and faced her awed and incredulous chums. "He's well, girls. He's completely sane again."

"It's a miracle," said Mollie breathlessly.

And so it came to pass that some little time later four good-looking young fellows, recently in the service of the greatest country on the earth, and one of them still wearing his regimentals, saw a rather unexpected sight as they swung down the path toward Wild Rose Lodge.

On the porch sat an elderly, contented looking man, clad in garments that would easily have accommodated two men of his size--garments belonging to Mollie's Uncle John, and seated about him in attitudes of lazy comfort were four young girls.

These young girls--who were, at least from the standpoint of the four young men, exceedingly good to look upon, were engaged in doing some sort of fancy work. All but one of them, that is; for the fourth, a girl with wavy brown hair and bright brown eyes, pink cheeks, and a dream of a mouth, was reading to the elderly man who sat in the chair of state.

"Gee, Allen," whispered one of the tall youths to the one who still wore the uniform of his country's service, "I feel as though we were crabbing your act. Can't we fellows do the disappearing act----"

But just at the moment the girl with the brown eyes and the pink cheeks looked up, gave one little startled cry, and dropped the book to the porch.

The other girls looked up and then followed a scene that very nearly made the temporarily forgotten and neglected old man on the porch drop out of his chair in surprise.

"Allen!" screamed the girls, all except the brown-haired, pink-cheeked one, who, for some unaccountable reason hung back behind the others. "You perfect angel!"

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming so that we could have been prepared?"

"Oh, isn't your uniform lovely!"

"And look at the dressed-up leggings!"

These and various other exclamations like them, coupled to the fact that all the girls, except the one that he wanted to

most, had kissed him, rather overwhelmed young Lieutenant Washburn and took his breath away.

His three companions, however, finding themselves neglected and out in the cold, interfered at this point and saved his life.

"Betty, what are you hiding away back there for?" cried Mollie to the Little Captain, whose cheeks were pinker than ever and whose eyes were shining very brightly with a sort of mixture of joy and fright. "Don't you know Allen in his uniform?"

"Aren't you going to kiss him?" chimed in Grace wickedly.

"We all did," added Amy.

But Betty had no intention of kissing Allen, although he begged her to with his laughing eyes and she continued backing into the doorway, until Mrs. Irving, coming up behind her, caught her up and pushed her out upon the porch again.

However, the chaperon monopolized Allen for a few minutes and gave Betty time to catch her breath. She found Mollie introducing Professor Dempsey to the astonished boys. These young soldiers wanted to ask a hundred questions, but, catching a warning look from Betty, decided to wait till later, when the little man himself was not present.

Frank, who was perhaps more glad than any of them to see the father of his chums alive and well, settled himself near the man and began to pour into his starved and eager ears news of his sons and tales of adventures in which they had figured.

And while Betty was still smiling in sympathy with the look of absolute happiness on Professor Dempsey's face, Allen dragged himself away from the group of his admirers and came over to her.

Boldly he pulled her hand through his arm and led her past the laughing boys and girls, down the steps, and along the path that led into the woods.

"Be back in time for supper," Will called after them. "Something tells me we are going to have some feed."

"Oh, don't bother them," they heard Mollie's voice in laughing reproof. "Remember, you were young yourself, once!"

"And now," said Allen, when they had gone just far enough for the trees and bushes to screen them from the view of the people on the porch, "I want you to look at me, Betty. You haven't yet, you know."

"I c-can't," said Betty in a muffled voice. "I guess--" she added whimsically, "I guess I'm a little afraid of you, Lieutenant Allen Washburn."

With a glad laugh Allen put his strong young arms about her.

"Do you think you can keep on all your life being afraid of me--like that?" he asked. "Little Betty?"

And Betty, with the radiant joy of all youth in her heart, slowly nodded.

And what glorious days followed! The young folks never tired of their tramps through the woods and walks in the vicinity of Moonlight Falls. They gave themselves up to a good time and had it in full measure.

"Gee, what an improvement over the trenches in France!" remarked Will one day. "No more wars for me!"

"So say we all of us!" sang out Frank.

When they had to return to Deepdale the boys took Professor Dempsey with them and Frank saw to it that the old man was made comfortable until his wounded sons returned to him. Both of the hurt soldiers were recovering, and the reunion of father and sons was most affecting.

"Now for a final swim below the falls!" cried Mollie one day, when the outing was coming to an end.

"We ought to have a good time--now there is no ghost to disturb us," put in Amy.

"A chocolate for the first one to enter the water!" exclaimed Grace, waving her ever-present candy box in the air.

"That settles it--I'm off!" burst out Betty; and then all made a wild dash for the swimming pool. And here let us say good-bye to the Outdoor Girls.

THE END