

FICTION

Laura Lee Hope

The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale



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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPPDALE

OR

CAMPING AND TRAMPING FOR FUN AND HEALTH

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPPDALE

CHAPTER I

A FLUTTERING PAPER

Four girls were walking down an elm-shaded street. Four girls, walking two by two, their arms waist-encircling, their voices mingling in rapid talk, punctuated with rippling laughter--and, now and then, as their happy spirits fairly bubbled and overflowed, breaking into a few waltz steps to the melody of a dreamy song hummed by one of their number. The sun, shining through the trees, cast patches of golden light on the stone sidewalk, and, as the girls passed from sunshine to shadow, they made a bright, and sometimes a dimmer, picture on the street, whereon were other groups of maidens. For school was out.

"Betty Nelson, the idea is perfectly splendid!" exclaimed the tallest of the quartette; a stately, fair girl with wonderful braids of hair on which the sunshine seemed to like to linger.

"And it will be such a relief from the ordinary way of doing things," added the companion of the one who thus paid a compliment to her chum just in advance of her. "I detest monotony!"

"If only too many things don't happen to us!" This somewhat timid observation came from the quietest of the four--she who was walking with the one addressed as Betty.

"Why, Amy Stonington!" cried the girl who had first spoken, as she tossed her head to get a rebellious lock of hair out of her dark eyes. "The very idea! We *want* things to happen; don't we, Betty?" and she caught the arm of one who seemed to be the leader, and whirled her about to look into her face. "Answer me!" she commanded. "Don't we?"

Betty smiled slightly, revealing her white, even teeth. Then she said laughingly, and the laugh seemed to illuminate her countenance:

"I guess Grace meant certain kinds of happenings; didn't you, Grace?"

"Of course," and the rather willowy creature, whose style of dress artistically accentuated her figure, caught a pencil that was slipping from a book, and thrust it into the mass of light hair that was like a crown to her beauty.

"Oh, that's all right, then," and Amy, who had interposed the objection, looked relieved. She was a rather quiet girl, of the character called "sweet" by her intimates; and truly she had the disposition that merited the word.

"When can we start?" asked Grace Ford. Then, before an answer could be given, she added: "Don't let's go so fast. We aren't out to make a walking record to-day. Let's stop here in the shade a moment."

The four came to a halt beneath a great horsechestnut tree, that gave welcome relief from the sun, which, though it was only May, still had much of the advance hint of summer in it. There was a carriage block near the curb, and Grace "draped herself artistically about it," as Mollie Billette expressed it.

"If you're tired now, what will you be if we walk five or six miles a day?" asked Betty with a smile. "Or even more, perhaps."

"Oh, I can if I have to--but I don't have to now. Come, Betty, tell us when we are to start."

"Why, we can't decide now. Are you so anxious all of a sudden?" and Betty pulled down and straightened the blue middy blouse that had been rumbled by her energetic chums.

"Of course. I detest waiting--for trains or anything else. I'm just dying to go, and I've got the cutest little traveling case. It--"

"Has a special compartment for chocolates; hasn't it, Grace?" asked Mollie Billette, whose dark and flashing eyes, and black hair, with just a shade of steely-blue in it, betrayed the French blood in her veins.

"Oh, Grace couldn't get along without candy!" declared Betty, with a smile.

"Now that's mean!" exclaimed Grace, whose tall and slender figure, and face of peculiar, winsome beauty had gained her the not overdrawn characterization of "Gibson girl." "I don't see why Billy wants to always be saying such horrid things about me!"

"I didn't say anything mean!" snapped Mollie, whose pseudonym was more often "Billy" than anything else. "And I don't want you to say that I do!" Her eyes flashed, and gave a hint of the hidden fire of temper which was not always controlled. The other girls looked at her a bit apprehensively.

"If you don't like the things I say," she went on, "there are those who do. And what's more--"

"Billy," spoke Betty, softly. "I'm sure Grace didn't mean--"

"Oh, I know it!" exclaimed Mollie, contritely. "It was horrid of me to flare up that way. But sometimes I can't seem to help it. I beg your pardon, Grace. Eat as many chocolates as you like. I'll help you. Isn't that generous?"

She clasped her arms about the "Gibson-girl," and held her cheek close to the other's blushing one.

"Don't mind me!" she cried, impulsively. Mollie was often this way--in a little whirlwind of temper one moment, and sweetly sorry for it the next, albeit her little spasms of rage were never serious, and seldom lasted long.

"Forgiven," murmured Grace. "But I am really anxious to know when we can start our Camping and Tramping Club. I think the idea is perfectly splendid! How did you come to think of it, Betty?"

"I got the idea from a book--it isn't original by any means. But then I always have been fond of walking--out in the country especially. Only it isn't so much fun going alone. So it occurred to me that you girls would like to join. We can take a nice long tramp the first opportunity we get."

"Just us four?" asked Grace.

"No, not necessarily. We can have as many members as we like."

"I think four is a nice number," spoke Amy. She was rather shy, and not given to making new friends.

"We four--no more!" declaimed Mollie. "Suppose we do limit it to four, Betty?"

"Well, we can talk of that later. And I do so want to talk of it. I thought we'd never get out of school," and the four who had just been released from the Deepdale High School continued their stroll down the main street of the town, talking over the new plan that had been proposed that morning by Betty Nelson--the "Little Captain," as she was often called by her chums, for she always assumed the leadership in their fun and frolics.

"Will we just walk--walk all the while?" asked Grace. "I'm afraid I shan't be able to keep up to you girls in that case," and she swung about on the sidewalk in a few steps of a mazy waltz with Amy.

"Of course we won't walk all the while," explained Betty. "I haven't all the details arranged yet, but we can set a certain number of miles to cover each day. At night we'll stop somewhere and rest."

"That's good," sighed Grace, with a glance at her small and daintily shod feet.

"Oh, here comes your brother Will!" Betty called to her.

"And that horrid Percy Falconer is with him," went on Mollie. "I--I can't bear him!"

"He's seen Betty--that's why he's hurrying so," spoke Grace. "Probably he's bought a new cane he wants to show her."

"Stop it!" commanded Betty, with a blush. "You know I can't bear him any more than you girls can."

"You can't make Percy believe that--my word!" and Mollie imitated the mannerism perfectly. For young Falconer, be it known, was partial to good clothes of a rather flashy type, and much given to showing them off. He had very little good sense--in fact, what little he had, some of his enemies used to say, he displayed when he showed a preference for pretty Betty Nelson. But she would have none of his company.

"I don't see why Will wants to bring him along," remarked his sister Grace, in a petulant tone. "He knows we don't like him."

"Perhaps Will couldn't help it," suggested Amy.

"That's nice of you to say, Amy," commented Grace. "I'll tell Will--some time when I get a chance."

"Don't you dare! If you do I'll never speak to you again!" and the pink surged to a deeper red in Amy's cheeks.

"Betty'd much rather have Will pick up Allen Washburn," remarked Mollie, in decisive tones. "Wouldn't you, Bet?"

"Oh, please don't say such things!" besought Betty. "I don't see why you always--"

"Hush, they'll hear you," cautioned Grace. "Let's pretend we don't see them. Hurry up! I've got a quarter, and I'll treat you to sodas. Come on in Pierson's drug store."

"Too late!" moaned Billy, in mock-tragic tones. "They are waving to us--we can't be too rude."

Will Ford, the brother of Grace, accompanied by a rather overdressed youth slightly older, had now come up to the group of girls.

"Good afternoon!" greeted Percy Falconer, raising his hat with an elaborate gesture. "Charming weather we're having--my word!" Percy rather inclined to English mannerisms--or what he thought were such.

"Hello, Sis--and the rest of you!" said Will, with a more hearty, and certainly a more natural, air. "What's doing?"

"Grace was going to treat," said Amy slowly; "she is so good about that--only--"

"Oh, girls! This is on me!" exclaimed Percy. "I shall be delighted. May I have the honor?" and again he took off his hat with an elaborate bow.

"Shall we?" Betty telegraphed this question to her friends with her eyes.

"Take the goods the gods provide," murmured Grace. "I can save my quarter for another time."

With a rather resigned air Betty followed her chums into the drug store and presently all were lined up before the marble-topped counter.

"The soda's delicious to-day," murmured Grace. "I've a good notion to get some fudge," and she began toying with a little silver purse.

"Save your money for our club," advised Mollie. "Did you hear of our expedition?" she asked Will.

"No, what's that? Are you going to try for the East or West pole?--seeing that the North and South ones have been captured," and he laughed, thereby getting some of the soda down his "wrong throat."

"Serves you right," murmured his sister, as he coughed.

"Betty is going to form a Camping and Tramping Club," went on Amy.

"Fine!" exclaimed Percy. "Are you going to take gentlemen? If so, consider my application."

"Oh, we really mean to *walk!*" exclaimed Grace, with a glance at the too-small patent leather shoes the overdressed youth thrust out ostentatiously. If he understood the allusion he gave no sign of so doing.

"What's the game, Sis?" asked Will, quizzically.

"Why, it isn't anything very elaborate," explained Betty, as she finished her soda. "It occurred to me that, as school closes exceptionally early this year, some of us girls could go for a two weeks' tramping tour before our regular summer vacation."

"And we're all in love with the idea," declared Amy.

"Twenty miles a day is our limit," added Mollie, smiling behind the youth's back.

"Twenty miles!" faltered Percy. "You never can do it--never!"

"Oh, yes, we can," said Betty, assuredly.

"Now do you still wish to join?" asked Grace, pointedly, glancing at Percy.

"You never can do twenty miles!" affirmed Percy. "Let's have some more soda!" he added quickly, to change the subject.

To the credit of Grace Ford, who was really very fond of sweets, be it said that she refused, and that with the mocking eyes of all the girls fastened on her.

"I've had enough," spoke Betty. "You walk with me," she whispered to Amy. "I don't want Percy to bore me. Stay near me, do!"

"I will," promised Amy.

Balked of his design to stroll beside Betty, Percy was forced to be content with Mollie, and she, with malice aforethought, talked at him in a way he could not understand, but which, the other girls overhearing, sent them into silent spasms of laughter.

"Don't you find it troublesome to carry a cane all the while?" Mollie asked him, sweetly ignorant.

"Oh, I don't *have* to carry it," he said quickly.

"Don't you? I thought on account of not being able to walk--"

"Why, Mollie--I can walk all right."

"Oh, I misunderstood you. You said twenty miles was too much."

"I meant for girls."

"Oh, then you carry the cane for dogs."

"No, indeed. I'm not afraid of dogs."

"He doesn't know she's 'spoofing' him--I believe that is the proper English word; isn't it?" whispered Grace, who was with her brother.

"Correct, Sis."

"Whatever did you want to bring him along for?"

"Couldn't help it. He fastened to me when I came out of school, and I couldn't shake him off. Is Bet mad?"

"You know she doesn't like him."

"Well, tell her it wasn't my fault, when you get the chance; will you? I don't want to get on her bad books."

"I'll tell her."

"I say, Sis, lend me a quarter; won't you? I'm broke."

"You had the same allowance that I did."

"I know, but I need just that much to get a catching glove. Go on--be a sport."

"I--"

"Don't say you haven't got it. Weren't you going to treat the crowd when I brought Percy along and let you sting him?"

"Such horrid slang!"

"Go on, be a sport! Lend me the quarter!"

Grace produced it from her purse. There were several other coins in it.

"Say, you're loaded with wealth! Where'd you get it?"

"I just didn't spend it."

"Go on! And you with a two-pound box of chocolates--or what's left of 'em--under your bed!"

"Will Ford, did you dare go snooping in my room?" and she grasped his arm, apprehensively.

"I couldn't help seeing 'em. I was looking for my ball, that rolled in there."

"Did you--did you eat them all?" she faltered.

"Only a few. There's Allen Washburn, I want to speak to him," and Will ran off unceremoniously, to join a tall, good-looking young man who was on the other side of the street. The latter, seeing the girls, raised his hat, but his glance rested longest on Betty, who, it might have been observed, blushed slightly under the scrutiny.

"Allen always has a book with him," murmured Amy.

"Yes, he's studying law, you know," spoke Betty.

Some other girls joined the four then, and Percy, seeing that he was rather ignored, had the sense to leave, making an elaborate departure, after what he considered the correct English style.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Mollie. "Puppies are all right, but I like better-trained ones!" and her dark eyes flashed.

"Billy!" exclaimed Grace, reproachfully, shaking an accusing finger at her friend.

"Well, you don't like him any more than--than Betty does!"

"Hush!" warned the Little Captain. "He'll hear you."

"I don't care if he does," was the retort.

Gradually the main part of the town had been left as the girls walked slowly on. Houses were fewer now, and the trees not so large, nor well cared for. The sun seemed to increase in warmth as it approached the west, wherein was a bank of fluffy clouds that soon would be turned into masses of golden, purple and olive.

"Oh, girls, I simply must rest again!" exclaimed Grace, as, with a wry face, she made for a smooth stump, which was all that was left of a great oak that had recently been cut down, as it had died, and was in danger of falling.

"What! Again?" cried Mollie. "Say, Grace, my dear, you never will be able to keep up with us on the tramp, if you give out so easily now. What is the matter?"

"Matter? Look at her shoes!" cried Amy. "Such heels!"

"They're not so awful high!" and Grace sought to defend her footwear from the three pairs of accusing eyes.

"It's a very pretty boot," remarked Betty. "But hardly practical, my dear."

"I suppose not," sighed Grace. "But I just simply could not resist the temptation to take them when the sales-girl tried them on me. I saw them in Robertson's window, and they were such a bargain--a sample shoe she said--that's why they're so narrow."

"You can wear a narrow size," spoke Mollie with a sigh. "I wish I could."

"Oh, I think your shoes are a lovely shape," spoke Grace. "I wish I had your high instep."

"Move over," begged Amy. "There's room for two on that stump, Grace."

Grace obligingly moved, and her friend sat beside her, idly swinging a couple of books by a long strap. Betty and

Mollie supported themselves by draping their arms about each other's waists.

"Patience on a monument," quoted Betty, looking at the two on the stump.

"Which one?" asked Mollie with a laugh.

"We'll divide the virtues between us; won't we, Amy?" exclaimed Grace, putting her head on the other's shoulder. "Now I'm--"

"The sleeping beauty!" supplied Betty, "Do come on!" and after a little argument, in which Grace insisted that she had not had more than a minute's respite, the four started off again. They were approaching the outskirts of the town in the vicinity of which they all lived.

"If this weather keeps up we can't start off on our tramping and camping trip any too soon," remarked Grace.

"When can we arrange for it?" asked Amy. "I think it is the nicest idea I ever heard of."

"You can all come over to my house to-night," suggested Betty. "We can make some plans then, perhaps."

"Let's, then!" cried impulsive Mollie. "But do you really intend to do any camping, Betty?"

"Yes, if we can. Of course not for any length of time--say a night or two. There are one or two places where camps are open the year around, and all you have to do is to go there and board, just as you would at a hotel."

"Only it must be much nicer," said Amy.

"It is--lots."

They had reached a place where the highway ran under a railroad line, that crossed on a high bridge. As the girls came under the structure a fluttering bit of paper on the ground caught the eyes of Betty. Rather idly she picked it up, and the next moment she uttered a cry that brought her chums to her side in some alarm.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "A five hundred dollar bill is pinned to this paper! A five hundred dollar bill, girls!"

CHAPTER II

THE TRAMPING CLUB

With staring eyes, and with breaths that were labored, the three chums gathered about Betty. She held the bill, and the paper pinned to it, stretched tightly between her slim fingers.

"Is it--is it real?" gasped Grace.

"Of course it's real," declared Amy.

"How do you know?" asked Mollie. "I confess I never saw a five hundred dollar bill all at once before."

"Did you see it in pieces?" asked Grace. "What a lot of money!"

"How many pounds of chocolates would it buy?" asked Amy, with a laugh.

"Don't you dare say chocolate to me!" commanded Grace.

"It is real," went on Betty, who had not spoken since picking up the money. "There's no doubt of that."

"If findings were keepings you'd be well off," said Mollie. "How lucky you are!" and sighed.

"Of course I can't keep it," decided Betty. "But I wonder who could have dropped it?" and she looked up at the railroad bridge over their heads, as if she might see some one standing there waiting for the return of the bill.

"What is that paper pinned to it?" asked Grace, as she took hold of it while Betty held the bank note by the two ends.

"That's so--I forgot to look at that," said the finder. She turned it over. There was some writing on it. It said:

"This is my last five hundred dollar bill--all that is left of my fortune. This is to remind me that if I don't make good use of this I don't deserve any more luck. It is make or break with me now! Which will it be?"

The girls were silent for a moment or two after reading this strange message that had come to them in such a queer manner. Then Betty said:

"Girls, what do you make of it?"

"It's a joke!" declared Grace.

"It sounds far from being a joke," spoke Betty, seriously. "Girls, there may be a grim tragedy here."

"How romantic!" sighed Mollie. "What shall we do with the money?"

"We must take it home and consult our folks about it," decided Betty. "I'll ask papa--and you might refer the question to yours, Amy. Being a broker, he's quite likely to know about such things, and can tell us what to do. This is quite a lot of money to lose, I wonder how we can find the owner?"

"Advertise?"

"Maybe there'll be a notice in the post office."

"It can't have been here very long. Perhaps we'll meet whoever it belongs to, coming back to look for it," spoke Grace.

Thus came some opinions, and while various others were rapidly formed and expressed, and as the girls are speculating on how the bill, and the attached paper, came to lie so openly on the highway, I hope I may be permitted to insert here a little descriptive matter that will, perhaps, give the reader a clearer understanding of the characters of this story.

And as Betty Nelson had, by right of more than one informal conquest, reached the position of leader, I can do no better than begin with her.

Betty was about sixteen years old. She was not exactly what one would call "pretty"--that is, at first glance. More likely she would have been spoken of as "good-looking." At least by the boys. And certainly Betty was good to look upon. Her face showed her character. There was a calm thoughtfulness about it that suggested strength of mind, and yet it was not the type of face called "strong." It was purely girlish, and it reflected her bright and vivacious manner perfectly. How her features lighted up when she spoke--or listened--her friends well knew. Her eyes seemed always to be dancing with fun, yet they could look calmly at trouble, too.

And when Betty Nelson looked at trouble that same trouble seemed to melt away--to flee as though it had no right to exist. And this not only as regarded her own troubles, but those of her friends as well. Intensely practical was Betty, yet there was a shade of romance in her character that few suspected. Perhaps the other girls had so often taken their little troubles to Betty, listening to her advice and sympathy, that they forgot she might have some of her own. But, under it all, Betty had a romantic nature, that needed but a certain influence to bring it out.

Full of life and vigor she was always ready to assume the leadership in whatever of fun or work was at hand. Perhaps that is why she was often called "The Little Captain," and certainly she deserved the name. Her father, Charles Nelson, was a wealthy carpet manufacturer, his factory being just outside of Deepdale, and her mother, Rose, was one of the society leaders of the town, though there was no elaborate social system.

A regular "Gibson girl," was Grace Ford, not only in form but in face. There was that well-rounded chin, and the neck on which was poised a head with a wonderful wealth of light hair. The other girls rather envied Grace her hair--especially Mollie, who was a decided brunette. And, as I have said, Grace dressed to advantage. There had been a time when she bemoaned the fact that she was tall--"regular bean-pole" her brother had taunted her with being--and Grace--well, she had slapped him. But this was some years ago. But now, with the newer styles that seem to forbid the existence of hips, and with skirts that so circumscribe the steps that fast walking is impossible, Grace fitted in perfectly. She was artistically tall and slender, which fact none knew better than she herself.

But Grace was not vain. She did pose at times, but it was done naturally and without undue thought. She just could not help it.

Her brother Will made no end of fun about her--even at this date, but Grace had sufficient composure to ignore him now, and only smiled sweetly, remarking:

"You only show how little you know, Billie-boy. Run along now and play ball!"

Then Will, trying to think of some cutting thing to say, would hasten to join his bosom friend Frank Haley, perhaps remarking as they tramped off:

"Hanged if I can understand girls anyhow."

"Why, what's up?"

"Oh, Grace is such a primper. She's got a new dress and some sort of fancy dingus on it doesn't mix in right. She says it makes her look too stout, and she's going to have it changed."

"Hum! I think your sister is a mighty stunning-looking girl."

"I'll tell her you said so."

"If you do I'll rub your nose in the mud!" and then, as they thought, philosophising further on the queerness of girls in general, the boys departed to the ball field.

The father of Grace and Will Ford was a lawyer with more than a local reputation. He was often called on to handle big cases of state-wide interest, and had made a modest fortune in the practice of his profession.

Of Mollie Billette--"Billy" to her chums, I hardly know what to say. Aged fifteen, the daughter of a well-to-do widow, Mrs. Pauline Billette, Mollie seemed older than either Betty or Grace, though she was a year younger. Yet she did not assume anything to herself by reason of this seeming difference in years; and the difference was only seeming.

Perhaps it was that bit of French blood making her so quick-tempered--so vivacious--so mature-appearing--that

accounted for it. And it was, very likely, that same French blood that gave her a temper which was not to be admired, and which Mollie tried so hard to conquer. But her friends knew her failing, and readily forgave her. Besides Mollie there were the comical twins--Dora--never called anything but Dodo--and Paul, aged four. They were always getting into mischief, and out again, and were "just too sweet and dear for anything," as Betty put it. Betty, being an only child, rather hungered for brothers and sisters.

And now we come to Amy Stonington. Poor Amy! There was something of a mystery about her. She realized something of it herself when she was old enough to know that she was not in physical characteristics at all like her parents--at least she regarded Mr. and Mrs. John Stonington as her parents. And yet she could not understand why she was not more like them in type, nor why, of late, she had often come upon them talking earnestly together, which talk ceased as soon as she entered the room. In consequence of which Amy was not very happy these days.

Yet the most that she feared was that her parents were mapping out a career for her. She was talented in music, playing the piano with a technique and fire that few girls of her age could equal. More than once, after a simple concert in the High School, at which she played, teachers had urged Mr. and Mrs. Stonington to send her to some well-known teacher, or even abroad to study.

"But if that's what they're planning I just won't go!" said Amy to herself, after one of those queer confidences she had broken up. "I'd die of loneliness if they sent me away."

So much for our four girls.

Dear Deepdale the girls always called it--Dear Deepdale! They always spoke affectionately of their home town, the only residence place any of them had ever really known, for though some of them had lived as children in other places, their years, since they were old enough to appreciate localities, had been spent in Deepdale.

And certainly it was a town of much natural beauty, to which a certain amount of civic pride added, had made for local enjoyment in parks, memorials and statues. Though there were only about fifteen thousand residents, there was a spirit about Deepdale that many a fair-sized city might have envied--a spirit of progress.

Deepdale was situated on the Argono river, which gave a natural advantage, and provided a setting that could not be improved upon. The stream ran around two sides of the place, the waters curling gracefully around a bend which had been laid out in a little pleasure park.

There were some who protested against this "waste" of good and valuable dockage facilities, but the town committeemen, wisely ignoring objections, had, at some cost, acquired the land, and made what was one of the prettiest spots for miles around--a little breathing place on the very edge of the beautiful river.

Nor was the river the only attractive bit of water about Deepdale. The stream emptied into Rainbow Lake, some miles below the town, and Rainbow Lake fully justified its name. It was a favorite scene of canoeing and motor-boat parties, and many summer residences dotted its shores. In summer white tents of campers gleamed beneath the trees on its banks.

Situated in the lake were a number of islands, also camping sites, and much frequented, in summer, by little parties of young people who landed there after a trip on the lake, to rest in the shade of the leafy trees. Triangle Island, so called from its shore outline, was the largest of those that seemed floating on the lake, like green jewels in a setting of silver.

Several steamers of good size plied on the Argono river, one a freight and passenger boat, belonging to a local line going as far as Clammerport at the foot of the lake. Often school society excursions were held, and the boys and girls made merry on the trip.

About Deepdale were several thriving farming communities, for the slightly rolling land was well suited to cultivation. The town, and the outlying farms filled a sort of valley, girt around with hills of sufficient size and height to be called mountains, at least by the local inhabitants who were proud of them.

There were valleys in these mountains, some large and others merely glens, though Shadow valley, one of the most beautiful, was only of medium size. It was a favorite spot for excursionists who wanted a change from the water route, there being a sort of summer resort and picnic ground at one end of this valley.

The other end was not so often visited. It had once formed the estate of a very wealthy man, who built a large mansion there. But, on his death, the property was contested for in the courts by several heirs and for years had been tied up by

litigation. So the mansion became deserted.

Of sufficient importance to have a railroad, as well as a steamer line, Deepdale was well provided with transportation facilities.

True, the railway was only a branch one, but it connected with the main road running to New York, and this was enough for the people of Deepdale. The town also boasted of a paper, the *Weekly Banner*, and there was a good high and grammar school in town, besides numerous stores, and other establishments, including a moving picture theatre--this last rather an innovation.

Our girls--I call them ours, for it is with their fortunes that we shall be chiefly concerned--our girls lived near each other on the outskirts of the town.

Betty and her parents occupied an old-fashioned stone house, that had once been the manor of a farm. But it was old-fashioned outwardly only, for within it was the embodiment of culture and comfort. It set well back from the street, and a lane of elms led from the front porch to the thoroughfare. Back of the house was an old-fashioned garden, likewise well-shaded, and there were the remains of an apple orchard, some of the trees still bearing fruit.

On the other side of the street, and not far off, was the home of Grace--a modern brick house of tasteful design. It had ample grounds about it, though being rather new could not boast of such noble trees as those that added dignity to the old stone house.

Amy Stonington lived in a large, rambling wooden structure, too large for the needs of the family, but artistic nevertheless. It was just around the corner from the residence of Betty, and the yards of the two girls joined---if you can call the big orchard of Betty's home a "yard."

Mollie's home was near the river, about ten minutes' walk from that of the other three girls. It was a wooden house of a dull red that mingled well in tone with the green grass and the spreading trees that surrounded it.

And now I believe I have mentioned my principal characters, and places, though others will be introduced to you from time to time as our story progresses.

So on this pleasant spring day, for one of the few times, Amy was not brooding on the subject that had given her such uneasiness of late. Nor were the other girls concerned with anything save the finding of the five hundred dollar bill, which absorbed everything else for the time being.

"Who could have lost it?" wondered Mollie.

"There aren't so many persons in Deepdale who can afford to throw away money like this," added Amy.

"It wasn't thrown away--it was lost," declared Betty, "and we must find the owner if we can."

"Especially after such a pathetic message," said Grace. "Poor fellow! His last big bill!"

"What makes you think it was a *man*?" asked Amy.

"That isn't a girl's writing," insisted Grace.

"Fine! You'll be a detective if you keep on--or should I say detectivess?" asked Mollie, with a laugh.

"I wonder what that note means?" inquired Mollie.

"Why," said Betty, "it seems to indicate that some young man ran through a fortune--or lost it--and had only five hundred dollars left. He was going to try to redeem his standing or wealth with this, and probably wrote this to remind himself not to fail. I used to have a habit of leaving my room untidy, and Daddy suggested once that I write a notice to myself, and pin it where I would see it as I came out each morning. I did, and I cured myself. This young fellow probably tried the same system."

"What makes you think he is *young*?" Grace wanted to know.

"I'm following your line of reasoning--no elderly man would do anything like this--write such a strange memorandum to himself. I'm sure he is young."

"And--good-looking?" asked Amy, smiling.

"Let us hope so--if we are to return the money to him in person," suggested Mollie.

"Well, the best thing to do is to put that in some secure place, Betty," advised Grace. "Has your father a safe at home?"

"Yes."

"Then let him keep it, and we can put an advertisement in the *Banner*. 'Found--a sum of money. Owner can have same by proving property, and paying for this advertisement.' How is that?"

"Wouldn't you ask for a reward?" came from Mollie.

"The idea--of course not!"

"But he might *give* us one," suggested Amy, "without being asked."

Then talking excitedly about the find, and speculating on how it could have come in the road, the girls accompanied Betty to her house. Mrs. Nelson was duly astonished at the news, and agreed with the chums that the best plan was that suggested by Grace. Accordingly, when Mr. Nelson came home, the bill and the queer attached note, were put in his safe. Then an advertisement was telephoned to the paper.

"And now let's talk about our Camping and Tramping Club," proposed Betty, for her three chums had called that evening after supper.

"I spoke to mamma about it," said Mollie, "and she said she thought I could go. But we must stay with friends, or relatives, at night; she won't let me put up at a hotel."

"Of course not!" cried Betty--"none of us will. Now my plan is this: Papa and mamma have a number of relatives living in distant towns, but all in this vicinity. Probably you girls have some also. Now, why couldn't we arrange a tour that would take us on a circuit say of--two hundred miles--"

"Two hundred miles!" came in a horrified chorus.

"Why, yes, that's not much. We can take three weeks to it, and that's only a little over ten miles a day--not counting Sundays, of course. If we can't walk ten miles a day--"

"Oh, that's not so bad," admitted Amy.

"I can easily do that," assented Mollie.

"What about our meals?" asked Grace.

"Can't you carry enough chocolate fudge to do between morning and evening?" asked Amy, with a laugh.

"I've got that part all planned," began Betty. "Or at least I have an idea about it. We can get breakfast and supper at our friends' or relatives' and at noon we can go to restaurants, or to houses along the way. Why, we can even take a little camping outfit with us, and make coffee on the road, carrying sandwiches, too."

"Fine!" cried Amy and Mollie.

"Make chocolate--not coffee," begged Grace.

"Well, chocolate then," assented Betty.

"I have a couple of aunts somewhere out Bessingford way," spoke Amy.

"And mamma has a cousin or two near Millford," went on Grace.

"Now, it's your turn, Mollie," said Betty.

"Oh, I have some wood-pile relations scattered about the country!" exclaimed the French girl, her eyes sparkling. "I guess they would be glad to entertain us."

"And I can fill in the between-spaces with uncles and aunts and cousins, I think," spoke Betty. "Now let's make out a partial list."

It took some little time to do this, but it was finally accomplished.

"Well, shall we decide on it?" asked Betty after a pause. "Shall we form the Deepdale Camping and Tramping Club?"

"I move you, Miss Chairman, that we do!" exclaimed Grace. "The sooner the better."

"Second the motion!" came laughingly from Mollie.

"All in favor--"

"Aye!" came in a joyous chorus, and the little club was thus quickly formed.

CHAPTER III

JEALOUSIES

"What do they find to talk about so often?"

"And so secretly. As soon as any of us other girls come near they begin to speak of the weather--or something like that."

Thus remarked Alice Jallow to Kittie Rossmore a few days after the formation of the Camping and Tramping Club. The question and comments took place in the court of the High School, just before the bell was to ring for the morning session.

"It's all Betty Nelson's doings," declared Alice, who had often tried to make herself more intimate with the quartette of friends, but unsuccessfully. The other girls did not care for these two.

"Yes. Grace, Mollie and Amy will do anything Betty tells them," asserted Kittie.

"I don't see why she is so popular. She hasn't a bit of style about her."

"I should say not! Her skirt is entirely too wide, and her blouse never seems cut right."

"They say her mother doesn't believe in style. But I do," said Alice. "I'd rather have a cheap dress, if it was in style, than something old-fashioned, even if it cost a lot more."

"So would I. Look at them now, with their heads together! I wonder if they're going to have a dance?"

"I don't know. How can we find out?"

"Leave it to me. Jennie Plum is quite friendly with Mollie. I'll get her to ask some questions."

"Do; and then tell me. I'm sure they're getting up some affair."

"I shouldn't wonder. If they'd only ask us--"

"We have a right to be asked!" and Alice flared up.

The warning bell interrupted further conversation, and the girls and boys filed into their classrooms.

As Alice had remarked, there was a good deal of talk going on among the four members of the newly-formed Camping and Tramping Club. Every spare moment the four seemed to have something to say to each other, as one or the other thought of some new point to consider.

Following the hasty formation of the organization, the girls had sent letters to their friends and relatives asking if it would be convenient to entertain them. Some favorable answers had been received, others were delayed. There were no refusals.

"As soon as we know on whom we can depend, we can make up a schedule--'an itinerary'"--Betty had said. "We will know just where we will stop each night, so the folks can send us word, if they have to," she added.

"Why should they have to, unless something happens?" asked Amy.

"Oh, that five hundred dollar bill might be claimed," said Betty. "We'd want to know about that."

"And you haven't heard a word yet?" asked Grace.

"Not a word! I telephoned to the paper, and they said no replies had come in there. If that young man is depending on this money to make his fortune, I'm afraid he'll be broken instead of made, to use his own expression," and Betty

sighed.

The warning bell had broken in on their talk, as it had on that of the rival girls. And then began the school day.

It was warm--very warm for that time of year, being early May, and as the members of the new Camping and Tramping Club looked from the open windows, out to where Spring was already forcing into bloom the flowers, and urging the trees to greater activity, as regards the tender green leaves, there came an almost overpowering desire to toss aside books and papers, and get out where the smell of the brown earth mingled with the perfume of growing vegetation.

The teachers, doubtless, found it difficult also, for the call of nature manifested itself to them, and the girls and boys, rather selfishly, did not make it as easy as they might.

The noon recess again brought the four friends together, and Betty showed a tentative program she had surreptitiously scribbled during a study period.

It contained the names of towns, with the available relatives of the girls set down opposite each one, and a rough calculation of the time required to walk from one place to the other.

"It seems as if we ought to start at once," exclaimed Mollie. "Aren't you just dying to go, Amy?"

"I am--yes." There was hesitation in the tones.

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Grace, quickly. "Are you ill, Amy?" for the girl looked pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes.

"No, I'm all right. But papa and mamma don't seem to want me to go--at least they say they rather I would not just at present."

"The idea!"

"After we have it almost all arranged!"

"Why not?"

These comments and the question were fairly shot at Amy.

"I--I don't know," she faltered. "At first they did not seem to mind--but last night--oh, I dare say it will, be all right, girls. Don't mind me," and Amy tried to smile, though it could easily be seen that it cost her an effort.

She did not want to tell that she had overheard her parents discussing something the night before that troubled her--a topic that had been hushed when she unexpectedly came into the room. And that it had to do with the proposed little trip Amy was sure. Yet Mr. and Mrs. Stonington had at first shown much interest in it, and had written to various relatives asking them to entertain the girls.

"Stuck up things!" murmured Alice Jallow, toward the close of the noon recess, when the four chums had kept to one corner of the school court, eating their lunches, and never joining in the activities, or talk, of the other pupils.

"I wonder what they can be planning?" murmured Alice. "If they're getting up a new society, we'll do the same, and we won't ask them to join."

"Indeed we won't," agreed her chum. "That Betty Nelson thinks she can run the school. I'll show her that she can't!"

"And if they knew what I know about Amy Stonington I don't believe they'd be so thick with her."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a secret."

"Oh, tell me, Alice," pleaded Kittie. "You know I won't ever tell--honest!"

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

"Well then--oh, come over here. There's that horrid Sadie Jones trying to hear what we're saying," and the two girls, arm in arm, strolled off to a distant part of the court.

The afternoon session wore on. The day grew warmer, the sky became overcast, and there was the dull muttering of distant thunder. There seemed a tension in the air--as if something was going to snap. Doubtless you have often felt it--a sensation as though pins and needles were pricking you all over. As though you wanted to scream--to cry out--against an uncertain sensation that gripped you.

In the various classrooms the droning voices were heard--of the pupils in recitations, or of the teachers as they patiently explained some point.

The thunder rumbled nearer and nearer. Now and then a vivid flash of lightning split the sombre clouds. At such times the nervous girls would jump in their seats, and there would follow hysterical, though quickly subdued, bursts of laughter from their more stolid mates, or the boys.

The four who were to go on the walking tour together were in the Latin class. Amy was standing up, translating--or trying to translate--a passage from Caesar. She halted and stammered, though usually she got perfect marks in this study.

"Take it a bit slower, Miss Stonington," suggested Miss Greene, the teacher. "That is very good. You should know that word--*nequaquam*--take your time."

"*Nequaquam*" said Amy faintly, "not ever--"

There was a titter from Alice Jallow, in which Kittie Rossmore joined. Poor Amy looked distressed. Tears came into her eyes.

There shot across the black heavens a vivid flash of lightning, and a bursting crash so promptly came echoing that nearly every one of the girls started from her desk, and a number screamed, while even the boys were startled.

Then, with a low moan, Amy swayed, and fell backward into the arms of Betty.

"She's fainted!" exclaimed Miss Greene. "Girls, keep quiet! Some one get me a glass of water!"

There was a stir among the boys who occupied one side of the big room, and Frank Haley hastened out.

CHAPTER IV

A TAUNT

With a great crash, a deluge of rain, a wind that swept the spray across the school room, and the rumbling of thunder, punctuated by vivid, hissing flashes of lightning, the storm broke. At once the tension--that of nature as well as that of the nerves of the girls--was relieved. A sound, like a great sigh, was heard in the room. There were one or two faint cries, some laughter, and the members of the class were themselves again. The balance had been restored.

"She will be all right presently," said Miss Greene, quietly, as she helped place Amy on a couch in her own private room. "Close some of the windows, girls, the rain is coming in."

Her firm and cheering words, and her calm manner, aided in the work of restoration that had begun when the nerve-tension was lessened. The girls were themselves again, most of them going quietly to their seats, while Betty and Grace helped Miss Greene restore Amy to consciousness. They had loosed her collar, and some ammonia had been procured from the physics laboratory by Frank, who also brought water.

"I can't imagine what made her faint," whispered Grace. "She never did such a thing before."

"Probably it was the storm," said the teacher. "I have often noticed that just before a severe electrical disturbance I felt 'like flying to pieces,' to put it crudely. Then when the rain came I would get calm again. I remarked that Amy did not seem quite herself while reciting, and perhaps I should have excused her, but I hoped, by letting her fix her attention on the lesson, that the little spell might pass over."

"It was that horrid Alice Jallow giggling at her!" declared Mollie, who had come softly into the room. "I could--" she clenched her hands, and her dark eyes gleamed.

"Mollie," said Betty softly, and the threatened fit of anger passed over.

"She will come to in a moment," remarked Miss Greene, as she saw Amy's eyelids fluttering. "It was just a nervous strain. I have seen it happen before."

"Not with Amy," declared Grace, positively.

"No; but in other girls."

"I do hope Amy isn't going to be ill," said Betty. "We want her to come on the walk with us."

"I have heard of your little club," said the teacher, with a smile. "The idea is a very good one; I hope you have a pleasant time. I think it will do all of you good. I wish more of my girls would take up systematic walking. We would have better recitations, I think."

"Poor Amy!" murmured Grace. "I wonder what could have caused it?" and she looked down at her pale, little chum.

"It was because Alice laughed at her!" declared Mollie, half fiercely.

"I think not," spoke Betty, softly. "Amy has not been quite herself of late. She--"

But she was not destined to finish that sentence, for the girl under discussion opened her eyes, and struggled to sit up.

"You're all right," said Miss Greene, softly. "Lie still, my dear."

"Where am I--what happened? Oh, I remember. Did I faint?" and she asked the question in some alarm.

"You did, my dear; but there was no harm in that," spoke Miss Greene softly, and she laughed in a low voice.

"I--I never did such a thing before. What made me?"

"The storm, Amy. It was the electrical disturbance, I think. My! how it rains!"

A perfect deluge was descending, but it had brought a calm to the waiting earth, and calm to tired girlish nerves as well. Amy sighed, and then sat up. The color came back into her pale face.

"I am all right now," she said, more firmly, and was soon able to walk.

"Stay here a little longer," urged Miss Greene, "Betty, Mollie and Grace may remain with you. I will go out to the other pupils. Some of them may be alarmed."

A crash of thunder almost smothered her words, and the girls started nervously. The three glanced apprehensively at Amy, but she smiled bravely and said:

"Don't worry about me. I'm all right. It was silly of me to go off that way."

The storm raged and tore about the school, and gradually spent its fury. Miss Greene gave up the attempt to have a Latin recitation, and the class was permitted to engage in general conversation.

It was the final period of the day, and soon school was over. Most of the girls remained, however, for few had brought rain coats or umbrellas, there being no hint that morning of the deluge that was to come. Then the rain gradually slackened, and the pupils departed.

"Don't come to school to-morrow, if you don't feel well," urged Miss Greene, as Amy and her chums left.

"Oh, I'll be all right," she brightly answered.

"I wish we were going to start on our tramp to-morrow!" exclaimed Betty as they walked along the damp country road toward their homes, the sweet smell of the newly-watered earth mingling with the scent of grass and flowers. "The country is just lovely now."

"It will still be as lovely next month," said Mollie. "Only two weeks more of school, and then we will be on our way."

"Do you feel all right, Amy?" asked Grace. "Have a--"

"No, she won't have a *chocolate*, if that's what you're going to say!" spoke Mollie, quickly. "Do you want to make her get worse?"

"I wasn't going to say chocolate--so there!" snapped the usually gentle-mannered Grace. "Don't be so quick, Billy."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," and the French girl showed her contrition. "I forgot you can think of something beside candy."

"I was going to ask her if she wanted my smelling salts," Grace went on, and Amy accepted the little bottle.

There was much talk that afternoon of the coming trip. Some further letters had been received from relatives who would welcome the girls at the various stopping places.

"This about completes our schedule," remarked Betty, as she noted down, on a map she had drawn, the names of some persons and places. "Everything is coming on fine, girls."

"Isn't it nice!" exclaimed Mollie.

"You're sure to come; aren't you, Amy?" asked Grace.

"Yes, of course--that is--" A shadow seemed to pass over her face, and then her pale cheeks became pink. "Oh, I guess you can count on me," she finally declared. "I was just thinking--oh, it doesn't matter. Let's see now, Betty, how many stopping places do you count on?"

"About eight. Of course there may be more, and we may have to stay in one place longer than I figure on, and we might skip some places altogether."

"What about the camp?" asked Mollie.

"I am arranging for that," spoke Grace. "Papa's half-brother lives in Cameron. He and his wife maintain a sort of camp there for those who love the woods and outdoors. Mamma has written, and arrangements will be made for us to have a cabin or bungalow there for a few days."

"Won't it be glorious!" cried Mollie, taking Amy in a waltzing hold and whirling about the room with her, while she hummed a dreamy song.

They were at Betty's house discussing their coming trip, and it was nearly supper time when they dispersed. Grace insisted on accompanying Amy part of the way home.

"I don't want you to faint again and be all by yourself," she said.

"Silly! I shall do nothing of the sort," declared Amy, but Grace had her way.

It was the next afternoon, when Betty and Grace were having a game of tennis on the court that had been laid out back of the High School, that Alice Jallow and Kittie Rossmore came past, arm in arm. They paused for a moment to watch the game, and during a lull Alice remarked:

"When does the tramping club start?"

"As soon as school closes," replied Betty, for the term ended unusually early that year.

"Have you the party all made up?" inquired Kittie, and it was evident that she had a reason for asking.

"Pretty much," answered Betty, wondering what was to follow. "It's your serve," she added to Grace.

"Alice and I are very fond of walking," proceeded Kittie. "We thought if the Camping and Tramping Club was to be a general one--that is, if you wanted more members--we'd like to join."

Betty caught her breath. It was a hard answer to give.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said softly, coming over to where Alice and Kittie stood. "If we had known before we might have arranged it. But our membership is limited to four now."

"You four, I presume," and there was almost a sneer in the voice of Alice as she looked at the four chums.

"Yes, it so happens. You see we are going to stop each night at the houses of friends or relatives, and of course--"

"I see--the accommodations are limited; are they?" and again that sneer was manifest.

"Yes, they are, I'm sorry to say," spoke Betty. "But why don't you girls form another club? You could easily do that, and we could be together all day, if not at night. Why don't you?" she asked, brightly.

"We might," said Alice, coolly. "Come on, Kittie," she added. "I guess we're not wanted here."

"The idea!" cried Mollie. "Betty, I've a good notion to--"

"Hush!" cautioned Betty, placing a hand on the arm of her impetuous chum. "Don't say anything. It will only make matters worse. They are trying to provoke us."

Kittie and Alice walked off, their arms about each other's waist, laughing heartily at something in which they seemed to find a good joke.

"Let us finish the game," suggested Betty quietly to Grace, and they did.

"I don't see how they could be so bold as to ask us," murmured Mollie.

It was one afternoon, a few days before the close of school for the term, which also would mark the start of the outdoor girls on their tramping tour that, as she was packing her books to leave her desk for the day, Betty saw a note fall out of her Latin grammar.

"That's strange," she murmured, half aloud, "I wonder who could have put that there? Who is it from, I wonder?"

"As if you didn't know!" laughed Amy, coming up behind her friend. They were alone in the classroom for the moment.

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Betty blushing slightly.

"I think I saw Will give Grace a note this noon," went on Amy. "Ah, secrets! And doesn't it happen that Will and Allen Washburn are quite chummy? If the initials A.W. aren't on that note, Betty--"

"Of course they're not! The idea! Allen Washburn needn't think--"

"Oh, I know he needn't send notes to you this way, but perhaps Will forgot to deliver it, and Grace just slipped it into your book, intending to tell you of it. Ah, Betty!"

"Silly. It isn't that at all. See, I'll let you read the note."

Hastily Betty unfolded it. There was but a single unsigned sheet of paper, and scrawled on it were these words:

"Before you go camping and tramping ask Amy Stonington who her father and mother are."

CHAPTER V

AMY'S MYSTERY

Betty was quick to comprehend the cruel words, and in an instant she had crumpled the anonymous scrawl in her hand. But she was the fraction of a second too late. Amy had read it.

Betty heard the sound of Amy's sigh, and then the catch in her breath. She turned quickly.

"Amy!" cried Betty. "Did you see it? Oh, my dear! The meanness of it! The awful meanness! Oh, Amy, my dear!" and she put her arms around her trembling companion. "Oh, if I only knew who sent it!"

"I--I can guess!" faltered Amy.

"Who?"

"Alice Jallow."

"The--the cat!"

Betty simply could not help saying it.

"Let--let me see it again," whispered Amy. "I didn't mean to read your note, Betty, but I saw it before I realized it."

"My note? It isn't mine! I wouldn't own to receiving such a scrawl! Oh, Amy, I'm so sorry!"

"Never mind, Betty. I--I've been expecting it."

"You have?"

"Yes. That--that is what has been bothering me of late. You may have noticed--"

"I've noticed that you haven't quite been yourself, Amy, my dear, but I never suspected--and you think Alice sent this?"

"I'm almost sure of it. It has to be known sooner or later. But don't say anything to Alice."

"Why not? The idea! She ought to be exposed--and punished. I'll go to--"

"No, please don't, Betty. It--it is true, and--and there is no use giving her the satisfaction of knowing that she has--has hurt me," faltered Amy.

"Oh, the meanness of it!" murmured Betty. "But, Amy dear, I don't understand. This doesn't at all look like the writing of Alice Jallow."

"I know; she has disguised her scribbling, that's all. But it doesn't matter. I'll never charge her with it."

"Why not?"

"I haven't the heart. Oh, Betty, I'm afraid it's only too true! I really don't know who my father and mother are!"

"Amy!"

"No, I don't. I've suspected a mystery a long while, and now I am sure I am mixed up in one."

"Amy Stonington!" cried Betty. "Do you mean to tell me--look here, let's get to some quiet place. Some one will be

coming in here. We can go to Miss Greene's room. She has gone for the day. But perhaps you don't want to tell me, Amy."

"Oh, yes I do. I want to tell all you girls. And then maybe--"

"Amy Stonington!" exclaimed Betty. "If you're going to hint--and I see that you are--that we'd pay any attention to this note, or let it make any difference between us--even if it's true--which I don't believe--let's see--what do I want to say--I'm all confused. Oh, I know. I mean that it shan't make a particle of difference to us--if you never had a father or mother--"

"Oh, of course I had--some time," and Amy smiled through a mist of tears.

"Only there's a mystery about them--what became of them."

"Why I thought--all of us thought--that Mr. and Mrs. Stonington were your parents," said the wondering Betty.

"So did I, until lately. Then I began to notice that papa and mamma--as I thought them--were frequently consulting together. They always stopped talking when I came near, but I supposed it might be about some plans they had for sending me away to be educated in music. So I pretended not to notice. Though I did not want to go away from dear Deepdale.

"Their queer consultations increased, and they looked at me so strangely that finally I went to mamma--no, my aunt, as I must call her, and--"

"Your aunt!" exclaimed Betty.

"Yes, that is what Mrs. Stonington is to me; or, rather she was poor dear mamma's aunt. I am going to call her aunt, however, and Mr. Stonington uncle. They wish it."

"Oh, then they have told you?"

"Yes. It was the night before the day that I fainted in school. It was thinking of that, I guess, that unnerved me."

"Why, Amy! A mystery about you?"

"Yes, and one I fear will never be found out. I'll tell you about it."

"Not unless you'd rather, dear," and Betty put her arms about her chum as they sat on the worn sofa in Miss Greene's retiring room.

"I had much rather. I want you and Grace and Mollie to know. Maybe--maybe you can help me," she finished with a bright smile.

"You see it was this way. Of course I don't remember anything about it. All my recollections are centered in Deepdale, and about Mr. and Mrs. Stonington. It is the only home I have ever really known, though I have a dim recollection of having, as a child, been in some other place. But that is like a dream.

"But it seems that when I was a very little girl both my parents lived in a distant city. Then one day there was a terrible storm, the river rose, and there was a flood. This I was told by my uncle and aunt, as I am going to call them. Who my father and mother were I never knew, except from what I have heard, but it seems that Mrs. Stonington was mamma's aunt.

"In the flood our house was washed away, but I, then a small baby, was found floating on a sort of raft tied to a mattress on a bed. I was taken to a farmhouse, and found pinned to my dress was an envelope."

"Just an envelope?"

"Yes. There might have been a letter in it, but if there was it had been washed out in the flood and rain. But the envelope was addressed to Mrs. Stonington here, and she was telegraphed to. Her husband hurried on, for he knew of the flood and feared for his wife's relatives who lived in that town. He took me back with him, and I have lived with Uncle John and Aunt Sarah ever since."

"But your father and mother, Amy?"

"No one ever knew what became of them. They--they were never found, though a careful search was made. I was the only one left."

"And was there nothing to tell of your past life?"

"There wasn't much to tell, you see--I was so small. There was a sort of diary in the bed with me, but it only gave details of my baby days--probably it was written by my mother--for the handwriting is that of a woman. Aunt Sarah gave it to me the other day. I shall always treasure it."

"And is that all?"

"Well, there was a mention of something--in a vague sort of way--that I was to inherit when I grew up. Whether it was land or money no one can tell. The reference is so veiled. Even Uncle John, and he is a stock and bond broker, you know, says he is puzzled. He has had a search made in Rockford--that's where the flood was--but it came to nothing. And so that is all I know of my past."

"But your aunt must know something of your mother if they were relatives."

"Very little. They saw each other hardly at all, and not for some years before my mother's marriage, Aunt Sarah says. How my parents came to pin the Stoningtons' address on my baby dress they can only guess. And I'll never know. Probably they did it before they were--were drowned."

"Then your name isn't Stonington after all, Amy?"

"Oh, yet it is. The queer part of it is that my mother is said to have married a man of the same name as Uncle John, but no relative, as far as we can learn. So I'm Amy Stonington just the same. My uncle and aunt formally adopted me after they found that there was no hope of locating my parents. And so I've lived in ignorance of the mystery about me until just the other day."

"And then they told you?"

"Yes. It was discussing the advisability of this that caused Uncle John and Aunt Sarah to confer so often. Then they decided that I was getting old enough to be told. They said they would rather it would come to me from themselves than from strangers."

"Oh, then others know of it?"

"Yes, a few persons in town, but they were good enough to keep it quiet for my sake. Among them, so Uncle John told me, were Alice Jallow's people. That is why I think she wrote the note. She must have found out about my secret in some way, and thought to taunt me with it."

"The mean creature!"

"Oh, I don't mind. I was only afraid you girls--"

"Amy Stonington! If you even hint at such a thing again we'll never forgive you! As if we cared! Why, I think it's perfectly wonderful to have such a romance about you. I know the other girls will be crazy about it. Of course, it's sad, too, dear. But maybe some day, you'll find out that your father and mother aren't--aren't gone--at all, and you'll have them again."

"That's what I've been hoping since I knew. But there is very little chance, after all these years. Uncle John told me not to hope. You see, they must have been drowned. The worst is that I can't recall them. They never corresponded with aunt and uncle in years. I don't know what sort of a home I had--or--or whether I had brothers or sisters."

"No, I suppose there isn't much chance of your parents having escaped the flood. And yet I've read--in books--"

"Oh, yes--in books. But this is real life, Betty. And now, dear, I've told you all I know. As I said, it shocked me when I first heard it, but I'm pretty well over it now. Only it did startle me when I read that note over your shoulder."

"I should think it would. When I see Alice--"

"Please don't say anything to her!" pleaded Amy. "Please don't! Let her see that--that it hasn't made a bit of difference."

"I will. A difference? Why, we'll love you all the more Amy,--if that's possible."

"That's good of you. Now shall we--"

"Hark, some one is coming!" exclaimed Betty, tiptoeing to the door, while Amy shrank back on the sofa.

CHAPTER VI

THE LEAKY BOAT

There was a moment of silence, and then the relieved voice of Betty was heard to say:

"Oh, it's Grace. I'm so glad. I thought--"

"What are you doing here?" asked the newcomer. It was evident from her rather mumbled words--which mumbling I have been unable to reproduce in cold type--that Grace was eating candy.

"Have some chocolate?" she went on, holding out a bag.

"Oh, Grace! Chocolate at such a time as this!" rebuked Betty, her mind filled with the story she had just heard.

"Why, what's the matter with the time?"

"Amy is in there," and she motioned to the private room.

"Gracious! Has she fainted again?"

"No; where is Mollie?"

"Coming. There she is. We were looking everywhere for you. Alice Jallow said--"

"The horrid thing!" burst out Betty. "Why, whatever can have happened? You look quite tragic!"

"I am. Come in here!"

Grace advanced, and not even the prospect of hearing what she guessed was going to be some sort of a strange secret could stop her from taking another helping of candy. Betty saw and murmured:

"You are hopeless."

"What's up?" asked Mollie, gliding into the room, her dark hair straying rather rebelliously from beneath her hat.

"Come in," invited Betty, and soon the four were sitting together, while in a sort of dialogue Betty and Amy told the pathetic little story.

"And that's how it stands," finished Betty. "I wanted to do something--or say something--to make Alice Jallow feel--"

"She should be punished--we should all cut her--she ought to be put out of school!" burst out the impulsive Mollie. "I shall go to Miss Greene--"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Billy!" exclaimed Betty, as she detained the girl, who had already started from the room. "Amy doesn't wish it. Besides, I think Alice will be sorry enough later for what she has done."

"I had rather you wouldn't go to her," spoke Amy, quietly.

"Oh, well, of course--" began Mollie. "I do wish I had better control of myself," she added, rather sadly. "I start to do such rash things--"

"Indeed you do, my dear," spoke Grace. "But we know you don't mean it. Here--help yourself," and she extended the candy bag.

"I couldn't--I don't feel like it. I--I feel all choked up in here!" exclaimed Mollie, placing her hand on her firm, white

throat. "I--I want to do something to--to that--cat!" Her eyes filled with tears.

"That's what I called her!" said Betty. "But we mustn't let her know that she has annoyed us. Sometimes I feel real sorry for Alice. She seems rather lonesome."

"I suppose the story will be all over school soon," went on Grace.

"I shan't mind," spoke Amy, softly.

"Well, I'm glad you don't, my dear," remarked Betty. "It's more romantic than anything else--after you get over the sad part of it."

"And I am trying to do that," said Amy, bravely.

Together the four girls came out of the school. Most of the other pupils had gone home, for vacation days were near, and study hours were shortened on account of examinations.

"There she is now," said Mollie, as they turned a corner.

"Who?" questioned Betty.

"That Jallow girl and her familiar--Kittie. Her name is too good for her."

"Don't notice her," suggested Betty, "and don't, for goodness sake, speak to them. We don't want a scene. Perhaps Alice only did it impulsively--and did not really mean it."

If the reputed author of the anonymous letter, and her close friend, hoped for any demonstration on the part of those they had hoped to wound, they were disappointed.

In calm unconsciousness of the twain, the quartette passed on, talking gaily--though it was a bit forced--of their coming trip. And I must do Alice the justice to say that later she was truly sorry for what she had done.

"There's Will!" exclaimed Grace, as she caught sight of her brother. "And Frank Haley is with him. Here, girls, take what's left of these chocolates, or Will won't leave one."

"Does he know you have them?" asked Amy, accepting a few.

"Yes, he saw me buying them. Oh, bother! There comes that Percy Falconer, and he has a new suit. Vanity of vanities!"

The course of Will and his chum, as well as that of the "faultless dresser," as he hoped he appeared, brought them toward the girls. There was no escape, and the little throng walked onward. Betty kept close to Amy, for she knew just how she must feel after the disclosure.

"Ah, good afternoon, ladies!" greeted Percy. "Wonderful weather we're having. My word!"

"Beastly beautiful!" mocked the irrepressible Mollie. "Horribly lovely, isn't it, what?"

"Oh, I say now," began Percy. "I--really--"

"Where'd you get the clothes?" broke in Will.

"They're a London importation."

"London importation, my eye!" exclaimed Frank. "Why, Cohen's Emporium, on Main street, has the same thing in the window marked thirteen ninety-eight--regular fourteen dollars."

"Oh, I say now! Quit your spoofing!"

"Give us some candy, Sis!" begged Will. "Come on, now, I know you've got it!"

"I had it, we have it--they had it--thou hast it--not!" quoted Grace, with a laugh. "Nothing doing this time, little brother of mine."

"And you ate all those chocolates?" This in semi-horrified tones.

"We--not I," corrected his sister.

Percy Falconer, after vainly trying to get in place to walk beside Betty, who frustrated him by keeping Amy close to her, drifted off to find new sartorial worlds to conquer.

The others walked on, the boys joining in the talk and laughter. Amy seemed to have recovered her spirits, and the girls made no reference to the little tragedy which they knew would soon become public property.

"So you are really determined to go off on that walking trip?" asked Will, who had floated back to join Mollie.

"We certainly are. Why, don't you think we can do it?"

"Perhaps. But I think you'll run at the sight of the first tramp--or cow; and as for a storm--good night!"

"Thank you--for nothing!" and Mollie's dark eyes had little of fun in them as they looked into those of Will Ford.

Eventually Will and Frank left them, and the girls continued on until they reached Mollie's house.

"Come in," she invited. "I know they baked to-day, and we'll have a cup of tea and some cake. It will refresh us."

"I ought to be going--home," said Amy, with a little hesitating pause at the word "home."

"Oh, do come in!" begged the French girl.

As they entered the yard the twins, hand in hand and solemn-eyed, came down the walk to meet them.

"Oh, the dears!" gushed Grace.

"Isn't she too sweet," whispered Betty, as she caught up Dodo.

"And in need of soap and water, as usual," commented Mollie, drily. "But Nanette can do nothing with them. They are clean one minute--*voilà!* like little Arabs the next! What would you have?" and she threw herself into a tragic gesture, in imitation of the imported French maid, at which her chums laughed.

"Have you a kiss for me, Paul?" demanded Grace, of the little fellow, when she had replaced his sister on the walk.

"Dot any tandy?" came the diplomatic inquiry.

"Listen to the mercenary little wretch!" cried his older sister. "Paul, *ma chérie*, where are your manners?"

"Has oo dot any tandy?" came in inflexible accents.

"I might find--just a morsel--if you'd kiss me first," stipulated Grace.

"Tandy fust," was the imperturbable retort. "I like tandy--Dodo like tandy--we bofe like tandy!"

"The sum total of childish happiness!" laughed Betty "Do, Grace, if you have any left, relieve this suspense."

Some candy was forthcoming, and then, with more of it spread on their faces than had entered their chubby mouths, the twins toddled off content.

"Girls, what do you say to a little row on the river?" asked Mollie, when they had been refreshed by cakes and tea. "My boat will hold us all, and we can float down and talk of our coming trip."

"Float down--and--row back," remarked Grace, with emphasis.

"The exercise will do you good. We must get in--training, I believe the proper word is--in training for our hike."

"Hike?" queried Betty.

"Suffragist lingo for walk," explained Mollie. "Come on."

The Argono river ran but a short distance from Mollie's home, and soon the four girls were in an old-fashioned, but safely constructed, barge, half drifting and half rowing down the picturesque stream.

The afternoon sun was waning behind a bank of clouds, screened from the girls by a fringe of trees. And as they floated on they talked at intervals of Amy's secret, and of the coming fun they expected to have.

"Let's get farther out in the middle," suggested Betty, when they came to a wide part of the river. "It's more pleasant there, and the air is fresher. It is very warm."

"Yes, I think we will have another storm," agreed Grace. "If it rains now it isn't so likely to when we start."

She was pulling on one pair of oars and Mollie on a second, the others relieving them occasionally. Soon the boat was in the middle of the stream. They had gone on for perhaps half a mile, when Betty, who was sitting comfortably in the stern, toying with the rudder ropes, uttered an exclamation.

"Oh!" she cried. "My feet are wet! Mollie, the boat is leaking!"

"Leaking?"

"Yes! See, the water is fairly pouring in!"

Mollie made a hasty examination under the bottom boards of her craft.

"Girls!" she cried, in tragic tones, "there's a hole in the boat!"

"Don't say that!" begged Amy, standing up.

"Sit down!" sternly ordered Betty. "There is no danger! Sit down or you'll fall overboard!"

"Oh, but see the water!" cried the nervous Amy. "It is coming in faster!"

And indeed it was.

"It is those twins!" declared Mollie. "I told them not to get in my boat, but they must have, and they've loosened the drain plug so that it came out a moment ago. Quick! See if you can find it!"

There was a frightened search for the plug that fitted in a hole in the bottom of the boat, through which aperture the water could be drained out when the craft was on shore.

"It isn't here!" cried Grace. "Oh, Mollie!"

"Keep quiet! It must be here!" insisted the owner of the boat. "It couldn't get out. Look for it! Find it! Or, if you can't, we'll stuff a handkerchief in the hole!"

Meanwhile the water continued to pour in through the bottom of the boat, setting the boards afloat, and thoroughly wetting the skirts of the girls. And they were now in the centre of the widest part of the river.

CHAPTER VII

TO THE RESCUE

Rapidly the water rose in the boat. It had now set the bottom boards more fully afloat, and the girls in vain tried to raise their feet out of the incoming flood. They stared at the swirling water, fascinated for the moment.

"Girls, we simply must do something!" cried Betty, usually the one to take the initiative.

"Row ashore! Row ashore!" begged Amy. "It's so deep out here."

"It isn't much shallower near shore," remarked Mollie. "What can have become of that plug?" and, pulling in her oars she began feeling about in the bottom of the boat, moving her hand around under the water.

"Maybe the twins took it to make a cat's cradle with," suggested Grace.

"No, it couldn't have been out when we started or the water would have come in at once," said Mollie. "It has come out only a few minutes ago. We simply must find it!"

"Row ashore--row ashore!" insisted Amy.

Betty had swung the boat's head around, but the craft was now badly water-laden, and did not move quickly. The current of the river was carrying them down the stream.

"Oh, girls!" cried Amy, her voice trembling somewhat, "it's getting deeper!"

"It certainly isn't stopping from coming in," murmured Mollie. "Where *is* that plug!"

Desperately she continued to feel about, while the other girls cast anxious eyes toward the shore, that now seemed so far away.

"And there's not another boat in sight!" exclaimed Betty. "We must call for help!"

"I have it! I have the plug!" suddenly cried Mollie, pulling on something.

"Ouch! That's my foot--my toe!" cried Grace. "Let go!"

"Oh, dear!" sighed Betty, in disappointed tones.

"I thought I had it!" said Mollie. "Wait until I catch those twins!"

"We--we never may see them again," faltered Amy, whose recent rather tragic experience; had gotten on her nerves.

"Stop that!" commanded Betty, a bit sharply.

"Oh, how fast the water is coming in!" moaned Grace. "I'm going to faint--I know I'm going to faint!"

"Don't you dare!" cried Mollie, quickly. "If you do I'll never speak to you again! There! Take that!" She reached over on the seat beside Grace, caught up a chocolate from a bag and thrust the confection into the tall girl's mouth. "That will keep you from saying such silly things, and also from fainting," remarked Mollie, practically. "Now, girls, since we can't find that plug, we've got to do the next best thing."

"If we could only whittle one!" said Betty.

"If we had a knife we might cut a piece off one of the oars, or the side of the boat," went on Mollie, "but as we haven't--we can't. We must arrange to take knives with us on our tour, though!"

"It's no time to talk about tours now!" moaned Amy. "We--we'll never get ashore."

"Nonsense!" cried Betty. "We've got to. If we can't find a plug, or make one, we'll have to stuff something in the hole. Girls, your handkerchiefs!" She seemed to have a sudden inspiration.

She began rolling hers into a sort of cylindrical shape as she spoke. The other girls saw her idea, and passed over their tiny squares of linen, which Betty rolled with her own.

"That's one of my best ones," sighed Grace, as she parted with hers. "I got it on my birthday."

"It's in a good cause--never mind," remarked Betty, firmly. "And you'll get it back, you know--when we get ashore."

"If we ever get ashore, you mean," spoke Amy.

"Stop it!" commanded the Little Captain, sharply. "Of course we'll get ashore. Now, Billy, where is that hole?"

"Wherever the water seems to be coming in fastest," replied the owner of the boat. "Oh, be quick, Betty. We can't float much longer!"

"Well, we can swim," coolly replied Betty, as she began feeling about for the hole in the bottom of the boat. Meanwhile she looked closely at the surface of the water in the craft, which had now risen until it was close to the under side of the seats. The girls were quite wet. The boat was harder than ever to row.

"That plug ought to be floating somewhere hereabouts," she murmured.

"It's probably caught in a crack, or under one of the seats," said Mollie. "Hurry up, Betty. The hole is right near where you were feeling that time."

"Yes, you can see the water bubbling up," added Amy. "Oh, do hurry, or we'll sink!"

"Well, then we can swim," said Betty, coolly. "It's a good thing we all know how."

"But--in our clothes!" protested Amy.

"Oh, I guess we can do it if we try," went on Betty. "There, I have the handkerchiefs in the hole!" she exclaimed, as she forced the wadded-up linens into the aperture. "Now let's row harder!"

"Oh, but I'm soaked!" sighed Grace. Indeed, they were all in no very comfortable plight.

They succeeded in heading the boat for shore, but they had only rowed a short distance when Grace cried:

"The water is still coming in!"

There was no doubt about it. They all stared at the place where, under water, Betty had thrust in the handkerchiefs. There was a string of small bubbles, showing that the river water was still finding its way into the boat.

"Help! Help! Help!" suddenly called Amy.

"Why--what's the matter?" demanded Betty, in alarm.

"Oh, there's someone on shore, near a boat! It's a man--or a boy! He must come out and rescue us!" said Amy, and there was a trace of tears in her voice.

"What's--the--matter?" came the hail from the one on shore.

"We're--sinking!" called Betty, making a megaphone of her hands. "Come out and save us!"

"All right!" and then the following words were lost as the wind carried them aside. The youth on shore--the girls could now see that he was a youth--began shoving out a boat. He did not seem very adept in the knowledge of rowing, and took quite a little time to get under way.

"Oh, it's that Percy Falconer!" cried Betty. "He'll never get to us! Girls, I guess we'll have to swim for it, after all!"

"Look--there comes someone else!" suddenly cried Amy. "Oh, Grace, it's your brother Will!"

"Thank goodness for that," murmured Betty. "Now we have some chance. If he can only make Percy listen to reason, and put back for him."

"They seem to be having some argument," said Grace. "Oh, if that Percy isn't the--"

She did not finish, for they were all vitally interested in what was taking place on shore. Will and Percy seemed to be having a difference of opinion, and it appeared that Percy wanted to shine as a lone hero in the rescue that must be performed quickly now, if it was to be performed at all.

"Come back with that boat!" Will could be heard to cry. "You don't know how to row!"

"I do so!" retorted Percy, the wind now carrying the words to the girls.

"Come back here!" insisted Will, firmly, "or I'll--"

"We'll be too late!" almost whined Percy. "They said they were sinking!"

"Come back here!" fairly shouted Will. "I can row twice as fast as you, and we'll make better time even if you do put back. Come on, or I'll jump in and swim out to you, and chuck you overboard! Come back!"

This argument proved effective. Possibly Percy was thinking what would happen to his clothes if Will put his threat into execution. At any rate, he swung the big boat around and a few moments later Will and he, the former pulling vigorously on the oars, were on their way to rescue the now thoroughly frightened girls.

CHAPTER VIII

CLOSING DAYS

"Oh, Will, do hurry! My dress will be ruined!"

Thus called Grace, as she frantically waved to her brother to hasten his stroke.

"Huh!" he panted. "Dress! A nice time to think--of dresses--when they're--almost sinking!"

"Are they--do you think they'll sink--and be drowned?" faltered Percy.

"They may sink--they're not very likely to be drowned, though," grunted Will, as he glanced over his shoulder to get his course straight. "They can all swim. Pull on your left more. We'll pass 'em if you don't!"

"Sink! I can't--I can't swim. Oh, dear!" cried Percy.

"I know it. That's why I wanted you to come back and get me. You'd look nice rescuing four girls all alone," said Will. "And you not able to swim a stroke!"

"I could do it," protested Percy, in self-defense.

"Maybe," agreed Will. "Anyhow, it's lucky I happened to come along."

"And it's a good thing I heard them hollering, and got the boat ready," said the well-dressed lad, whose attire was now rather disheveled from the haste of rowing.

"That's right, Percy. I'll give you credit for that."

"Oh, do hurry, boys!" cried Mollie. "We'll be under in another minute."

"Coming!" cried Will. "Pull harder, Percy!"

"I can't!"

"You've got to!" That seemed to be all there was to it. Percy pulled harder.

Only just in time did Will and his companion reach the boat that was on the verge of sinking. And only the skill and good sense of the girls, and the knowledge that they could swim if they happened to fall into the water, enabled the rescue to be made. For it was no easy task to disembark from one craft to the other, especially with one nearly submerged. But, while Will and Percy held the gunwale of their boat close to that of the half-sunken one, the girls carefully crawled out and soon, rather wet, considerably dismayed, but, withal, calmer than might have been expected, the quartette was safe in the larger craft.

"Oh, what a relief!" exclaimed Mollie, wringing some water from the bottom of her skirt.

"But look at my dress--and this is only the second time I've worn it!" cried Grace, in distress. "It will be ruined."

"All it needs is pressing," said Will, disdainfully.

"What do you think this is--a pair of your trousers?" demanded his sister, indignantly. "Pressing! It is ruined!"

"We're all drenched," spoke Amy. "But it doesn't matter as long as we're safe."

"That's the way to look at it!" exclaimed Will. "How did it happen, anyhow?"

"Plug out of the bottom," explained Mollie, sententiously. "The twins!"

"I see! Say, she's going down all right!" This Will remarked as the boat from which the girls had climbed settled lower and lower in the water.

"Oh, can't we save it?" cried Mollie. "My poor boat!"

"I'll use one of the oars as a buoy," said Will. "I'll fasten it to the painter. It will probably drift, but it will run into the eddy at the Point, and we can get it to-morrow."

Quickly he knotted the end of the painter about one of the oars. Then taking the others into the craft that Percy had commandeered for the occasion, the two boys rowed the girls back to the dock at the foot of the slope that led to Mollie's house.

"Come in, girls," she invited. "We can get dry, and Will can go for some decent things for you three."

"I'll go, too!" exclaimed Percy, eagerly. And for once the girls were glad of his services.

Up the walk went the four bedraggled ones. The twins saw them coming, and, grave-eyed and solemn, came down to meet them.

"Oo's wet," remarked Dodo.

"Dreffful wet," echoed Paul.

"Yes, you naughty children!" scolded Mollie. "Why did you take the plug--the wooden peg--out of sister's boat? Why did you do it?"

"Dodo do it," remarked Paul, with the ancient privilege of the accusing man. "Dodo want to make a doll."

"Oo helped me," came from the little girl. "Oo helped!"

"But us put it back," asserted Paul.

"Yes, but it came out, and sister and her friends were nearly drowned. You were naughty children--very naughty!"

"Oo dot any tandy?" demanded Dodo, fixing her big eyes on Grace.

"Candy! Good land sakes, no! Candy? The idea!"

"We 'ikes tandy," added Paul.

Then out came Mrs. Billette, startled at the sight of the dripping figures.

"Oh, did you fall in?" she asked, with a tragic gesture.

"No, we fell out," said her daughter, laughing. "It's all right, momsey, but we must get dry. Girls, give Will and Percy your orders."

"Perhaps we had better telephone," suggested Betty.

"Oh, yes!" chorused the others.

Soon the desired garments had been specified, and the boys promised to bring them in suitcases as soon as might be. Then the drenched ones made themselves comfortable in Mollie's home, and, while waiting, talked over the accident.

That it had not resulted more seriously was due to a combination of circumstances.

"For once Percy was really useful," commented Amy, kindly.

"Yes, but we'll never hear the last of it," declared Grace. "He'll think we are his eternal debtors from now on. Oh, here comes Will! I'm so glad."

Soon clothed, and if not exactly in their right minds, at least on the verge of getting there, the four came out to thank the boys, and there was more talk of the occurrence.

"I hope nothing like this happens when we set off on our tour," said Amy.

"It won't be so comfortable then to be drenched."

"Don't speak of it, my dear," begged Betty. The little happening--not so little, either, when one considers the possibility--had one good effect. It had raised Amy out of the slough of despond into which she had unwittingly strayed, or been thrust.

I shall pass rapidly over the next few days, for nothing of moment happened. I say nothing of moment, and yet there was, for the story of the mystery concerning Amy's parentage became generally known, as might have been expected.

There were curious glances cast at Amy, and more than one indiscreet girl tried to draw her out about the matter. This made it hard for Amy, and she was so upset about it that Mrs. Stonington kept her home from school for two days.

Then, chiefly by reason of the sensible attitude of Betty, Grace and Mollie, there came a more rational feeling, and it was agreed that the affair was not so uncommon after all.

The chums of Amy said nothing about the letter Alice had written. That she had was very evident from her actions, for she was at first defiant, and then contrite, and several times it was seen that she had been crying. But she said nothing, perhaps being too proud to admit her fault.

"We'll just treat her as if nothing had happened," said Betty, and this advice was followed. Alice was not generally liked, but the three chums were so pleasant to her, in contrast with the conduct of the other girls, that it must have been as coals of fire on her head.

Mollie's boat was easily recovered, and the handkerchiefs that had been stuffed in the hole were of some service afterward, though rather stained by river water. The missing plug was found fast under a seat brace, which accounted for it not floating.

As for the five-hundred-dollar bill, nothing was heard of the owner, and it, with the attached paper, remained in Mr. Nelson's safe. The advertisement about it was published again, and though there were several inquiries from persons who had lost money, they could lay no claim to this particular bankbill.

"We'll just have to wait to solve that mystery," said Grace. "Maybe until after we come back from our tour."

Arrangements to start on the journey had rapidly been completed. Betty had made out the schedule.

"We'll leave Deepdale early in the morning," she said, "and go on to Rockford. There we're due to stop with my aunt. We can take lunch wherever we find it most convenient, but we'll make Rockford at dusk, I hope."

"I certainly trust so," said Mollie. "A night on a country road--never, my dear!"

"The next night we'll stop in Middleville," went on Betty, "at Amy's cousin's house. From there to Broxton, where Grace's married sister will put us up, and then, in turn to Simpson's Corners--that's my uncle, you know--to Flatbush, where Grace's mother's niece has kindly consented to receive us; on to Hightown, that's Mollie's aunt's place; to Cameron--that's where we'll go to the camp that Mr. Ford's half-brother runs."

She paused to make a note and to glance over the schedule to make sure of some points.

"Then we'll go to Judgville, where my cousin lives, and that will be our last stopping place. Then for home," she finished.

"It sounds good," said Mollie.

"It will be lovely," declared Betty. "Are you sure your--your aunt and uncle won't have any further objections to you going, Amy?"

"Oh, sure! It was only because they thought that I might be upset on hearing of the mystery that they didn't want me to go. But I'm over that now."

"Bravely over it," murmured Betty, as she put her arms about her chum's shoulders.

The examinations were on, and boys and girls were working hard, for, because of the need of some repairs to the school, it had been decided to cut the summer term short.

Then came the closing days, with the flowers, the simple exercises, and the farewell to the graduating class, of which our girls were not members.

"Two days more and we'll be off on our wonderful tour!" exclaimed Mollie, as she and the others came out of school on the final day. "Oh, I can hardly wait!"

CHAPTER IX

OFF ON THE TOUR

"How do we look?"

"Don't you think these skirts are too short?"

"Isn't it fine to have--pockets?"

"Oh, Grace Ford! You'll never be able to walk in those shoes! Girls, just look at those French heels!" It was Amy who spoke.

"They're not French!" declared Grace, driven to self-defense. "They're a modified Cuban."

"Not enough modification, then; that's what I say!" exclaimed Mollie, the three expressions which opened this chapter having come from Betty, Grace and Amy, respectively. "They're of the French--Frenchy, Grace, my dear!"

"I don't care! I tried to get fitted in the kind of shoes you girls have," and Grace looked at the stout and substantial walking boots of her companions, "but they didn't have my size. The man is going to send for them, and he said he'd forward them to Middleville. They'll be there when we arrive."

"All right, as long as you're going to get them," spoke Betty. "You never could belong to our Camping and Tramping Club in those shoes, Grace."

"Well, they're the largest I have, and I don't think the heels are so very high; do you?" and she appealed to the others.

"Here are Will and Frank," spoke Amy. "We'll let them decide."

"Oh, Will is sure to say something mean," declared his sister. "Don't you dare mention heels to him!"

"Ready for the hike?" demanded Will, as he came up with his chum.

"We start in half an hour," replied Betty, in the front yard of whose house the others were gathered. "Gracious, I know I haven't half the things I need. What did I do with that alcohol stove?"

"I saw you put it in the case," said Amy.

"Oh, yes, so I did. I declare I don't know what I'm doing! Now, girls, is there anything else to be thought of?"

"If there is, I'm not capable of it," declared Mollie. "I am a wreck," and she leaned against patient Amy for support.

"We'll go part way with you," offered Will.

"You shall not!" exclaimed his sister. "You'll make all manner of fun of us, and--"

"No, we won't--I promise!" exclaimed Frank, earnestly.

"Oh, let them come," pleaded Betty.

"Then go get Percy," urged Grace.

"Don't you dare!" cried Betty.

"Well, here comes Allen Washburn, anyhow," went on the tall girl. "At least we'll have enough escorts." Betty blushed and hurried into the house on some pretense or other.

The girls were to travel "light," taking with them only a few articles of clothing. Their suitcases they had arranged to

send on ahead, so that they would be at each stopping place in the evening when the little party arrived. Then on leaving in the morning the satchels would again be dispatched in advance. Near the end of the route trunks would await them.

The girls expected to get their dinners wherever it was most convenient, and Betty had drawn up a sort of schedule that, should they be able to keep up to it, would mean comfort at noon. As I have explained, the breakfasts and suppers would be eaten at the homes of friends or relatives.

The girls had a little alcohol stove, a teapot and saucepan, and they expected, under favorable circumstances, to stop by the roadside and brew a cup of tea, each girl carrying an aluminum cup and saucer. Evaporated cream and sugar, to be replenished from time to time, formed part of their stores. Sandwiches, to be procured as needed, would form a staple food.

The day was a "perfect" one for June. Clad in their new suits of olive drab, purposely designed for walking, with sensible blouses, containing pockets, with skirts sufficiently short, stout boots and natty little caps, the outdoor girls looked their name. Already there was the hint of tan on their faces, for they had been much in the open of late.

They had assembled at Betty's house for the start, and were about ready to leave, though there seemed to be much confusion at the last minute.

Their first stopping place, at least for the night, would be the town of Rockford, about sixteen miles away, where Betty's aunt lived. They expected to remain two nights there, using the second day to walk to a certain old historic mill that was said to be worthy of a visit.

The good-byes were said, over and over again, it seemed, and a number of friends called to wish the girls good luck. Betty, who had been voted into the place of leader, looked over her small command. What it lacked in numbers it made up in attractiveness, for certainly no prettier picture could have been viewed than the one the girls presented that June morning, beneath the trees in the big yard.

"Well, are we ready?" finally asked Betty.

"As ready as we ever shall be," replied Grace.

"Then--what shall I say--forward--march?"

"Just say--hike!" cried the irrepressible Will.

"Don't mind him!" cautioned his sister. "Oh, I've left my handkerchief in your house, Betty!" and she hastened to secure it.

But, finally, after a few more forgotten articles had been collected, the girls were ready to start. Mr. Nelson came out to wave a farewell, and his wife appeared, to add more to her already numerous cautions.

"What shall I do with that five hundred dollar bill?" asked Betty's father. "If the owner comes, shall I give it up?"

"Don't you dare!" she cried. "At least, not until we girls have a chance to see him. We want to find out about the romance back of it. Write to us if it's claimed."

"All right--I will," he said, with a laugh.

"But it doesn't seem as though, after this lapse of time, that it would be called for. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye! Good-luck!"

This was echoed and re-echoed. Then the four members of the Camping and Tramping Club started down the pleasant country road, whereon the June sun shone in golden patches through the leafy branches of the trees.

"A good omen," breathed Amy, who walked beside Betty.

Will, Frank and Allen brought up the rear, carrying the small valises or suitcases the girls had packed. The little cavalcade passed Mollie's house, Mrs. Billette appearing at the window to wave another farewell. The twins were not in sight.

"For which I am thankful--they'd cry to come," said their sister, "and they are dreadful teases."

As the girls and their escorts swung around a turn in the highway a little later, about a mile from Mollie's house, Grace looked back to cry out in almost tragic accents:

"Look! The twins! They're following us," and the others turned around to see Dodo and Paul, hand in hand, trudging bravely and determinedly after them.

CHAPTER X

ON THE WRONG ROAD

Molly, for a moment, looked as if she wanted to cry from sheer vexation, for the getting ready to start had been trying on all of them. Then the humor of the situation appealed to her, and she exclaimed, as the solemn-eyed twins drew nearer:

"Dodo--Paul--what does this mean? Go back home at once! Mamma will be dreadfully worried about you. Go back."

"We tum too," lisped Dodo.

"We go for walk wit oo, Mollie," Paul added.

"The little dears!" murmured Amy.

"You wouldn't say so if you had to go all the way back with them," exclaimed the sister. "Dodo--Paul, you must go home at once."

"Dot any tandy?" asked Dodo, seeing, doubtless, a chance to make capital out of the escapade.

"Candy! The idea!"

"We go back if oo dot tandy," spoke Paul, cunningly, seeing the drift of his small sister's scheme. "We 'ikes tandy."

"I'll give them some if they promise to go back," spoke Grace, making a motion toward her little case that Frank carried.

"No, they must not be bribed," said Mollie, firmly. "I shall insist on their going back. And oh! what faces they have! They must have been eating candy already this morning."

"Our tandy all gone," spoke Dodo. "Oo dive us tandy we go back; won't us, Paul?" and confidingly she looked up into her brother's face.

"We go for tandy," he affirmed, and there was an air of determination about him that boded no good for the girls.

"You must go back!" declared Mollie.

"We go for walk," said Dodo. "Tum on, Paul. We dot fings to eat same as dem," and proudly she displayed a very dirty bag, the opening of which disclosed a rather jumbled collection of bread and butter, and cookie crumbs.

"An' I dot a gun to shoot bad bears," went on Paul, shouldering a wooden article, that, by a wide stretch of the imagination could be seen to somewhat resemble a musket. "Gun go bang-bang!" explained the little chap, "bad bears run 'way off. Tum on, Dodo, we go wif'em," and he nodded at the "hikers," as Will unfeelingly characterized his sister and her chums.

"Go back! Go back!" cried Mollie, now again on the verge of tears. "Oh, you bad children! What shall I do? Mamma will be dreadfully worried, and if we take them back we'll lose a lot of time. What shall we do, girls?"

"We go back for tandy--lots of tandy," spoke the inexorable Dodo. "We 'ikes tandy; don't us, Paul?"

"Yes," said Paul, simply.

"The easiest way out of it is to give them some candy," said Grace, in a low voice, but, low as it was, the twins heard. Their eyes brightened at once, and they came eagerly forward.

"Oh, dear, I suppose it is the only thing to do," affirmed Mollie. "Will you go straight back if you get some candy?" she asked. "Straight home to mamma?"

"Ess--we bofe go," promised Dodo, who usually led her small brother. "We 'ikes tandy," she reiterated.

"Me tan shoot bears to-morrow," said Paul, philosophically. "Where is tandy?" With him evidently the prospect of present enjoyment was preferable to the future possibility of becoming a great hunter.

"Here you are!" cried Grace, as she took out some chocolates. "Now be good children. Do you think it safe for them to go back alone, Mollie?"

"That's so, I never considered that. I wonder if we'll have to go with them? Oh, isn't this annoying, and we're behind time now! We'll never get to Rockford to-night. What shall I do?"

"We take 'em back if oo dive us some tandy!" mocked Will, who, with his chums, had been an interested observer of the little scene.

"Smarty!" exclaimed his sister. "But I'll take you at your word just the same. Here, Frank--Allen--you see that he performs his part of the contract," and she held the candy box out to the other two, who laughingly accepted the bribe.

Then with the hands of the trusting, and now contented, twins in theirs, Will and Frank bade the girls good-speed and led away the two small ones on their homeward way, Allen following them after a farewell to Betty.

"At last we are off!" murmured Mollie. "I'm so sorry it happened, girls!"

"Why, the idea!" cried Betty. "It was just a little pleasant episode, and we'll remember it all day, and laugh."

"But it may make us late," suggested Mollie, anxiously.

"Not much," went on the Little Captain. "It wasn't your fault, anyhow. We can just walk a little faster to make up for it--that is, if, Grace thinks she can stand it."

"Oh, you won't find me complaining," declared the girl whose footwear had been the subject of comment. "I'm not as comfortable as you, perhaps," she admitted, "but I will be when I get my other shoes. And now, let's give ourselves up to the enjoyments of the way--and day. Oh, isn't it just lovely!"

Indeed, a more auspicious start--barring the little delay caused by the twins--could not have been provided. The day was one of those balmy ones in June, when it is neither too hot nor too blowy, when the breeze seems fairly laden with the sweet scent of flowers, and the lazy hum of bees mingles with the call of birds.

The way led out along a pleasant country road, which, for some distance, wound in and out among great maples that formed a leafy shade which might be most acceptable later in the day, since there was the promise of considerable heat at noon.

As yet it was early, a prompt enough start having been made to allow of an easy pace along the road.

"For," Betty had said in reviewing the procedure to be followed, "we don't want to tire ourselves out on the first stage of our trip. We ought to begin gradually. That is the way all athletes train."

"Oh, then we are going to be athletes?" asked Amy.

"Walking athletes, at least," responded the leader. "Now, girls, if any of you feel like resting at any time, don't hesitate to say so. We want this to be an enjoyment, not a task, even if we are a regular club."

So perfect was the day, and in such good spirits were the girls, that even the simplest sights and happenings along the highway brought forth pleased comments. The sight of a cow placidly chewing her cud in a meadow, the patient creature standing knee-deep amid the buttercups, was a picture they all admired, Mollie carried a little camera, and insisted on snapping the bovine, though the other girls urged her to save some films with which to take their own pictures.

"But that cow will make such a lovely enlargement," said Mollie. "It's like an artist's painting."

Bravely they marched along, with a confident swing and firm tread--at least, all but Grace trod firmly, and she rather favored herself on account of her high heels. But her chums were good enough not to laugh.

They passed farm houses, in the kitchen doors of which appeared the women and girls of the household, standing with

rolled-up sleeves, arms akimbo, looking with no small wonder at the four travelers.

There were comments, too, not always inaudible.

"I wonder what they're selling?" one woman asked her daughter, as they paused in their work of washing a seemingly innumerable number of milk pans.

"They take us for peddlers," said Amy.

A little later a small boy, who had been playing horse in front of his house, scuttled back toward the kitchen, crying out:

"Ma--ma! Come an' see the suffragists!"

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Betty. "What will we be taken for next?"

But it was fun, with all that, and such a novelty to the girls that they wondered why they had not before thought of this means of spending part of their vacation.

The sun crept higher in the sky, and the warmth of the golden beams increased. The girls were thankful, now, for any shade they might encounter, and they were fortunate in that their way still lay in pleasant places. They came to a little brook that ran under the road, and not far from it a roadside spring bubbled up. Their collapsible drinking cups came in useful, and they remained for a little while in the shade near the cool spot.

"Where shall we eat our lunch?" asked Grace, as the ever-mounting sun approached the zenith.

"Are you hungry already?" asked Amy.

"I am beginning to feel the pangs," admitted the tall, graceful girl.

"Then you can't have eaten much candy," commented Mollie.

"Only three pieces."

"Hurrah! Grace is reforming!" cheered Betty. "That's fine!"

"I don't see why you're always making fun of me," Grace said, as she pouted. "I'm sure you are all just as fond of chocolate as I am."

"Never mind," consoled Mollie. "We will eat soon, for I confess to having an appetite on my own account."

Deciding to eat, at least on this first day of the tramp, a lunch of their own providing, rather than go to some restaurant, country hotel, or stop at a chance farm house, the girls had brought with them packages of food, and the alcohol stove for a cup of tea, or some chocolate.

"This looks to be a perfect place for our picnic," said Betty, as, on passing a farm, they saw the plow-horses unhitched and led under a tree to partake of their hay and oats. "It must be noon by that sign," went on the Little Captain, confirming her guess by a glance at her watch. "It is," she said. "So we'll eat here," and she indicated a little grassy knoll under a great oak tree at the side of the road.

"There's the most beautiful spring of water here, too," went on Grace.

"Shall we make tea?"

"Do!" exclaimed Mollie. "I'm just dying for a good hot cup. But not too strong."

Soon they had merrily gathered about the greensward table, on which paper napkins formed the cloth. The sandwiches were set out, with a bottle of olives to add to the attractiveness, and then the little kettle was put on the alcohol stove, which had been set up in the shelter of the great oak's massive trunk.

"It's boiling!" finally announced Betty. "Hand me the tea ball, Amy, my dear."

Pouring the steaming water over the silver tea ball, Betty circulated it around in the cup, until one fragrant brew was made. She passed this over to Mollie, and proceeded to make another.

"It's delicious!" cried the French girl, as she tasted it, cream and sugar having been added. "Oh, isn't this just lovely!"

"Perfect," murmured Grace. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything!"

In pure enjoyment they reclined on the grass after the meal, and then, as Betty, after a look at her watch, warned them that the better half of their journey still lay before them, they started off again.

They had proceeded a mile or so, and the way was not so pleasant now, for the road was sandy, when they came to a fork of the highway. A time-worn sign-post bore letters that could scarcely be made out, and, though they had a road map, the girls were not quite sure which way to take to get to Rockford. They were debating the matter, alternately consulting the map and the sign-post, when a farmer drove past.

"Which road to Rockford, please?" hailed Betty.

"Th' left!" he exclaimed, sententiously. "G'lang there!" This last to the horses, not to the girls.

"The road map seems to say the road to the right," murmured Betty, as the farmer drove that way himself.

"Well, he ought to know," insisted Grace. "We'll take the left," and they did.

If they had hoped to have all go smoothly on this, their first day of tramping, the girls were destined to disappointment. In blissful ignorance they trudged on, talking so interestedly that they never thought to glance at the sign-boards, of which they passed several.

It was Amy who discovered the error they had made--or rather, the error the farmer had caused them to make. Again coming to a dividing of the ways, they saw a new sign-board, put up by a local automobile organization.

"Eight miles to Hamptown, and ten to Denby," read Amy. "Girls, where is Rockford?"

Anxiously they stared at the sign.

"It doesn't seem to say anything about Rockford," murmured Grace.

"Maybe someone has moved our town," suggested Mollie, humorously.

Betty looked puzzled, annoyed and a little anxious. A snub-nosed, freckle-faced boy came along whistling, and beating the dust of the road with a long switch.

"Which is the road to Rockford, little boy?" asked Betty.

"Huh?"

"I say, which is the road to Rockford?"

"Give him a candy if you have any left, Grace," suggested Mollie, in a low tone.

"Are you folks peddlin' candy?" asked the boy, and his eyes shone.

"No, but we have some," answered Betty. "We want to get to Rockford."

"You're five miles off the road," exclaimed the boy, with a grin, as though he took personal delight in their dilemma.

"You come the wrong way. Huh!"

"Oh, dear!" murmured Mollie. "Don't you give him any candy, Grace."

"It isn't his fault that we went wrong," spoke Betty.

CHAPTER XI

THE BARKING DOG

Disappointment, and not a little worryment, held the four girls silent for a moment. Then Betty, feeling that it was her place to assume the leadership, said:

"Are you sure, little boy? A man told us, at the last dividing of the roads, to take the left, as that led to Rockford."

"Well, he didn't know what he was talking about," asserted the little chap, with the supreme confidence of youth. "To get to Rockford you've got to go back."

"All that distance?" cried Grace. "We'll never make it in time."

"Isn't there a shorter way--some cross-road we can take?" inquired Betty.

"Who's got the candy?" inquired the little chap, evidently thinking that he had already earned some reward.

"Here!" said Grace, hopelessly, holding out an almost emptied box. "But please--*please* don't tell us we're lost."

"Oh, you ain't exactly lost!" exclaimed the urchin, with a grin. "I live just down the road a piece, and it's only a mile to Bakersville. That's a good town. They got a movin' picture show there. I went onct!"

"Did you indeed?" said Betty. "But we can't go there. Isn't there some way of getting to Rockford without going all the way back to the fork? Why, it's miles and miles!"

"I wish I had that man here who directed us wrongly!" exclaimed Mollie, with a flash of her dark eyes. "I--I'd make him get a carriage and drive us to your aunt's house, Betty."

"That would not be revenge enough," declared Grace. "He ought to be made to buy us each a box of the best chocolates."

"Nothing like making the punishment fit the crime," murmured Betty.

"Say, are you play-actors?" demanded the boy, who had stood in opened-mouth wonder during this dialogue. The girls broke into peals of merry laughter that, in a measure, served to relieve the tension on their nerves.

"Now do please tell us how to get to Rockford?" begged Mollie when they had quieted down. "We must be there to-night."

"Well, you kin git there by goin' on a mile further and taking the main road that goes through Sayreville," said the boy, his mouth full of candy.

"Would that be nearer than going back to where we made the mistake?" Betty asked.

"Yep, a lot nearer. Come on; I'll show you as far as I'm goin'," and the boy started off as though the task--or shall I say, pleasure?--of leading four pretty girls was an every-day occurrence.

"We never can get there before dark," declared Mollie.

"Oh, yes, we will," said Betty, hopefully. "We can walk faster than this."

"If you do I'll simply give up," wailed Grace. "These shoes!" and she leaned against a tree.

And to the eternal credit of the other girls be it said that they did not remark: "I told you so!"

Silently and unconcernedly, the snub-nosed boy led them on. Finally he came to his own home, and rather ungallantly,

did not offer to go farther.

"You jest keep on for about half a mile," he said, "an' you'll come to a cross-road."

"I hope it isn't too cross," murmured Grace, with a grave face.

"Huh?"

The boy looked at her wonderingly.

"I mean not cross enough to bite," she went on.

"You turn to the left," the boy continued, "and keep straight on till you get to Watson's Corners. Then you turn to the right, keep on past an old stone church, turn to the right and that's a straight road to Rockford." He looked curiously at Grace, as though in doubt as to her sanity. "A cross road!" he murmured.

"Gracious, we'll never remember all that!" exclaimed Amy.

"I have it down!" said practical Betty, as she wrote rapidly in her note book. "I'm sure we can find it. Come on, girls!"

"Have another candy," invited Grace, hospitably extending the now nearly depleted box.

"Sure--thanks!" exclaimed the boy, but he backed quickly away from her. Her joke had fallen on a suspicious mind, evidently.

The girls trudged on, rather silent now, for somehow the edge of their enjoyment seemed to have been taken off. But still they were not discouraged. They were true outdoor girls, and they knew, even if worse came to worst, and darkness found them far from their destination, and Betty's aunt's house, that no real harm could come to them.

Successfully they found the various points of identification mentioned by the freckled boy, and at last they located a sign-post that read:

FIVE MILES TO ROCKFORD

"Five miles!" exclaimed Grace, with a tragic air. "We can never do it!"

"We must!" declared Betty, firmly. "Of course we can do it. Why, even with going out of our way as we did, we won't have covered more than eighteen miles to-day. And we set twenty as an average."

"But this is the first day," said Mollie.

"We can--we *must* get to Rockford to-night," insisted Betty.

Rather hopelessly they tramped on. The sun seemed to sink with surprising rapidity after getting to a certain point in the western sky.

"It's dropping faster and faster all the while!" cried Amy, as they watched it from a crest of the road.

"Never mind--June evenings are the longest of the year," consoled Betty.

They hurried on. The sun sank to its nightly rest amid a bed of golden, green, purple, pink and olive clouds, and there followed a glorious maze of colors that reached high up toward zenith.

"Girls, we simply must stop and admire this--if it's only for a minute!" exclaimed Grace. "Isn't that wonderful!" and she pointed a slender hand, beautified by exquisitely kept nails, toward the gorgeous sky picture.

"Every minute counts!" remarked practical Betty. Yet she knew better than to worry her friends.

The glow faded, and again the girls advanced. From the fields came the lowing of the cows, as they waited impatiently for the bars of the pastures to be let down. A herd of sheep was driven along the road, raising a cloud of dust. From farm houses came the barking of dogs and the not unmusical notes of conch or tin horns, summoning the "men folks" to the evening meal.

"Girls, we're never going to make it in time!" exclaimed Grace as the sky darkened. "We must see if we can't stop at one of these houses over night," and she pointed to a little hamlet they were approaching.

"Grace!" exclaimed Betty. "Aunt Sallie would be worried to death if we didn't come, after she expected us."

"Then we must send her word. I can't go another step."

They all paused irresolutely. They were in front of a big white house--a typical country home. Betty glanced toward it.

"It's too bad," she said. "I know just how you feel, and yet can we go up to one of these places, perfect strangers, and ask them to keep us over night? It doesn't seem reasonable."

"Anything is reasonable when you have to," declared Mollie. "I'll ask," she volunteered, starting toward the house.

"The worst they can say is 'no,' and maybe we can hire a team to drive to Rockford, if they can't keep us. I can drive!"

"Well, we'll ask, anyhow," agreed Betty, rather hopelessly. She hardly knew what to do next.

As they advanced toward the House the savage barking of a dog was heard, and as they reached the front gate the beast came rushing down the walk, while behind him lumbered a farmer, shouting:

"Here! Come back! Down, Nero! Don't mind him, ladies!" he added. "He won't hurt you!"

But the aspect, and the savage growls and barks, of the creature seemed to indicate differently, and the girls shrank back. Betty, reaching in her bag, drew out the nearly emptied olive bottle for a weapon.

"Don't hit him! Don't hit him!" cried the farmer. "That will only make him worse! Come back here, Nero!"

"Run, girls! Run!" begged Amy. "He'll tear us to pieces!" and she turned and fled.

CHAPTER XII

AT AUNT SALLIE'S

Probably that was the most unwise course poor Amy could have taken. Dogs, even the most savage, seldom come to a direct attack unless their prospective victim shows fear. Then, like a horse that takes advantage of a timid driver, the creature advances boldly to the attack.

It was so in this case. The other girls, not heeding Amy's frantic appeal, stood still, but she ran back toward the road, her short skirt giving her a chance to exercise her speed. The dog saw, and singling out her as the most favorable for his purposes, he leaped the fence in a great bound and rushed after the startled girl.

"Stop him! Stop him!"

"Oh, Amy!"

"If she falls!"

"I know I'm going to faint!"

"Don't you dare do it, Grace Ford!"

"Why doesn't that man keep his dog chained?"

These were only a few of the expressions that came from the lips of the girls as, horror-stricken, they watched the dog rush after poor Amy.

Never had she run so fast--not even during one of the basket ball games in which she had played, nor when they had races at the Sunday school picnic.

And, had it not been for a certain hired man, who, taking in the situation as he came on the run from the barn, acted promptly, Amy might have been severely injured. As it was the farmer's man, crossing the yard diagonally, was able to intercept the dog.

"Run to the left, Miss! Run to the left!" he cried. Then, leaping the low fence at a bound, he threw the pitchfork he carried at the dog with such skill that the handle crossed between the brute's legs and tripped it. Turning over and over in a series of somersaults, the dog's progress was sufficiently halted to enable the hired man to get to it. He took a firm grip in the collar of the dog and held on. Poor Amy stumbled a few steps farther and then Betty, recovering her scattered wits, cried out:

"All right, Amy! All right! You're in no danger!"

And Amy sank to the ground while her chums rushed toward her.

"Hold him, Zeke! Hold him!" cried the farmer, as he came lumbering up.

"Hold on to him!"

"That's what I'm doin'!" responded the hired man.

"Is th' gal hurted? Land sakes, I never knew Nero to act so!" went on the farmer apologetically. "He must have been teased by some of th' boys. Be you hurted, Miss?"

Pale and trembling, Amy arose. But it was very evident that she had suffered no serious harm, for the dog had not reached her, and she had simply collapsed on the grass, rather than fallen.

The dog, choking and growling, was firmly held by the hired man, who seemed to have no fear of him.

"I'm awfully sorry," said the farmer, contritely. "I never knew him to act like that."

"Some one has tied a lot of burrs on his tail," called out the hired man.

"That's what set him off."

"I thought so. Well, clean 'em off, and he'll behave. Poor old Nero!"

Even now the dog was quieting down, and as the hired man removed the irritating cause of the beast's anger it became even gentle, whining as though to offer excuses.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," went on the farmer. "You're strangers around here, I take it."

"Yes," said Betty, "and we lost our way. We're going to Rockford. We must be there to-night."

"Rockford?"

"Yes, my aunt lives there."

"And who might your aunt be?"

"Mrs. Palmer."

"Bill Palmer's wife?"

"Yes, that's Uncle Will I guess," and Betty laughed.

"Pshaw now! You don't say so! Why, I know Bill well."

The farmer's wife came bustling out.

"Is the young lady hurt, Jason? What got into Nero, anyhow? I never see him behave so!"

"Oh, it was them pesky boys! No, she's not hurt."

Amy was surrounded by her chums. She was pale, and still trembling, but was fast recovering her composure.

"Won't you come in the house," invited the woman. "We're jest goin' t' set down t' supper, and I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea."

"I should love it!" murmured Grace.

"What be you--suffragists?" went on the woman, with a smile.

"That's the second time we've been taken for them to-day," murmured Betty, "Do we look so militant?"

"You look right peart!" complimented the woman. "Do come in?"

Betty, with her eyes, questioned her chums. They nodded an assent. Really they were entitled to something it seemed after the unwarranted attack of the dog.

"We ought to be going on to Rockford," said Betty, as they strolled toward the pleasant farm house. "I don't see how we can get there now--"

"You leave that to me!" said the farmer, quickly. "I owe you something on account of the way Nero behaved. Ain't you ashamed of yourself?" he charged.

The dog crouched, whined and thumped the earth with a contrite tail. He did not need the restraining hand of the hired man now.

"Make friends," ordered the farmer. The dog approached the girls.

"Oh--don't!" begged Amy.

"He wouldn't hurt a fly," bragged the farmer. "I can't account for his meanness."

"It was them burrs," affirmed the hired man.

"Mebby so. Wa'al, young ladies, come in and make yourselves t' hum! Behave, Nero!" for now the dog was getting too friendly, leaping up and trying to solicit caresses from the girls. "That's th' way with him, one minute he's up to some mischief, an' th' next he's beggin' your, pardon. I hope you're not hurt, miss," and he looked anxiously at Amy.

"No, not at all," she assured him, with a smile that was brave and winning. "I was only frightened, that's all."

"I'm glad of that. I'll have t' tie that dog up, I guess," and he threw a little clod of earth at the now cringing animal, not hitting him, however.

"Oh, don't hurt him," pleaded Betty.

"Hurt him! He wouldn't do that, miss!" exclaimed the hired man, who now had to defend himself from the over-zealous affections of the dog. "He's too fond of him. Nero isn't a bad sort generally, only some of the boys worried him."

The girls, with the farmer and his man in the lead, walked toward the house, the woman hurrying on ahead to set more places at the table.

"I'm afraid we're troubling you too much," protested Betty.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all," the farmer assured her. "And I owe you something on account of my dog's actions."

"But really, ought we to stay?" asked Grace. "It's getting dark, Betty, and your aunt--"

"Say, young ladies!" exclaimed the farmer, "I'll fix that all right. As soon as you have a bite to eat I'll hitch up and drive you over to Rockford, to Bill Palmer's."

"Oh!" began Betty, "we couldn't think--"

She stopped, for she did not know what to say. Truly, it was quite a dilemma in which they found themselves, and they must stay somewhere that night. To remain at a strange farm house was out of the question. Perhaps this was the simplest way after all.

"It won't be any trouble at all," the farmer assured her. "I've got a fast team and a three-seated carriage. I'll have you over there in no time."

"Then perhaps we'd better not stop for supper," said Mollie. "Your aunt might be worrying, Betty, and--"

"We'll telephone her!" exclaimed the farmer. "I've got a 'phone--lots of us have around here--and I can let her know all about it. Or you can talk to her yourself," he added.

So it was arranged; and soon Betty was talking to her anxious relative over the wire. Then, after a bountiful supper, which the girls very much enjoyed, the farmer hitched up his fine team, and soon they were on their way to Mrs. Palmer's. The drive was not a long one.

"My!" exclaimed Mollie, as they bowled along over the smooth road, under a young moon that silvered the earth, "this is better than walking!"

"I should say so," agreed Grace, whose shoes hurt her more than she cared to admit.

"You are both traitors to the Club!" exclaimed Betty. "The idea of preferring riding to walking!"

"Oh, it's only once in a while," added Mollie. "Really, pet, we've had a perfectly grand time."

"Even with the dog," added Amy, who was now herself again. "I was silly to run."

"I don't blame you," said the farmer, "and yet if you hadn't, maybe Nero wouldn't have chased you. It's a good thing not to run from a dog. If you stand, it let's him see you're not afraid."

"Put that down in your books, girls," directed Betty. "Never run from a dog. That advice may come in useful on our

trip."

Half an hour later they were at Mrs. Palmer's house, and received a hearty welcome, the telephone message having done much to relieve the lady's anxiety.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MISSING LUNCH

"Oh, but these shoes are so comfortable!"

"I'm glad of that, Grace."

"Though I didn't really delay you much; did I?"

"No, I wasn't complaining," and Betty put a caressing hand on the arm of her companion.

"We'll be able to make up for lost time now," said Mollie, as she shifted her little valise from one hand to the other. "Your aunt was certainly generous in the matter of lunch, Betty," she went on.

"Yes, she said this country air would give us good appetites."

"I'm sure I don't need any," spoke Amy. "I've been hungry ever since we started."

The four girls were again on the broad highway that was splashed and spotted with the streaks of the early sun as it slanted through the elms and maples along the road. They had spent two nights at the home of Betty's aunt, that lady having insisted on a little longer visit than was at first planned. She made the girls royally welcome, as did her husband. Grace's shoes had been sent to her at Rockford, having been telephoned for.

"But if we stay another day and night here," said Betty, "not that we're not glad to, Aunt Sallie--why we can't keep up to our schedule in walking, and we must cover so many miles each day."

"You see it's in the constitution of our club," added Grace. "We can't violate that."

"Oh, come now!" insisted Mr. Palmer. "You can stay longer just as well as not. As for walking, why we've got some of the finest walks going, right around Rockford here. You'd better stay. We don't very often see you, Betty, and your aunt isn't half talked out yet," and he solemnly winked over the head of his wife.

"The idea!" she exclaimed. "As if I'd talked half as much as you had."

And so the girls had remained. They had greatly enjoyed the visit. In anticipation of their coming Mrs. Palmer had prepared "enough for a regiment of hungry boys," to quote her husband, and had invited a number of the neighboring young people to meet the members of the Camping and Tramping Club.

The dainty rooms of the country house, with their quaint, old-fashioned, striped wall paper, the big four-poster beds, a relic of a by-gone generation, the mahogany dressers with their shining mirrors, and the delightful home-like atmosphere--all had combined to make the stay of the girls most pleasant.

The day after their arrival by carriage they had gone on a long walk, visiting a picturesque little glen not far from the village, being accompanied by a number of girls whose acquaintance Betty and her chums had made. Some of them Betty had met before.

The idea of a walking club was enthusiastically received by the country girls, and they at once resolved to form one like the organization started by Betty Nelson. In fact they named it after her, in spite of her protests.

In the afternoon the girls went for a drive in Mr. Palmer's big carriage, visiting places of local interest. And in the evening there was an old-fashioned "surprise party"--a real surprise too, by the way, for Betty and her chums had never dreamed of it. It was a most delightful time.

Mr. and Mrs. Palmer had tried to persuade their niece and her chums to stay still longer, but they were firm in their determination to cover the two hundred miles--more or less--in the specified time.

So they had started off, and the snatches of conversation with which I begun this chapter might have been heard as the four walked along the pleasant country road.

"We've had very good luck so far," said Mollie, as she skipped a few steps in advance on the greensward. "Not a bit of rain."

"Don't boast!" cautioned Betty. "It will be perfectly terrible if it rains. We simply can't walk if it does."

"I don't see why not," spoke Mollie, trying to catch Amy in a waltz hug and whirl her about.

"My, isn't she getting giddy!" mocked Grace.

"I feel so good!" cried Mollie, whose volatile nature seemed fairly bubbling over on this beautiful day. And indeed it was a day to call forth all the latent energies of the most phlegmatic person. The very air tingled with life that the sunshine coaxed into being, and the gentle wind further fanned it to rapidity of action. "Oh, I do feel so happy!" cried Mollie.

"I guess we all do," spoke Grace, but even as she said this she could not refrain from covertly glancing at Amy, over whose face there seemed a shade of--well, just what it was Grace could not decide. It might have been disappointment, or perhaps an unsatisfied longing. Clearly the mystery over her past had made an impression on the character of this sweet, quiet girl. But for all that she did not inflict her mood on her chums. She must have become conscious of Grace's quick scrutiny, for with a laugh she ran to her, and soon the two were bobbing about on the uneven turf in what they were pleased to term a "dance."

"Your aunt was certainly good to us," murmured Mollie, a little later. "I'm just dying to see what she has put up for our lunch." For Mrs. Palmer had insisted, as has been said, on packing one of the little valises the girls carried with a noon-day meal to be eaten on the road. Mollie was entrusted with this, her belongings having been divided among her chums.

"Oh," suddenly cried Grace, a moment later, "I forgot something!"

"You mean you left it at my aunt's house?" asked Betty, coming to a stop in the road.

"No, I forgot to get some of those lovely chocolates that new drug store sells. They were delicious. For a country town I never ate better."

"Grace, you are hopeless!" sighed Betty. "Come along, girls, do, or she'll insist on going back for them. And we must get to Middleville on time. It won't do to fall back in our schedule any more."

"I sent a postal to my cousin from your aunt's house," said Amy, at whose relatives the girls were to spend the night. "I told her we surely would be there."

"And so we will," said Betty. "Gracious, I forgot to mail this card to Nettie French," and she produced a souvenir card from her pocket.

"Never mind, you can put it in the next post-office we come to," suggested Grace. "Oh, dear! I'm so provoked about those chocolates. I'm positively famished, and I don't suppose it is anywhere near lunch time?" and she looked at her watch. "No, only ten o'clock," and she sighed.

Laughing at her, the girls stepped on. For a time the road ran along a pleasant little river, on which a number of canoes and boats could be seen.

"Oh, for a good row!" exclaimed Mollie.

"We'll have plenty of chances this summer," said Betty. "It has hardly begun."

"I wonder where we will spend our vacation?" spoke Mollie.

"We'll talk about that later," said Betty. "I hope we can be together, and somewhere near the water."

"If we only could get a motor boat!" sighed Grace. "Oh, Bet, if no one claims that five hundred dollars maybe we can get a little launch with it, and camp at Rainbow Lake."

"I'm only afraid some one will claim it," spoke Betty. "I dropped papa a card, telling him to send me a line in case a claimant did appear."

"Oh, let's sit down and rest," proposed Mollie, a little later. "There's a perfect dream of a view from here and it's so cool and shady."

The others were agreeable, so they stopped beneath some big trees in a grassy spot near the bank of the little stream. Grace took advantage of the stop to mend a pair of stockings she was carrying with her. It was so comfortable that they remained nearly an hour and would have stayed longer only the Little Captain, with a look at her watch, decided that they must get under way again.

"Now it's noon!" exclaimed Grace, when they had covered two miles after their rest. "Mollie, open the lunch and let's see what it contains."

There was a startled cry from Mollie. A clasping of her hands, a raising of her almost tragic eyes, and she exclaimed:

"Oh, girls, forgive me! I forgot the lunch! I left it back there where we rested in the shade!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE BROKEN RAIL

Dumb amazement held the girls in suspense for a moment. Then came a chorus of cries.

"Mollie, you never did that!"

"Forgot our lunch!"

"And we're so hungry!"

"Oh, Mollie, how could you?"

"You don't suppose I did it on purpose; do you?" flashed back the guilty one, as she looked at the three pairs of tragic, half-indignant and hopeless eyes fastened on her.

"Of course you didn't," returned Betty. "But, oh, Mollie, is it really gone? Did you leave it there?"

"Well, I haven't it with me, none of you have, and I don't remember picking it up after we slumped down there in the shade. Consequently I must have left it there. There's no other solution. It's like one of those queer problems in geometry, or is it algebra, where things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other," and she laughed with just the hint of hysteria.

"But what are we to do?" demanded Grace. "I am so hungry, and I know there were chicken sandwiches, and olives, in that lunch. Oh, Mollie!"

"Oh, Mollie!" mocked the negligent one. "If you say that again--that way--"

Her temper was rising but, by an effort, she conquered it and smiled.

"I am truly sorry," she said. "Girls, I'll do anything to make up for it. I'll run back and get the lunch--that is, if it is there yet."

"Don't you dare say it isn't!" cried Betty.

"Why can't we all go back?" suggested Amy. "Really it won't delay us so much--if we walk fast. And that was a nice place to eat. There was a lovely spring just across the road. I noticed it. We could make tea--"

"Little comforter!" whispered Betty, putting her arms around the other. "We will all go back. The day is so perfect that there's sure to be a lovely moon, and we can stop somewhere and telephone to your cousin if we find we are going to be delayed. She has an auto, I believe you said, and she might come and get us."

"Stop!" commanded Mollie. "We are a walking club, not a carriage or auto club. We'll walk."

"Then let's put our principles into practice and start now," proposed Grace. "We'll have a good incentive in the lunch at the end of this tramp. Come on!"

There was nothing to do but retrace their steps. True, they might have stopped at some wayside restaurant, but such places were not frequent, and such as there were did not seem very inviting. And Aunt Sallie had certainly put up a most delectable lunch.

The girls reached the spot where they had stopped for a rest, much sooner than they had deemed it possible. Perhaps they walked faster than usual. And, as they came in sight of the quiet little grassy spot, Mollie exclaimed:

"Oh, girls, I see it. Just where I so stupidly left it; near that big rock. Hurry before someone gets there ahead of us!"

They broke into a run, but a moment later Grace cried:

"Too late! That tramp has it!"

The girls stopped in dismay, as they saw a rather raggedly-dressed man slink out from the shadow of a tree and pick up the lunch valise. He stood regarding it curiously.

"Oh, dear!" cried Grace. "And I was so hungry!"

Betty strode forward. There was a look of determination on her face. She spoke:

"Girls, I'm not going to let that tramp take our lovely lunch. Come on, and I'll make him give it back!"

"Betty!" cried Amy. "You'd never dare!"

"I wouldn't? Watch me!"

The man was still standing there, looking at the valise as if in doubt whether or not to open it. Betty with a glance at her chums walked on. They followed.

"That--that's ours, if you please," said Betty. Her voice was weaker than she had thought it would be, and quite wobbly, too. Her knees, she confessed later, were in the same state. But she presented a brave front. "That--that's our lunch," she added, swallowing a lump in her throat.

The man--he certainly looked like a tramp, as far as his clothes were concerned, but his face was clean--turned toward the girls with a smile.

"Your lunch!" he exclaimed, and his voice was not unmusical, "how fortunate!"

He did not say whether it was fortunate for them--or himself.

"We--we forgot it. We left it here," explained Mollie. "That is, I left it here."

"That is--unfortunate," said the man. "It seems--it seems to be a fairly substantial lunch," and he moved the bag up and down.

"It ought to be--for four of us," breathed Amy.

"Allow me," spoke the man, and with a bow he handed the missing lunch to Betty. The girls said afterward that her hand did not tremble a bit as she accepted it. And then the Little Captain did something most unexpected.

"Perhaps you are hungry, too," she said, with one of her winning smiles, a smile that seemed to set her face in a glow of friendliness. "We are on a tramping tour--I mean a walking tour," she hastily corrected herself, feeling that perhaps the man would object to the word "tramp." She went on:

"We are on a walking tour, visiting friends and relatives. We generally take a lunch at noon."

"Yes, that seems to be the universal custom," agreed the man. "That is, for some persons," and he smiled, showing his white teeth.

"Are you--are you hungry?" asked Betty, bluntly.

"I am!" He spoke decidedly.

"Then perhaps--I'm sure we have more here than we can eat--and we'll soon--I mean comparatively soon--be at a friend's house--perhaps--"

She hesitated.

"I would be very glad," and again the man bowed.

Betty opened the little satchel--it was a miniature suitcase--and a veritable wealth of lunch was disclosed. There were sandwiches without number, pickles, olives, chunks of cake, creamy cheese--

"Are you sure you can spare it?" asked the man. "I'm sure I don't want to--"

"Of course we can spare it," put in Mollie, quickly.

"Well then I will admit that I am hungry," spoke the unknown. "I am not exactly what I seem," he added.

Betty glanced curiously at him.

"Don't be alarmed," he went on quickly. "I am not exactly sailing under false colors except in a minor way. Now, for instance, you took me for a tramp; did you not?" He paused and smiled.

"I--I think we did," faltered Mollie.

"And I don't blame you. I have, for the time being, assumed the habiliments of a knight of the road, for certain purposes of my own. I am--well, to be frank, I am trying to find something. In order to carry out my plans I have even begged my way, and, not always successfully. In fact--"

"You are hungry!" exclaimed Grace, and her chums said she made a move as though to bring out some chocolates. Grace, later, denied this.

"I am hungry," confessed the tramp--as he evidently preferred to appear.

Betty took out a generous portion of food.

"It is too much," the wayfarer protested.

"Not at all," Betty insisted. "We have a double reason for giving it to you. First, you are hungry. Second, please accept it as a reward for--"

"For not eating all of your lunch after I found it, I suppose you were going to say," put in the man, with a smile. "Very well, then I'll accept," and he bowed, not ungracefully.

He had the good taste--or was it bashfulness--to go over to a little grove of trees to eat his portion. Grace wanted to take him a cup of chocolate--which they made instead of tea--but Betty persuaded her not to. The girls ate their lunch, to be interrupted in the midst of it by the man who called a good-bye to them as he moved off down the road.

"He's going," remarked Amy. "I wonder if he had enough?"

"I think so," replied Betty. "Now, girls, we must hurry. We have been delayed, and--"

"I'm so sorry," put in Mollie. "It was my fault, and--"

"Don't think of it, my dear!" begged Grace. "Any of us might have forgotten the lunch, just as you did."

As they walked past the place which the tramp had selected for his dining room, Betty saw some papers on the ground. They appeared to be letters, and, rather idly, she picked them up. She looked into one or two of the torn envelopes.

"I wouldn't do that," said Grace. "Maybe those are private letters. He must have forgotten them. I wonder where he has gone? Perhaps we can catch him--he might need these papers. But I wouldn't read them, Betty."

"They're nothing but advertising circulars," retorted the Little Captain.

"Nothing very private about them. I guess he threw them all away."

She was about to let them fall from her hand, when a bit of paper fluttered from one envelope. Picking it up Betty was astonished to read on the torn portion the words:

"I cannot carry out that deal I arranged with you, because I have had the misfortune to lose five hundred dollars and I shall have to--"

There the paper, evidently part of a letter to someone, was torn off. There were no other words.

"Girls!" cried Betty, "look--see! This letter! That man may be the one whose money we found! He has written about it--"

as nearly as I can recall, the writing is like that in the note pinned to the five hundred dollars. Oh, we must find that tramp!"

"He wasn't a tramp!" exclaimed Grace.

"No, I don't believe he was, either," admitted Betty. "That's what he meant when he spoke of his disguise, and looking for something. He's hunting for his five hundred dollars. Oh, dear! which way did he go?"

"Toward Middleville," returned Amy.

"Then we must hurry up and catch him. We can explain that we have his money."

"But are you sure it is his?" asked Mollie.

"This looks like it," said Betty, holding out the torn letter.

"But some one else might have lost five hundred dollars," protested Grace.

"Come on, we'll find him, and ask him about it, anyhow," suggested Betty. "Middleville is on our way. Oh, to think how things may turn out! Hurry, girls!"

They hastily gathered up their belongings and walked on, talking of their latest adventure.

"He was real nice looking," said Mollie.

"And quite polite," added Amy.

"And do you think he may be traveling around like a tramp, searching for that bill?" asked Grace.

"It's possible," declared Betty: "Perhaps he couldn't help looking like a tramp, because if he has lost all his money he can't afford any other clothes. Oh, I do hope we find him!"

But it was a vain hope. They did not see the man along the road, and inquiries of several persons they met gave no trace. Nor had he reached Middleville, as far as could be learned. If he had, no one had noticed him.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Betty, when they had exhausted all possibilities, "I did hope that money mystery was going to be solved. Now it's as far off as ever. But I'll keep this torn piece of letter for evidence. Poor fellow! He may have built great hopes on that five hundred dollar bill--then to lose it!"

They went to the house of Amy's cousin in Middleville. There they spent an enjoyable evening, meeting some friends who had been invited in. Amy said nothing about the disclosure to her of the strange incident in her life. Probably, she reflected, her relative already knew it.

Morning saw them on the move again, with Broxton, where a married sister of Grace lived, as their objective point. The day was cloudy, but it did not seem that it would rain, at least before night.

And even the frown of the weather did not detract from the happiness of the chums. They laughed and talked as they walked on, making merry by the way.

Stopping in a country store to make sure of their route they were informed that by taking to the railroad track for a short distance they could save considerable time.

"Then we ought to do it," decided Betty, "for we don't want to get caught in the rain," and she glanced up at the clouds that were now more threatening.

They reached the railroad track a short distance out of the little village, and proceeded down the stretch of rails.

"There's a train in half an hour," a man informed them, "but you'll be off long before then."

"I hope so," murmured Amy.

They had nearly reached the end of the ballasted way, when Betty, who was in the lead, came to a sudden halt.

"What is it," asked Mollie, "a snake? Oh, girls!"

"No, not a snake," was the quick answer. "But look! This rail is broken! It must have cracked when the last train passed. And another one--an express--is due soon! If it runs over that broken rail it may be wrecked! Girls, we've got to stop that train!" and she faced her chums resolutely.

CHAPTER XV

"IT'S A BEAR!"

"What can we do?" It was Grace who asked the question. It was Betty, the Little Captain, who answered it.

"We must stop the train," she said. "We must wave something red at it. Red always means danger."

"Mollie's tie," exclaimed Amy. Mollie was wearing a bright vermilion scarf knotted about the collar of her blouse.

"It isn't big enough," decided Betty. "But we must do something. That man said the train would come along soon. It's an express. A slow train might not go off the track, as the break is only a small one. But the express--"

She paused suggestively--apprehensively.

"There's a man!" cried Grace.

"A track-walker!" cried Betty. "Oh, he'll know what to do," and she darted toward a man just appearing around the curve--a man with a sledge, and long-handled wrench over his shoulder.

"Hey! Hey!" Betty called. "Come here. There's a broken rail!"

The man broke into a run.

"What's that?" he called. "Got your foot caught in a rail? It's a frog--a switch that you mean. Take off your shoe!"

"No, we're not caught!" cried Betty, in shrill accent. "The rail is broken!"

The track-walker was near enough now to hear her correctly. And, fortunately, he understood, which might have been expected of him, considering his line of work.

"It's a bad break," he affirmed, as he looked at it, "Sometimes the heat of the sun will warp a rail, and pull out the very spikes by the roots, ladies. That's what happened here. Then a train--'twas the local from Dunkirk--came along and split the rail. 'Tis a wonder Jimmie Flannigan didn't see it. This is his bit of track, but his wife is sick and I said I'd come down to meet him with a bite to eat, seein' as how she can't put up his dinner. 'Tis lucky you saw it in time, ladies."

"But what about the train?" asked Betty.

"Oh, I'll stop that all right. I'll flag it, and Jimmie and me'll put in a new rail. You'll be noticin' that we have 'em here and there along the line," and he showed them where, a little distance down the track, there were a number placed in racks made of posts, so that they might not rust.

From his pocket the track-walker pulled a red flag. It seemed that he carried it there for just such emergencies. He tied it to his pick handle, and stuck the latter in the track some distance away from the broken rail.

"The engineer'll see that," he said, "and stop. Now I'll go get Jimmie and we'll put in a new rail. You young ladies--why, th' railroad company'll be very thankful to you. If you was to stop here now, and the passengers of the train were told of what you found--why, they might even make up a purse for you. They did that to Mike Malone once, when he flagged the Century Flier when it was goin' to slip over a broken bridge. I'll tell 'em how it was, and how you--"

"No--no--we can't stay!" exclaimed Betty. "If you will look after the broken rail we'll go on. We must get to Broxton."

"Oh, sure, it'll not take the likes of you long to be doin' that," complimented the man, with a trace of brogue in his voice. "You look equal to doin' twice as much."

"Well, we don't want to be caught in the rain," spoke Mollie.

"Ah, 'twill be nothin' more than a sun shower, it will make your complexions better--not that you need it though," he hastened to add. "Good luck to you, and many thanks for tellin' me about this broken rail. 'Tis poor Jimmie who'd be blamed for not seein' it, and him with a sick wife. Good-bye to you!"

The girls, satisfied that the train would be flagged in time, soon left the track, the last glimpse they had of the workman being as he hurried off to summon his partner to replace the broken rail.

That he did so was proved a little later, for when the girls were walking along the road that ran parallel to the railroad line some distance farther on, the express dashed by at a speed which seemed to indicate that the engineer was making up for lost time.

Several days later the girls read in a local paper of how the train had been stopped while two track-walkers fitted a perfect rail in place of the broken one. And something of themselves was told. For the track-walker they had met had talked of the young ladies he had met, and there was much printed speculation about them.

"I'm glad we didn't give our names," said Grace. "Our folks might have worried if they had read of it."

"But we might have gotten a reward," said Mollie.

"Never mind--we have the five hundred dollars," exclaimed Grace.

"It may already be claimed," spoke Betty.

When they had seen the express go safely by, thankful that they had had a small share in preventing a possible loss of life, the girls continued on their way. They stopped for lunch in a little grove of trees, brewing tea, and partaking of the cake, bread and meat Amy's cousin had provided. Amy had torn her skirt on a barbed wire fence and the rent was sewed up beside the road.

The clouds seemed to be gathering more thickly, and with rather anxious looks at the sky the members of the Camping and Tramping Club hastened on.

"Girls, we're going to get wet!" exclaimed Mollie, as they passed a cross-road, pausing to look at the sign-board.

"And it's five miles farther on to Broxton!" said Amy. "Can we ever make it?"

"I think so--if we hurry," said Betty. "A little rain won't hurt us. These suits are made to stand a drenching."

"Then let's walk fast," proposed Grace.

"She wouldn't have said that with those other shoes," remarked Amy, drily.

"Got any candy?" demanded Mollie. "I'm hungry!"

Without a word Grace produced a bag of chocolates. It was surprising how she seemed to keep supplied with them.

The girls were hurrying along, now and then looking apprehensively at the fast-gathering and black clouds, when, as they turned a bend in the road, Amy, who was walking beside Grace, cried out:

"Oh, it's a bear! It's a bear!"

"What's that--a new song?" demanded Mollie, laughing.

"No--look! look!" screamed Amy, and she pointed to a huge, hairy creature lumbering down the middle of the highway.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DESERTED HOUSE

The girls screamed in concert, and whose voice was the loudest was a matter that was in doubt. Not that the Little Captain and her chums lingered long to determine. The bear stopped short in the middle of the road, standing on its hind legs, waving its huge forepaws, and lolling its head from side to side in a sort of Comical amazement.

"Run! Run!" screamed Betty. "To the woods!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" That seemed the extent of Mollie's vocabulary just then.

"Climb a tree," was the advice of Grace.

"Is he coming? Is it coming after us?" Amy wanted to know.

She glanced over her shoulder as she put the question, and there nearly followed an accident, for Amy was running, and the look back caused her to stumble. Betty, who was racing beside her, just managed to save her chum from a bad fall. All the girls were running--running as though their lives depended on their speed. Luckily they wore short, walking skirts, which did not hinder free movement, and they really made good speed.

[Illustration: THE BEAR STOPPED SHORT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD.]

They crossed the road and plunged into the underbrush, crashing through it in very terror. They clung to their small suitcases instinctively. Then suddenly, as they ran on, there came the clear notes of a bugle in an army call. Betty recalled something.

"Stop, girls!" she cried.

"What, with that bear after us?" wailed Grace. "Never!"

"It's all right--I tell you it's all right!" went on Betty.

"Oh, she's lost her mind! She's so frightened she doesn't know what she is saying!" exclaimed Mollie. "Oh, poor Betty!"

"Silly! Stop, I tell you. That bear--"

Again came the notes of the bugle, and then the girls, looking through the fringe of trees at the road, saw a man with a red jacket, and wearing a hat in which was a long feather, come along, and grasp a chain that dangled from the leather muzzle which they had failed to notice on the bear's nose.

"It's a tame bear!" cried Betty. "That's what I meant. He won't harm us. Come on back to the road! Oh, I've torn my skirt!" and she gazed ruefully at a rent in the garment.

The girls hesitated a moment, and then, understanding the situation, and being encouraged by the fact that the man now had his bear in charge, also seeing another man, evidently the mate of the first, approaching with a second bear, they all went back to the highway. The bugle blew again, and one of the bears, at a command from the man, turned a clumsy somersault.

Grace burst into hysterical laughter, in which she was joined by the others.

"Weren't we silly!" exclaimed Mollie.

"Oh, but it looked just like a real bear!" gasped Amy in self-defense.

"Listen to her," said Betty. "A real bear--why, of course it is. Did you think it was the Teddy variety?"

"Oh, you know what I mean," spoke Amy, "I thought it was a wild bear."

"It probably was--once," remarked Grace.

They were all out in the road now, and the two men, with the bears, were slowly approaching. Evidently the foremost man had seen the precipitate flight of the girls, so, taking off his hat, and bowing with foreign politeness, he said:

"Excuse--please. Juno him get away from me--I chase after--I catch.
Excuse, please."

"That's all right," said Betty, pleasantly. "We were frightened for a minute."

"Verra sorry. Juno made the dance for the ladies!"

He blew some notes on a battered brass horn, and began some foreign words in a sing-song tone, at which the bear moved clumsily about on its hind feet.

"Juno--kiss!" the man cried.

The great shaggy creature extended its muzzle toward the man's face, touching his cheek.

"Excuse--please," said the bear-trainer, smiling.

"Come on girls," suggested Amy. The place was rather a lonely one, though there were houses just beyond, and the two men, in spite of their bows, did not seem very prepossessing.

With hearts that beat rapidly from their recent flight and excitement, the girls passed the bears, the men both taking off their hats and bowing. Then the strange company was lost to sight down a turn in the road, the notes of the bugles coming faintly to the girls.

"Gracious! That *was* an adventure!" exclaimed Mollie.

"I thought I should faint," breathed Amy.

"Have a chocolate--do," urged Grace.

"They're nourishing," and she held out some.

"Girls, we must hurry," spoke Betty, "or we'll never get to Broxton before the rain. Hurry along!"

They walked fast, passing through the little village of Chanceford, where they attracted considerable attention. It was not every day that four such pretty, and smartly-attired, girls were seen on the village main street--the only thoroughfare, by the way. Then they came to the open country again. They had been going along at a good pace, and were practically certain of reaching Grace's sister's house in time for supper.

"It's raining!" suddenly exclaimed Betty, holding up her hand to make sure.

A drop splashed on it. Then another. Amy looked up into the clouds overhead.

"Oh!" she cried. "A drop fell in my eye."

Then with a suddenness that was surprising, the shower came down hard. Little dark spots mottled the white dust of the road.

"Run!" cried Mollie. "There's a house. We can stay on the porch until the rain passes. The people won't mind."

A little in advance, enclosed with a neat red fence, and setting back some distance from the road was a large, white house, with green shutters. The windows in front were open, as was the front door, and from one casement a lace curtain flapped in the wind.

"Run! Run! We'll be drenched!" cried Grace, thinking of her new walking suit. Without more ado the girls hurried through the gate, up the gravel walk and got to the porch just as the rain reached its maximum. It was coming down now in a veritable torrent.

"Queer the people here don't shut their door," remarked Betty.

"And see, the rain is coming in the parlor window," added Amy.

"Maybe they don't know it," suggested Grace. "Oh, the wind is blowing the rain right in on us!" she cried.

"I wonder if it would be impertinent to walk in?" suggested Mollie.

"We at least can knock and ask--they won't refuse," said Betty. "And really, with the wind this way, the porch is no protection at all."

She rapped on the open door. There was no response and she tapped again--louder, to make it heard above the noise of the storm.

"That's queer--maybe no one is at home," said Grace.

"They would hardly go off and leave the house all open, when it looked so much like rain," declared Amy. "Suppose we call to them? Maybe they are upstairs."

The girls were now getting so wet that they decided not to stand on ceremony. They went into the hall, through the front door. There was a parlor on one side, and evidently a sitting room on the other side of the central hall.

"See that rain coming in on the curtains and carpets!" cried Betty.

"Girls, we must close the windows," and she darted into the parlor.

The others followed her example, and soon the house was closed against the elements.

Breathless the girls waited for some sign or evidence of life in the house. There was none. The place was silent, the only sound being the patter of the rain and the sighing of the wind. The girls looked at each other. Then Betty spoke:

"I don't believe there's a soul here!" she exclaimed. "Not a soul! The house is deserted!"

CHAPTER XVII

IN CHARGE

"No one here? What do you mean?"

"Betty Nelson, what a strange thing to say!"

"Of course there must be some one here. They're only upstairs, maybe, shutting the windows there."

Thus spoke Mollie, Grace and Amy in turn. Betty listened patiently, and then suggested:

"Just hearken for a minute, and see if you think anyone is upstairs shutting windows."

Then all listened intently. There was not a sound save that caused by the storm, which seemed to increase in fury instead of diminishing.

"There is no one here," went on Betty positively. "We are all alone in this house."

"But where can the people be?" asked Grace. "They must be people living here," and she looked around at the well-kept, if somewhat old-fashioned, parlor.

"Of course the house is lived in--and the people must have left it only recently," said Betty. "That's evident."

"Why did they go off and leave it?" asked Mollie.

"That's the mystery of it," admitted Betty. "It's like the mystery of the five hundred dollar bill. We've got to solve it."

"Perhaps--" began Amy in a gentle voice.

"Well?" asked Betty encouragingly.

"Maybe the lady was upstairs shutting the windows when she saw the storm coming, and she fell, or fainted or something like that."

"That's so!" exclaimed Mollie.

"We'll look," decided Betty.

"Betty!" chorused Grace and Amy.

"Why not?" the Little Captain challenged. "We've got to get at the bottom of this."

"But suppose we should find her--find some one up there in a--faint," and Amy motioned toward the upper rooms.

"All the more reason for helping them," said practical Betty. "They may need help. Come on!"

The girls left their things in the hall, and, rather timidly, it must be confessed, ascended the stairs. But they need not have been afraid of seeing some startling sight. The upper chambers were as deserted as the rooms below. In short, a careful examination throughout the house failed to disclose a living creature, save a big Maltese cat which purred and rubbed in friendly fashion against the girls.

"The house is deserted!" declared Betty again. "We are in sole and undisputed possession, girls. We're in charge!"

"For how long?" asked Amy.

"Until this storm is over, anyhow. We can't go out in that downpour," and Betty glanced toward the window against

which the rain was dashing furiously. "We must close down the sashes here, too!" she exclaimed, for one or two were open, and the water was beating in.

"What can have happened?" murmured Mollie. "Isn't it strange?"

"I've no doubt it can be explained simply," said Betty. "The woman who lives here may have gone to a neighbor's house and failed to notice the time. Then she may be storm-bound, as we are."

"No woman would remain at a neighbor's house, and leave her own alone, with a lot of windows up, the front door open and a beating rain coming down," said Grace, positively. "Not such a neat housekeeper as the woman here seems to be; she'd come home if she was drenched," and she glanced around the well-ordered rooms.

"You've got to think up a different reason than that, Betty Nelson."

"Besides, what of the men folks?--there are men living here--at least one, for there's a hat on the front rack," put in Amy. "Where are the men, or the man?"

"They'll be along at supper time," declared Betty.

"Besides, maybe that hat is just kept there to scare tramps," said Grace. "I've often heard of a lone woman borrowing a man's hat--when she didn't have--didn't want, or couldn't get a man."

"That's so," admitted Betty. "But, speaking of supper reminds me--what are we going to do about ours?"

"It is getting nearly time," murmured Mollie. "But we simply can't tramp through that rain to your sister's house, Grace."

"No, we'll have to wait. Oh, dear! Isn't this a queer predicament to be in, and not a chocolate left?" she wailed, as she looked in the box. "Empty!" she cried quite tragically.

The rain still descended. It was not, for the moment, pouring as hard as at first, but there was a steadiness and persistency to it that did not encourage one in the belief that it would soon stop. The big drops dashed against the windows intermittently, as the wind rose and fell.

Around one angle of the house the gale howled quite fiercely, and in the parlor, where there was an open fireplace, it came down in gusts, sighing mournfully out into the room, with its old horsehair furniture, the pictures of evidently dead-and-gone relatives, in heavy gold frames, while in other frames were fearfully and wonderfully made wreaths of flowers--wax in some cases, and cloth in the remainder, being the medium in which nature was rather mocked than simulated.

The girls stood at the windows, staring drearily out. They could just see a house down the road on the other side. In the other direction no residences were visible--just an expanse of rain-swept fields. And there seemed to be no passers-by--no teams on the winding country road.

"Oh, but this is lonesome," said Amy, with a sigh.

"Girls, what are we to do?" demanded Mollie.

"We simply must go on to my sister's," declared Grace. "What will she think, if we don't come?"

As if in answer, the storm burst into another spasm of fury, the rain coming down in "sheets, blankets and pillow cases," as Mollie grimly put it.

"We can never go--in this downpour," declared Betty. "It would be sheer madness--foolishness, at any rate. We would be drenched in an instant, and perhaps take cold."

"If there was only some way to let your sister know," spoke Mollie. "I wonder if there's a telephone?"

It needed but a little survey to disclose that there was none.

"If we could only see someone--send for a covered carriage, or send some word--" began Amy.

"Oh, well, for the matter of my sister worrying, that doesn't amount to much," interrupted Grace. "When I wrote I told her it was not exactly certain just what day we would arrive, as I thought we might spend more time in some places than

in others. That part is all right. What's worrying me is that we can't get to any place to spend the night--we can't have any supper--we--"

"Girls!" cried Betty, with sudden resolve, "there is only one thing to do!"

"What's that?" the others chorused.

"Stay here. We'll get supper here--there must be food in the house. If the people come back we'll ask them to keep us over night--there's room enough."

"And if they don't come?" asked Amy, shivering a little.

"Then we'll stay anyhow!" cried the Little Captain. "We are in charge and we can't desert now."

CHAPTER XVIII

RELIEVED

That Betty's suggestion was the most sensible one which could have been made they were all willing to admit when they had thought of it for a little while.

"Of course it is possible for us to go out in this storm, and tramp on to Broxton," said Betty. "But would it be wise?"

"Indeed not!" exclaimed Grace, as she glanced down at her trim suit, which the little wetting received in the dash to the house had not spoiled. "If we were boys we might do it, but, as it is--"

"I won't admit that we can't do it because we are *not* boys," said Betty. "Only just--"

"Only we're just not going out in this storm!" said Mollie, decidedly. "We'll stay here, and if the people come back, and make a fuss, we'll pay, just as we would at a hotel. They won't be mean enough to turn us out, I think."

"We'll stay--and get supper," cried Betty. "Come on, I'm getting hungrier every minute!"

"If the people do come," remarked Amy, "they ought to allow us something for taking care of their house--I mean if they attempt to charge us as a hotel would, we can tell them how we shut the windows--"

"At so much per window," laughed Mollie. "Oh, you are the queerest girl!" and she hugged her.

"Well, let's get supper," proposed Betty again. "It will soon be dark, and it isn't easy going about a strange house in the dark."

"There are lamps," said Mollie, pointing to several on a shelf in the kitchen.

"Oh, I didn't exactly mean that," went on Betty, rolling up her sleeves. "Now to see what's in the ice box--at least, I suppose there is an ice box. There's a fire in the stove, and we can cook. Oh, girls! It's going to be real jolly after all!"

"And how it does rain!" exclaimed Amy. "We never could have gone on in this drenching downpour."

It was an exceedingly well-ordered house, and the girls, who had been wisely trained at home, had no difficulty in locating an ample supply of food. They invaded the cellar, and found plenty of canned fruit, tomatoes and other things. There were hams, shoulders of bacon, eggs, and some fresh meat. Great loaves of evidently home-made bread were in the pantry.

"We shall dine like kings!" cried Grace.

"Better than some kings," said Betty. "Only I don't see any chocolates, Grace," and she laughed.

"Smarty!" was the other's retort, but she laughed also.

Such a jolly meal as it was! The girls, once they had decided in their minds to make the best of a queer situation, felt more at home. They laughed and joked, and when supper was over, the dishes washed, and the lamps lighted, they gathered in the old-fashioned parlor, and Betty played on a melodeon that gave forth rather doleful sounds.

However, she managed to extract some music from its yellowed keys, and the girls sang some simple little part-songs.

"Too bad we haven't an audience," murmured Grace, as they ended up with "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean."

"The rain is audience enough," spoke Mollie. "As for someone's Bonnie lying over the *ocean*--the yard is a perfect *lake*!" she went on, looking from the window.

"It would have been foolish to go on," said Betty. "I am glad we have such a comfortable place."

And comfortable it certainly was. The house, while a typical country residence, was very convenient and well ordered. Careful people lived in it--that was easy to see. And as the rain pelted down, the girls sat about, the cat purring contentedly near them, and a cheerful fire burning on the hearth in the parlor.

"I hope they won't make a fuss about the liberties we are taking," said Mollie, putting some extra sticks on the blaze. "Some persons never open their parlors in the country."

"These people don't seem of that sort," said Amy. "At least, the parlor was open enough when we closed the windows."

"And how it rains!" murmured Grace, with a little nervous shiver.

"Suppose the people come back in the middle of the night?" asked Mollie.

"They'll think we are burglars."

"We must leave a light burning," decided Betty, "and a note near it explaining why we came in and that we are asleep upstairs. Then they will know."

That was decided on as the best plan, and it was carried out. The girls went to bed, but it was some time before they got to sleep, though finally the steady fall of rain wooed them to slumber. No one entered during the night, and the morning came, still retaining the rain.

"Will it ever clear?" asked Mollie, hopelessly.

"The wind is changing," spoke Betty. "I think we can soon start."

"But can we go away and leave the house alone?" asked Amy. "Ought we not to stay until the owners come back?"

"How can we tell when they will come back?" demanded Grace. "Besides, I must let my sister know why we were detained."

"I suppose we will have to go on," said Betty. "If the persons living here didn't care about deserting their place we ought not to."

"But what will they think when they come in and see that someone has been here?" asked Mollie.

"We must leave a note explaining, and also some money for the food we took," decided Betty. "Or we can stop at the next house and tell how it was."

They debated these two plans for some time, finally deciding on part of both. That is, they would leave a note and a sum of money that they figured would pay for what they had eaten. They made no deduction for closing the windows against the rain. They would also stop at the nearest house and explain matters to the residents there, asking them to communicate with the occupants of the deserted house.

When this point had been reached, and when the note had been written, and wrapped around the money, being placed in a conspicuous place in the front hall, the girls were ready to leave.

The rain had slackened, and there was a promise of fair weather. Breakfast had been partaken of, and the dishes washed. The house was as nearly like it had been as was possible to leave it.

"Well, let's start," proposed Grace.

They went towards the front door, and as they opened it they saw advancing up the walk a lady with a large umbrella, a large carpet bag, wearing a large bonnet and enveloped in the folds of a large shawl. She walked with determined steps and as she came on she glanced toward the house. As she saw the four girls on the porch she quickened her pace.

"Girls, we're relieved," said Betty, in a low voice. "Here comes the owner, or I'm much mistaken!"

CHAPTER XIX

A LITTLE LOST GIRL

"What are you doing here? Who are you? How long have you been here? Is Mrs. Black in there?"

These questions were fairly shot at the girls, who stood in rather embarrassed silence on the porch. The sun was now breaking through the clouds in warm splendor, and they took this for a good omen.

"Well, why don't you answer?" demanded the rather aggressive woman. "I can't see what you are doing here!"

She stuck her umbrella in the soft earth along the graveled walk.

"We--we came in to shut the windows," said Amy, gently.

A change came over the woman's face. She frowned--she smiled. She turned about and looked toward the nearest house. Then she spoke.

"Do you mean to tell me," she demanded, "that after I called her on the telephone, Martha Black didn't come over, shut my windows, lock up my house, and feed the cat? Didn't she?"

"We don't know. I'm afraid we don't know Mrs. Black," answered Betty. She was getting control of herself now. The aggressive woman had rather startled her at first.

"She lives down there," and the owner of the deserted house pointed toward the nearest residence.

"No one is here but us," said Betty. "We closed the windows, and we fed the cat. We also fed ourselves, but we left the money to pay for it. Shall I get it?"

The woman stared at her blankly.

"I--I'm afraid I don't understand," she returned, weakly.

"I'll explain," said Betty, and she did, telling how they had come in for shelter from the storm, how they had found the windows open, how they had closed up the place and had eaten and slept in it. Now they were going away.

"Well if that doesn't beat all!" cried the woman, in wonder.

"We couldn't understand how no one was at home," went on Betty.

"Well, it's easy enough explained," said the woman. "I'm Mrs. Kate Robertson. Yesterday afternoon I got a telephone message from Kirksville, saying my husband, who works in the plaster mill there, was hurt. Of course that flustered me. Hiram Boggs brought the message. Of course you don't know him."

"No," answered Betty, as Mrs. Robertson paused for breath.

"Well, I was flustered, of course, naturally," went on the large lady. "I just rushed out as I was, got into Hiram Boggs's rig--he drives good horses, I will say that for him--I got in with him, just as I was, though I will say I had all my housework done and was thinking what to get for supper. I got in with Hiram, and made him drive me to the depot. I knew I just had time to get the three-thirty-seven train. And I got it. And me with only such things as I could grab up," she added, with a glance at her attire, which, though old fashioned, was neat.

"On my way to the station," she resumed, "I stopped at the drug store, telephoned to Martha Black, and asked her to run over and close up my house, for it looked like a storm."

"It did rain," put in Mollie.

"I should say it did. And Martha never closed my house?" It was a direct question.

"No, we did," said Betty. "Probably she forgot it."

"I'll have to see. Well, anyhow, when I got to my husband I found he wasn't much hurt after all. Still I stayed over night with him, as there wasn't a train back. And when I saw you girls on my porch I couldn't think what had happened. Are you a Votes for Women crowd?"

"No," said Betty. "We're a walking club."

"No politics?"

"None whatever."

"All right. Now, then, I'll see why Martha didn't come over. I can't understand."

"Perhaps this is she now," said Betty, as another woman was seen coming up the walk.

"It is," said Mrs. Robertson. "That's Martha Black."

The two met. There was much talk, of which the girls caught some, and then the explanation came. Mrs. Black had started to come over to Mrs. Robertson's house to close the windows as she saw the rain, but, pausing to attend to some household duties, she was a little late. Then she looked over and saw the sashes shut down, and thought that Mrs. Robertson had come back to attend to them herself. As the storm kept up, she did not have a chance to call, and only on seeing Mrs. Robertson arrive did she suspect anything wrong. Meanwhile the girls had been in charge, but Mrs. Black was not aware of it.

"Well, I must say I thank you," said Mrs. Robertson, to Betty and her chums. "And as for me taking your money, I'd never dream of it! Won't you stay to dinner?"

"We must be off," replied Betty, and soon, after more talk and explanations, and the return of the money left by the girls in the hall, the travelers were on their way once more.

"Well, I must say, they were neat and clean," observed Mrs. Robertson, as she went through her house. "Real nice girls."

But Betty and her chums did not hear this compliment. They went on to visit the sister of Grace, who was not greatly alarmed at their delay, though she was amused at the narrative of their experience. They remained there over night, and the next day went on to Simpson's Corners, where they were the guests of Betty's uncle. This was a typical country settlement, and the girls only remained one night. Their next stopping place was to be Flatbush, where Mollie's aunt lived.

The weather was fine now, after the storm, and the roads pleasant through the country. The grass was greener than ever, the trees fully in leaf, and there were many birds to be heard singing.

Save for minor adventures, such as getting on the wrong road once or twice, and meeting a herd of cattle, which did them no harm, nothing of moment occurred to the girls on their trip toward Flatbush.

They had stopped for lunch in the little village of Mooretown, eating at the roadside, under some great oak trees, and making chocolate instead of tea for a change. Then came a rest period before they went forward again.

They were within two miles of their destination, going along a peaceful country road, arched with shady trees, and running parallel for a distance with a little river, when Betty paused and called:

"Hark! Listen! Someone is crying!"

"Gracious, I hope it isn't the twins!" exclaimed Mollie.

"Out here? Never!" said Grace.

The crying increased, and then they all saw a little girl sitting on a stone under a tree, sobbing as if her heart would break. Betty hurried up to the tot.

"What is the matter?" she asked, pillowing the tousled yellow head on her arm.

"I--I'se losted!" sobbed the little girl "P'ease take me home!
I'se losted!"

CHAPTER XX

THE BOY PEDDLER

"What are we to do?" asked Amy, in dismay.

"We can't leave her here," added Mollie, and at the word "leave" the child broke into a fresh burst of tears.

"I'se losted!" she sobbed. "I don't got no home! I tan't find muvver!
Don't go 'way!"

"Bless your heart, we won't," consoled Betty, still smoothing the tousled hair. "We'll take you home. Which way do you live?"

"Dat way," answered the child, pointing in the direction from which the girls had come.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Grace. "Have we got to go all the way back again?"

"Me live dere too!" exclaimed the lost child, indicating with one chubby finger the other direction.

"Gracious! Can she live in two places at once?" cried Mollie.
"What a child!"

"She can't mean that," said Betty. "Probably she is confused, and doesn't know what she is saying."

"Me do know!" came from the tot, positively. She had stopped sobbing now, and appeared interested in the girls.

"Mamma Carrie live dat way, mamma Mary live dat way," and in quick succession she pointed first in one direction and then the other.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Amy. "It's getting worse and worse!"

"You can't have two mammas, you know," said Betty, gently. "Try and tell us right dearie, and we'll take you home."

"I dot two mammas," announced the child, positively. "Mamma Carrie live down there, mamma Mary live off there. I be at mamma Carrie's house, and I turn back, den I get losted. Take me home!"

She seemed on the verge of tears again.

"Here!" exclaimed Grace, in desperation. "Have a candy--do--two of them. But don't cry. She reminds me of the twins," she added, with just the suspicion of moisture in her own eyes. The lost child gravely accepted two chocolates, one in each hand, and at once proceeded to get about as much on the outside of her face as went in her mouth. She seemed more content now.

"I can't understand it," sighed Mollie. "Two mothers! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Me got two muvvers," said the child, calmly, as she took a bite first of the chocolate in her left hand, and then a nibble from the one in the right. "One live dat way--one live udder way."

"What can she be driving at?" asked Amy.

"There must be some explanation," said Betty, as she got up from the stump on which she had been sitting, and placed the child on the ground.

"We'll take her a little distance on the way we are going," she went on.

"Perhaps we may meet someone looking for her."

"And we can't delay too long," added Mollie. "It will soon be supper time, and my aunt, where we are going to stay to-night, is quite a fusser. I sent her a card, saying we'd be there, and if we don't arrive she may call up our houses on the

telephone, and imagine that all sorts of accidents have befallen us."

"But we can't leave her all alone on the road," spoke Betty, indicating the child.

"Don't 'eeve me!" pleaded the lost tot. "Me want one of my muvvers!"

"It's getting worse and worse," sighed Mollie, wanting to laugh, but not daring to.

Slowly the girls proceeded in the direction they had been going. They hoped they might meet someone who either would be looking for the child, or else a traveler who could direct them properly to her house, or who might even assume charge of the little one. For it was getting late and the girls did not feel like spending the night in some strange place. It was practically out of the question.

They were going along, Betty holding one of the child's hands, the other small fist tightly clutching some sticky chocolates, when a turn of the road brought the outdoor girls in sight of a lad who was seated on a roadside rock, tying a couple of rags around his left foot, which was bleeding.

Beside the boy, on the ground, was a pack such as country peddlers often carry. The lad seemed in pain, for as the girls approached, their footfalls deadened by the soft dust of the road, they heard him murmur:

"Ouch! That sure does hurt! It's a bad cut, all right, and I don't see, Jimmie Martin, how you're going to do much walking! Why couldn't you look where you were going, and not step on that piece of glass?"

He seemed to be finding fault with himself.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mollie. "I hope this isn't another lost one. We seem to be getting the habit."

"He appears able to look after himself," said Amy.

The boy heard their voices and looked up quickly. Then, after a glance at them, he went on binding up his foot. But at the sight of him the little girl cried:

"Oh, it's Dimmie! Dat's my Dimmie! He take me to my two muvvers!" She broke away from Betty and ran toward the boy peddler.

"Why, it's Nellie Burton!" the lad exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"I'se losted!" announced the child, as though it was the greatest fun in the world. "I'se losted, and dey found me, but dey don't know where my two muvvers is. 'Oo take me home, Dimmie."

"Of course I will, Nellie. That is, if I can walk."

"Did oo hurt oo's foot?"

"Yes, Nellie. I stepped on a piece of glass, and it went right through my shoe. But it's stopped bleeding now."

"Do you know this little girl?" asked Betty. "We found her down the road, but she can't seem to tell us where she lives. First she points in one direction and then the other, and--"

"And we can't understand about her two mothers," broke in Mollie. "Do, please, if you can, straighten it out. Do you know her?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered the boy peddler, and his voice was pleasant. He took off a rather ragged cap politely, and stood up on one foot, resting the cut one on the rock. "She's Nellie Burton, and she lives about a mile down that way," and he pointed in the direction from which the girls had come.

"I live dere sometimes," spoke the child, "and sometimes down dere," and she indicated two directions. "I dot two muvvers."

"What in the world does she mean?" asked Mollie, hopelessly.

"That's what she always says," spoke the boy. "She calls one of her aunts her mamma--it's her mother's sister, you see. She lives about a mile from Nellie's house, and Nellie spends about as much time at one place as she does at the other.

She always says she has two mothers."

"I *has*" announced the child, calmly, accepting another chocolate from Grace.

"And you know Nellie?" asked Betty, pointedly.

"Yes," said the boy. "You see, I work through this part of the country. I peddle writing paper, pens, pins, needles and notions," he added, motioning to his pack. "I often stop at Nellie's house, and at her aunt's, too. They're my regular customers," he added, proudly, and with a proper regard for his humble calling.

"I'm doing pretty well, too," he went on. "I've got a good trade, and I'm thinking of adding to it. I'll take little Nellie back home for you," he offered. "I'm going that way. Sometimes, when I'm late, as I am to-day, her mother keeps me over night."

"That's nice," said Betty. "We really didn't know what to do with her, and we ought to be in Flatbush at my friend's aunt's house," and she indicated Mollie. "Will you go with your little friend?" Betty asked of the child.

"Me go wif Dimmie," was the answer, confidently given. "Dimmie know where I live."

"But can you walk?" asked Amy, as they all noticed that the boy's foot was quite badly cut.

"Oh, I guess I can limp, if I can't walk," he said, bravely. "If I had a bandage I might tie it up so I could put on my shoe. Then I'd be all right."

"Let me fix it," exclaimed Betty, impulsively. "I know something about bandaging, and we have some cloth and ointment with us. I'll bandage up your foot."

"Oh, I couldn't think of troubling you!" he protested. "I--I guess I can do it," but he winced with pain as he accidentally hit his foot on the stone.

"Now you just let me do it!" insisted the Little Captain. "You really must, and you will have to walk to take Nellie home. That will be something off our minds."

"Maybe we can get a lift," suggested the boy. "Often the farmers let me ride with them. There may be one along soon."

"Let us hope so--for your sake as well as Nellie's," spoke Grace. "It's really kind of you, and quite providential that we met you."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the boy, looking from one pretty girl to the other. "I'll take care of Nellie. I've known her for some time, you see. I peddle around here a lot. My father's dead, I haven't got any relatives except a sick aunt that I go to see once in a while, and I'm in business for myself."

"You are quite a little soldier," complimented Betty, as she got out the bandages and salve. "You are very brave."

"Oh, I haven't got any kick coming," he answered, with a laugh. "Of course, this cut foot will make me travel slow for a while, and I can't get to all my customers on time. But I guess they'll save their trade for me--the regulars will."

"I might be worse off," the lad continued, after a pause. "I might be in as bad a hole as that fellow I saw on the train not long ago."

"How was that?" asked Betty, more for the sake of saying something rather than because she was interested. The boy himself had carefully washed out the cut at a roadside spring, and as it was clean, the girl applied the salve and was; skillfully wrapping the bandage around the wound. "What man was that?" she added.

"Why," said the boy, "I had a long jump to make from one town to another, and, as there weren't any customers between, I rode in the train. The only other passenger in our car was a young fellow, asleep. All of a sudden he woke up in his seat, and begun hunting all through his pockets. First I thought he had lost his ticket, for he kept hollerin', 'It's gone! I've lost it! My last hope!' and all things like that. I was goin' to ask him what it was, when he shouted, 'My five hundred dollar bill is gone!' and out of the car he ran, hoppin' off the train, which was slowin' up at a station. That was tough luck, losin' five hundred dollars. Of course I couldn't do it, for I never had it," the boy added, philosophically, as he watched Betty adjusting the bandage.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LETTER

The effect of the boy's words on the girls was electrical. Betty paused midway in her first-aid work and stared at him. Grace, who had, unconsciously perhaps, been eating some of her chocolates, dropped one half consumed. Amy looked at Betty to see what the Little Captain would do. Mollie murmured something in French; just what does not matter.

"Did--did he really lose a five hundred dollar bill?" faltered Betty, as she resumed her bandaging, but her hands trembled in spite of herself.

"Well, that's what he said," replied the boy. "He sure did make an awful fuss about it. I thought he was crazy at first, and when he ran and jumped off the train I was sure of it."

"Did he get hurt?" asked Amy, breathlessly.

"No, ma'am, not as I could see. The train was slowing up at a station, you know. I think it was Batesville, but I'm not sure."

"That's the next station beyond Deepdale," murmured Grace.

"What's that, ma'am?" asked the boy, respectfully.

"Oh, nothing. We just know where it is, that's all. A five hundred dollar bill! Fancy!" She glanced meaningly at her companions.

"Well, that's what he hollered," said the boy. "And he was real excited, too."

"Did you know him?" asked Betty, as she finished with the bandage.

"Never saw him before nor since. It was quite some time ago. I'd just bought a new line of goods. Anyhow, I'm glad it wasn't me. I couldn't afford to lose many five hundred dollar bills," and he laughed frankly. "That's about as much as I make in a year--I mean, altogether," he said, quickly, lest the girls get an exaggerated notion of the peddling business. "I can't make that clear, though I hope to some time," he said, proudly.

"Me want to go home," broke in little Nellie. "Me want my muvvers."

"All right, I'll take you to your real mother," spoke the boy peddler. "I guess I can walk now, thank you," he said to Betty. "Couldn't I give you something--some letter paper--a pencil. I've got a nice line of pencils," he motioned toward his pack.

"Oh, no, thank you!" exclaimed Mollie.

"We are only too glad to help you," added Betty. "You have done us a service in looking after the little girl."

"To say nothing of the five hundred dollar bill," added Grace, in a low tone.

"Hush!" cautioned Betty, in a whisper. "Don't let him know anything about it."

"And you are sure you wouldn't know that man again?" asked Mollie. "I mean the one you spoke of?"

"Well, I'd know him if I saw him, but I'm not likely to. He was tall and good looking, with a little black mustache. He got out of the train in a hurry when he woke up. You see, he was sitting with his window open--it was very hot--he fell asleep. I noticed him tossing around in his seat, and every once in a while he would feel in his pocket. Then he hollered."

"Maybe someone robbed him," suggested Betty, yet in her heart she knew the bill she had found must belong to this

unknown young man--the very man to whom they had once given something to eat.

"No one was in the car but him and me," said the boy, "and I know I didn't get it. Maybe he didn't have it--or maybe it fell out of the window. Anyhow, he cut up an awful row and rushed out. He might have dreamed it."

"Me want to go home!" whined Nellie.

"All right--I'll take you," spoke the boy. "I can walk fine now. Thank you very much," and he pulled on his shoe, gingerly enough, for the cut was no small one. Then, shouldering his pack, and taking hold of Nellie's hand--one having been refilled with chocolates by Grace--the boy peddler moved off down the road limping, the girls calling out good-bys to him.

"I hope it's all right--to let that child go off with him," said Mollie.

"Of course it is," declared Betty. "That boy had the nicest, cleanest face I've ever seen. And he must suffer from that cut."

"Oh, I think it will be all right," said Amy. "You could trust that boy."

"I agree with you," remarked Grace. "Fancy him seeing the man lose the five hundred dollar bill we found!" she added.

"Do you think it's the same one?" asked Betty.

"I'm sure of it," said Mollie.

"I guess I am too," admitted the Little Captain. "He was the tramp. Now I will know what to do."

"What?" chorused her chums.

"Let the railroad company know about it. They must have had some inquiries. I never thought of that before. Look, he is waving to us."

"And little Nellie, too," added Grace. The boy and the little lost girl had reached a turn in the road. They looked back to send a voiceless farewell, the child holding trustingly to the boy's hand.

"Come on!" exclaimed Mollie, as the two passed from sight. "We'll hardly get to my aunt's in time for supper."

And they hastened on.

Somewhat to their relief they learned, on reaching the home of Mrs. Mulford, in Flatbush--Mrs. Mulford being Mollie's aunt--that the boy peddler was quite a well-known and much-liked local character. He was thoroughly honest, and could be trusted implicitly. Some time later the girls learned from Mollie's aunt that the little lost tot had reached home safely, and that the boy had to remain at her house for a week to recover from the cut on his foot.

The mother of the lost child took quite an interest in Jimmie Martin, the boy peddler, and looked after him, so the news came to Mrs. Mulford, who had friends acquainted with the parents of the child who insisted she had "two muvvers."

So that little incident ended happily, and once more the outdoor girls were left to pursue their way as they had started out. They stayed a day with Mollie's aunt, a rain preventing comfortable progress, and when it cleared they went on to Hightown, where they stopped with Grace's cousin.

"And now for the camp!" exclaimed Betty, one morning, when they were headed for Cameron, where a half-brother of Mr. Ford maintained a sort of resort, containing bungalows, and tents, that he rented out. It was near a little lake, and was a favorite place in summer, though the season was too early for the regulars to be there. Mr. Ford had written to Harry Smith, his half-brother, and arranged for the girls to occupy one of the bungalows for several days. Mrs. Smith agreed to come and stay with them as company.

"Though we don't really need a chaperon," laughed Grace. "I think we can look after ourselves."

"It will be better to have her at the bungalow," said Betty, and so it was arranged.

Betty had written to the railroad company, asking if any report of a lost sum of money had been received, and the answer she got was to the contrary.

"That leaves the five hundred dollar mystery as deep as ever," she said, showing the letter to her chums. It had reached them at Hightown.

"Maybe we should have told that boy peddler, and asked him to be on the lookout," suggested Amy.

"No, I do not think it would have been wise to let him have the facts," said Betty.

The girls found the camp in the woods a most delightful place. The bungalow was well arranged and furnished, and, though there were no other campers at that time, the girls did not mind this.

"I'll write home and ask Will to come," said Grace. "He might like to spend a few days here, and Uncle Harry said he could take a tent if he liked."

"Ask Frank Haley, too," suggested Amy.

"And Percy Falconer!" added Mollie, with a sly glance at Betty.

"Don't you dare!" came the protest.

"I meant Allen Washburn," corrected Mollie.

"He can't come--he has to take the bar examinations!" cried Betty, quickly.

"How do you know?" she was challenged.

"He wrote--" and then Betty blushed and stopped. Her companions laughed and teased her unmercifully.

There was some mail for the girls awaiting them at Mr. Smith's house, having been forwarded from Deepdale. And Betty's letter contained a surprise. Among other things, her mother wrote:

"There have been some inquiries made here about the five hundred dollar bill. Down at the post-office the other day a man came in and posted a notice, saying he had lost such a sum of money somewhere in this part of the country. His name is Henry Blackford, and the address is somewhere in New York State. It was on the notice, but some mischievous boys got to skylarking and tore it off. Your father is going to look into the matter."

"Oh, maybe he'll find the owner of the money, after all!" cried Mollie.

"Maybe," returned Betty.

CHAPTER XXII

A PERILOUS LEAK

The boys came to the camp at Cameron--Will, Frank--and, as a surprise--Allen Washburn. Betty could hardly believe it when she saw him, but he explained that he had successfully passed his bar examinations, and felt entitled to a vacation. Will had invited him on the receipt of his sister's letter.

"And we'll have some dandy times!" exclaimed Will.

"What about the man looking for his five hundred dollars?" asked Grace, for her brother and the other boys knew of the find, and also of the notice put up in the post-office.

"No one seems to know much about him," said Will, when he had been told of Mrs. Nelson's letter. "He hurried in, stuck up that notice, and hurried out again. Then some kids tore off the address."

"He's crazy," affirmed Frank.

"It does seem so," admitted Will. "He asked the postmaster if anyone had found a big sum of money, and of course Mr. Rock--slow as he always is--didn't think about the advertisement in the *Banner*. He said he didn't know of anyone picking up a fortune, and the man hurried off."

"I must write to him, if I can learn that address," said Betty.

The weather continued exceptionally fine, and life in the woods, in the tent for the boys and the bungalow for the girls, was well-nigh ideal. They stayed there a week, enjoying the camping novelty to the utmost. At night they would gather around a campfire and sing. Sometimes they went out on the lake in a small launch Mr. Smith owned.

Not far away was a resort much frequented by the summer colonists, and though it was not yet in full swing there were some amusements opened. These the young people enjoyed on several evenings.

"Well, I do hope my new suitcase comes tomorrow," spoke Grace, for she had written for one to be forwarded to her, containing fresh garments.

"And I need some clothes!" cried Mollie. "This walking is harder on them than you'd think."

Fortunately the garments came on time, and in fresh outfits the girls prepared to bid farewell to the camp, and once more proceed on their way. The boys begged for permission to accompany them, but Betty was firm in refusing.

"We said we would make this tour all by ourselves," she declared, "and we are going to do it. Some other time you boys may come along. But there is only another day or so, and we will be back home. Please don't tease."

The boys did, but that was all the good it availed them. The girls were obdurate.

From Cameron they were to go to Judgeville, a thriving town of about ten thousand inhabitants. Betty's cousin lived there, and had planned a round of gaieties for her young relative and friends. They were to stay three days, and from there would keep on to Deepdale, thus completing the circuit they had mapped out.

So far they had been very fortunate, not much rain coming to interfere with their progress. The morning they were to leave camp, however, the weather changed, and for three miserable days they were compelled to remain in the bungalow.

Not that they stayed indoors all the while, for the travelers fully merited the title, "Outdoor Girls," and they lived up to it. They tramped even in the rain, and managed to have a good time.

But the rain sent the boys home, for rain in a tent is most depressing, and as all the other bungalows were being repaired, they could not live in one with any comfort.

But finally the sun came out, and the girls really set off on almost the last stage of their tour. They expected to be in Judgeville at night, though the walk was about the longest they had planned for any one day.

Shortly before noon their way took them along a highway that paralleled the railroad--the same line that ran to Deepdale. And, naturally, the talk turned to the finding of the five hundred dollar bill.

"Do you suppose we'll ever find the owner?" asked Mollie.

"Of course we will!" exclaimed Betty. "It is only a question of time."

Once or twice Amy looked back down the railroad track, and Grace, noticing this, in the intervals of eating chocolate, finally asked:

"What is it, Amy?"

"That man," replied the quiet girl. "He's been following us for some time."

"Following us!" cried Betty. "What do you mean?"

"I mean walking along the railroad track back of us."

"Well, that may not mean he is following us. Probably he wants to get somewhere, and the track is the shortest route."

"He's looking down as though searching for something," said Mollie.

"Maybe he's a track-walker," suggested Amy.

"No, he isn't dressed like that," asserted Betty. She turned and looked at the man. He seemed young, and had a clean-shaven face. He paid no attention to the girls, but walked on, with head bent down.

"We must soon stop for lunch," proposed Mollie. "I have not left it behind this time," and she held out the small suitcase that contained the provisions put up that morning. "I'm just dying for a cup of chocolate!"

"We will eat soon," said Betty. "There's a nice place, just beyond that trestle," and she pointed to a railroad bridge that crossed a small but deep stream, the highway passing over it by another and lower structure.

As the girls hurried on, the man passed them, off to the left and high on the railroad embankment. He gave them not a glance, but hastened on with head bent low.

When he reached the middle of the high railroad bridge, or trestle over the stream, he paused, stooped down and seemed to be tying his shoelace. The girls watched him idly.

Suddenly the roar of an approaching train was heard. The man looked up, seemed startled, and then began to run toward the end of the bridge.

It was a long structure and a high one, and, ere he had taken a dozen steps over the ties, the train swept into sight around a curve. The road was a single-track one, and on the narrow trestle there was no room for a person to avoid the cars.

"He'll be killed!" cried Mollie.

Fascinated, the girls looked. On came the thundering train. The whistle blew shrilly. The young man increased his pace, but it was easy to see that he could not get off the bridge in time.

Realizing this, he paused. Coming to the edge of the ties on the bridge, he poised himself for a moment, and with a glance at the approaching locomotive, which was now whistling continuously, the man leaped into the stream below him.

"Oh!" screamed Grace, and then she and the others looked on, almost horrified, as the body shot downward.

[Illustration: THE MAN LEAPED INTO THE STREAM.]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAN'S STORY

There was a great splash, and the man disappeared under the water. It all occurred suddenly, and the man must have made up his mind quickly that he had not a chance to stay on the trestle when the train passed over it.

"He'll be killed!" cried Mollie. "Oh, Betty, what can we do?"

"Nothing, if he really is killed," answered the practical Little Captain. "But he jumped like a man who knew how to do it, and how to dive. The water is deep there."

"Come on!" cried Amy, for once taking the initiative, and she darted toward the bank of the stream.

"There he is!" cried Betty. "He's come up!"

As she spoke, the man's head bobbed into view, and, giving himself a shake to rid his eyes of water, he struck out for the shore.

"Oh, he's swimming! He's swimming!" Mollie exclaimed. "We must get him a rope--a plank--anything! We'll help you!" she called, and she ran about almost hysterically.

The man was now swimming with long, even strokes. He seemed at home in the water, even with his clothes on, and the long jump had evidently not injured him in the least.

He reached the bank, climbed up, and stood dripping before the four young travelers.

"Whew!" he gasped, taking off his coat and wringing some water from it.

"That was some jump! I had to do it, though!"

"Indeed you were fortunate," said Betty. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit--a little shaken up, that's all. I should not have been on that bridge, as a section hand warned me a train was due, and the trestle is very narrow. But I was taking a short cut. Railroads seem to bring me bad luck. This is the second time, in a little while, that I've had trouble on this same line."

Grace was rummaging about in the valise she carried.

"Where's our alcohol stove?" she demanded, of Mollie.

"Why? What do you want of it?"

"I'm going to make him a cup of hot chocolate. He must need it; poor fellow!"

"I'll help you," said Mollie, and the two set up the little heating apparatus in the lee of a big rock.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" asked Betty, anxiously.

"Oh, I'm all right," the man assured the girls. "I wish I had some dry clothes. This is about the only suit I have. However, the sun will soon dry them, but they'll need pressing."

"We're making you some chocolate," spoke Grace. "It will be ready soon, and keep you from getting cold."

The man--he was young and good-looking--smiled, showing his even, white teeth.

"You seemed prepared for emergencies," he said to Betty. "Are you professional travelers?"

"Just on a walking tour. We're from Deepdale. We're going home to-morrow, after stopping over night in Judgeville. We

were just going to get our noon-day lunch when we saw you jump."

"Indeed," remarked the young man, who was now wringing out his vest. "From Deepdale; eh? I've been through there on the train. This line runs there; doesn't it?" and he motioned to the one he had so hastily left.

"Yes," answered Betty. "But we never walk the track--though we did once for a short distance."

"And we found a broken rail, and told a flagman and he said the train might have been wrecked," remarked Amy.

It was the first she had spoken in some time. The young man looked at her sharply--rather too long a look, Betty thought; but there was nothing impertinent in it.

"Railroads--or, rather, this one--have been the cause of two unpleasant experiences to me," the young man went on. "I was nearly injured just now, and not long ago I lost quite a sum of money on this line."

At the mention of money Betty started. The others looked at her.

"How did it happen?" asked Betty, and then of a sudden she stared at the young man. "Excuse me, but, but--haven't we met before?" she stammered.

"Sure!" he answered, readily. "You young ladies were kind enough to share your lunch with me one day."

"Oh!" cried Mollie. "But you--you looked different then!"

"You had a mustache and long hair," murmured Amy.

"That's right, so I did. But I had my hair cut day before yesterday and the mustache taken off. Changes me quite a lot; doesn't it?"

"Yes," replied Betty. "But you were saying something about losing money on this line," she added, quickly.

"Well, I was on my way to New York, expecting to complete a business deal. I fell asleep in the car, for I was quite tired, and I guess I had been thinking pretty hard on that business matter. You see a fellow offered me an option on a small, but good, concern, for four hundred dollars. I knew if I could clinch the deal, and get the option, that some friends of mine would invest in it, and I'd have a good thing for myself.

"Well, as I say, I fell asleep. Then I dreamed someone was trying to get my pocketbook. It was a sort of nightmare, and I guess I struggled with the dream-robber. Then, all of a sudden, I woke up, and--"

"Was your pocketbook gone?" asked Mollie.

"No, but my money was. And that was the funny part of it. How anyone could get the money without taking the pocketbook I couldn't see. And there wasn't anyone in the car with me but a boy--a peddler, I think he was."

The girls looked at each other. Matters were beginning to fit together most strangely.

"I didn't know what to do," the young man went on. "I didn't want to say anything that would seem as if I accused the boy, and I felt the same about the trainmen. I knew if I said the money had been taken and the pocketbook left they would only laugh at me. I was all knocked out, and hardly knew what I was doing. I jumped off the train, and went back over the line, thinking the bill might have blown out of the window. But--"

"That is just what did happen!" cried Betty.

"What's that?" the man exclaimed, excitedly.

"I say that is exactly what happened!" went on the Little Captain. "At least, that is how I account for it."

"What sort of a bill did you lose?" asked Mollie, trying not to get excited.

"It was one of five hundred dollars, and--"

"Did it have a--anything pinned to it?" exclaimed Betty.

"It did--a note. Wait, I can tell you what it said on it." He hesitated a moment and then repeated word for word the writing on the note pinned to the bill the girls had picked up. "But I don't see how you know this!" he added, wonderingly.

"We know--because we found your five hundred dollar bill!" exclaimed Betty.

CHAPTER XXIV

BY TELEGRAPH

The man stared at the girls as if he could not believe what Betty had said. A strange look came over his face.

"If this is a joke, please drop it," he began. "I am almost crazy as it is. I don't know what I am doing. I--"

"It isn't a joke!" declared Betty. "It may sound strange, but it's all true. We did find your bill, under the railroad bridge in Deepdale. It's in my father's safe now."

"That's great--it's fine. I'd given it up long ago. I advertised, and put up a notice in the post-office, and--"

"Yes, my mother wrote me about it," said Betty. "But she did not give your address, for some naughty boys tore it off the notice."

"And do you really think someone tried to rob you?" asked Mollie.

"I don't know what to think," frankly admitted the young man. "There was a boy in the same car--"

"He never took it!" exclaimed Grace.

"How do you know?" the young man asked.

"Because we met that boy, and he told us just how you acted when you discovered your loss. Besides, that boy is thoroughly honest."

"Say, is there anything about my case that you girls don't know?" asked the young man with a smile. "But before I go any further, perhaps I had better introduce myself--"

"Oh, we know your name!" exclaimed Betty.

"You do? And you never saw me before?"

"You forget that your name was signed to the notice in the post-office--Mr. Blackford," and Betty blushed.

"That's so. But I don't know your names, and, if it's not too impertinent, after the service you have rendered me--"

"We'll tell you--certainly," interrupted Betty, and she introduced herself and her chums.

"I suppose you will wonder how I played the part of a tramp," said the young man. "I will tell you why. I was almost out of my mind, and I imagined that by going around looking ragged I might pick up some news of my lost money from the tramps along the railroad."

Then he told of how he had started to write a letter, stating he could not buy the business he was after, and had then torn the letter up, because he still hoped to find the bill and get control of the business.

"And we found part of that letter," cried Betty. "We tried to find you, too, but you had disappeared."

"Indeed. I know how that happened--I took a short cut through the woods."

"The chocolate is ready!" called Grace, a little later. "Won't you have some, Mr. Blackford?"

"Thank you, I will. Say, but you young ladies are all right. Do you do this sort of thing often?"

"Well, we like to be outdoors," explained Betty, as she handed him a cup of the hot beverage. "We like to take long walks, but this is the first time we ever went on a tour like this."

"And we've had the *best* time!" exclaimed Mollie.

"And *such* adventures," added Grace. "Will you have more chocolate?"

"No, thank you. That was fine. Now I must try and get dry. But I'm used to this sort of thing. I'm from the West, and I've been in more than one flood."

"You have!" cried Amy, and the others knew of what she was thinking--her own case. "I hope he didn't have the same sort of trouble I had, though," she thought.

"Perhaps if you were to walk along your clothes would dry quicker," said Betty. "And if you went on to Judgeville you might be able to get a tailor to press them."

"Thanks, I believe I will. That is, if you don't mind being seen with such a disreputable figure as I cut."

"Of course we don't mind!" declared Betty. "We are getting rather travel-stained ourselves."

"Our trunks will be waiting for us at your cousin's house, Betty," spoke Grace, for it was there they were to spend the last night of their now nearly finished tour. "We can freshen up," went on the girl who loved candy, "and enter into town in style. I hope mamma put in my new gown and another pair of shoes."

"Grace Ford! You don't mean that you'd put on a new dress to finish up this walking excursion in, do you?" asked Mollie.

"Certainly I shall. We don't know who we might meet as we get into Deepdale."

"We will hardly get in before dusk," said Betty. "From Judgeville there is the longest stretch of all, nearly twenty-two miles."

"Oh, dear!" groaned Grace. "We'll never do it. Why did you arrange for such a long walk, Betty?"

"I couldn't help it. There were no other relatives available, and I couldn't have any made to order. There was no stopping place between here and home."

"Oh, I dare say I can stand it," murmured Grace. "But I guess I won't wear my new shoes in that case. Twenty-two miles!"

"It is quite a stretch," said Mr. Blackford.

He helped Grace put away the alcohol stove, and the cups in which the chocolate had been served. They were washed in the little stream, and would be cleansed again at the house of Betty's cousin.

"You haven't asked us when we are going to give you that five hundred dollar bill," said Mollie, as they started for Judgeville.

"Well," spoke Mr. Blackford, with a laugh, "I didn't want to seem too anxious. I knew that it was safe where you had put it, Miss Nelson," and he looked at Betty. "Besides, I have been without it so long now that it seems almost as if I never had it. And from all the good it is going to do me, perhaps I might be better off without it now."

"We didn't exactly understand what you meant by the note you wrote," said Betty.

"Well, I'll tell you how that was," he said, frankly. "You see, I was left considerable money by a rich relative, but I had bad luck. Maybe I didn't have a good business head, either. Anyhow, I lost sum after sum in investments that didn't pan out, and in businesses that failed. I got down to my last big bill, and then I heard of this little business I could get control of in New York.

"I said I'd make that my last venture, and to remind myself how desperate my chances were I just jotted down those words, and pinned the note to the bill. Then I must have gotten excited in my dream. I know just before I fell asleep I kept taking the bill out of the pocketbook, and looking at it to make sure I had it. I might have done that while half asleep, and it blew out of the window. That's how it probably happened, and you girls picked up the money. I can't thank you enough. But I'm afraid it will come to me too late to use as I had intended," the man went on, with a sigh.

"Why?" asked Betty.

"Because the option on the business I was going to buy expires at midnight to-night, and as you say the five hundred dollars is in Deepdale, I don't see how I am going to get it in time to be of any service."

"Isn't that too bad!" cried Amy.

"And we might have brought it with us," said Mollie.

"Only we didn't think it would be wise to carry that sum with us," spoke Grace. "And we never thought the owner of it would jump off a railroad trestle right in front of us," she added, with a laugh.

"No, of course not," admitted Mr. Blackford, drily. "You couldn't foresee that. Neither could I. Well, it can't be helped. Maybe it will be for the best in the end. I'll have the five hundred, anyhow, and perhaps I can find some other business. But I did want to get this one on which I had the option. However, there's no help for it."

A sudden light of resolve came into Betty's eyes. She confronted the owner of the bill.

"There's no need for you to lose your option!" she exclaimed.

"But I don't see how I can get the money in time. I might if I had an airship; but to go to Deepdale, and then to New York with it, is out of the question."

"No!" cried Betty. "We can do it by telegraph! I've just thought of a way out. You can take up that option yet, Mr. Blackford!"

CHAPTER XXV

BACK HOME

Betty Nelson's chums stared at her. So did Mr. Blackford. Betty herself, with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, looked at them all in turn. Her idea had stimulated her.

"What--how--I don't see--" stammered Mr. Blackford. "If you--"

"It's this way!" cried Betty, all enthusiasm. "You know you can transfer money by telegraph in a very short time--it only takes a few minutes to do it--really it's quicker than an airship," and she smiled at Mr. Blackford.

"That's so," he admitted. "I see now."

"I'll have my father telegraph the five hundred dollars to me at Judgeville," explained Betty. "Then I can give it to you, and you can telegraph it to your business man in New York. It is sure to reach there before midnight, and you can take up your option, if that is the proper term."

"It is--very proper," said Mr. Blackford. "I believe you have the right idea, Miss Nelson. I should have thought of that myself, but that shows I am really not a good business man."

"Now let's hurry on to town," proceeded Betty. "We haven't any too much time."

It was rather an astonished telegraph operator who, a little later, was confronted by four pretty girls, a man who looked as if he had been in a shipwreck, and a much-flustered lady. The latter was Betty's cousin, at whose house the girls had stopped. It was necessary for the recipient of the money to be identified, and this Betty's cousin, who knew the operator, agreed to look after.

There was a little delay, but not much, and soon Mr. Blackford was in a position to take up his option. A local bank, where the telegraph concern did business, paid over the five hundred in cash, and four hundred of this was at once sent on to New York, by telegraph.

"I hope it reaches my man," said Mr. Blackford. "I have told him to wire me here."

A little later word was received that the transaction had been successfully carried out. Mr. Blackford could now get control of the business.

"And it's all due to you young ladies!" he said, gratefully. "I don't know how to thank you. You are entitled to a reward--"

"Don't you dare mention it!" cried Betty,

"Well, some day I'll pay you back for all you did for me!" he exclaimed, warmly. "I won't forget. And now that I have some money to spare, I'm going to get a new suit of clothes."

He said good-bye to the girls, promising to see them again some time, and then he left, having made arrangements to go on to New York and finish up his business affairs.

"Well, now that it is all over, won't you come on to the house and have supper?" said Betty's cousin, as they came out of the telegraph office. "I must say, you girls know how to do things."

"Oh, you can always trust Betty for that," said Mollie.

"It just did itself," declared Betty. "Everything seemed to work out of its own accord from the time we found the five hundred dollar bill."

"But you helped a lot," insisted Amy.

"Indeed she did," added Grace.

"Well, our walking tour will soon be over," Betty said as they neared her cousin's house. "We'll be home to-morrow. We've had lots of fun, and I think it has done us all good. We'll soon be home."

"But not without a long walk," said Grace, with a sigh. "I wonder what we shall do next? We must keep out of doors."

"We have a long vacation before us--all summer," said Amy. "I do wish we could spend it together."

"Maybe we can," said Betty. "We'll see."

And how the four chums enjoyed the vacation that was opening may be learned by reading the next volume of this series, which will be entitled "The Outdoor Girls at Rainbow Lake; Or, The Stirring Cruise of the Motor Boat *Gem*."

The stay of the girls at the home of Betty's cousin was most enjoyable. They remained two nights, instead of one, sending word of the change of their plans to their parents. Then, early in the morning, they started for home on the last stage of their tour.

"Twenty-two miles!" sighed Grace, as they set out. "Oh, dear!"

But they were not destined to walk all the way. About five miles from town they saw a big touring car approaching, and as it neared them they beheld Will Ford and his chum Frank in it.

"Hurray!" cried Grace's brother.

"Welcome to our city!" added Frank. "Get in and we'll take you home in style."

"Oh, you boys!" cried Betty, but she and the others got in. Off they started, all of them seemingly talking at once, and in a short time they arrived at Deepdale. They attracted considerable attention as they passed through the town in the car Will and Frank had hired to honor the members of the Camping and Tramping Club.

"But it rather spoiled our record, I think," said Betty. "We were to walk all the way."

"Oh, we walked enough," declared Grace. "I did, anyhow," and she glanced at her shoes.

"But it was fun!" exclaimed Amy.

"Glorious!" cried Mollie.

A little later the four tourists were warmly welcomed at their respective homes, later meeting for a general jollification at Mollie's house.

"Oh, you dears!" cried Betty, trying to caress the twins, Paul and Dodo, both at once. "And we saw the dearest little lost girl. Shall I tell you about her?"

"Dive us tum tandy fust," said Dodo, fastening her big eyes on Grace. "Us 'ikes tandy--don't us, Paul?"

"Us do," was the gurgling answer, and Grace brought out her confections.

And, now that the four girls are safely at home again, we will take leave of them.