

FICTION

Laura Lee Hope

The Outdoor Girls on Pine Island

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

The Outdoor Girls On Pine Island

OR

A CAVE AND WHAT IT CONTAINED

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPPDALE," "THE
MOVING PICTURE GIRLS," "THE BOBBSEY
TWINs," "BUNNY BROWN AND HIS
SISTER SUE," ETC.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON PINE ISLAND



**THEIR CLOTHES WERE PICTURESQUE
AND EACH ONE CARRIED A HUGE**

BUNDLE.

The Outdoor Girls on Pine Island. Frontispiece (Page [172](#))

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON PINE ISLAND

CHAPTER I

THE RUNAWAY CAR

"The boys will be here in five minutes!" cried Mollie Billette, bursting in upon her friend, dark hair flying and eyes alight. "You'd better get on your hat."

"What boys and why the hat?" returned Grace Ford who, pretty and graceful, as always, was provokingly calm.

"I'll answer any and everything if you will only get ready. Oh, have you got to go upstairs? Hurry then," and Mollie swung her feet impatiently as Grace detached herself from the great chair slowly and gracefully and started out into the hall.

"If you will come upstairs with me, Mollie," Grace suggested, "perhaps you will deign to tell me why you rush in here like a whirlwind and insist on my putting on my hat to go goodness knows where."

"Oh, all right, if you will only hurry," cried Mollie in desperation, and jumping from her chair she propelled her friend in most undignified haste up the broad stairway--Grace protesting at every step.

"Here's your coat. Now don't talk--act!" Mollie was commanding when Grace took her firmly by her two shoulders and backed her up against the wall.

"Now listen here, young lady," she said, looking sternly down into her friend's laughing eyes. "It's my turn to talk. I refuse to budge another step until you have explained, to my perfect satisfaction, the cause of all this rush."

"Well, since you feel that way about it," laughed Mollie, "suppose you let me--sit down."

"Will you tell me about it if I let you go? Promise!"

"Uh-huh," said Mollie, and so she was released. "There isn't much to tell anyway," she went on. "Betty and I met Frank Haley and Will a few minutes ago and Frank happened to remark that it was a splendid day for an auto ride. We agreed with him--that's all."

"Fine--but where's Betty?" and Grace adjusted her tiny toque with care before the huge mirror.

"Oh, she's coming, just as soon as she lets her mother know where she's off to. We wanted Amy to go along too--stopped in there on the way down--but Mrs. Stonington isn't feeling well and Amy thought she ought to stay with her."

"I'm sorry for that. But would there have been room for all of us in Frank's car, anyway?"

"Oh, yes, it's a big seven-passenger affair. Mr. Nelson says it is a wonder. Just think! I can only squeeze five into mine," and Mollie drew a long sigh at Fate.

"How ungrateful, Mollie--most girls would be glad of the chance to ride around in a neat little machine like yours. Why, I'd even be thankful for a tiny runabout."

"There it is now," Mollie said as a motor horn tooted insistently on the drive below. "Don't let's keep them waiting."

"Hello, girls, we'd have been here sooner if Betty hadn't delayed us." It was Frank Haley who spoke, a handsome young fellow, whose merry grey eyes showed that he deserved his name--the first part of it, at least. "Come, 'fess up, Betty," he added, turning to the bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl beside him.

"I'm afraid I did keep them waiting, girls--about two minutes," Betty Nelson admitted, then added in defense: "But I couldn't go looking the way I was, you know."

"I don't see why not. I didn't see anything wrong."

"That doesn't prove a single thing, Frank," Grace retorted as he opened the door for the girls. "Boys never do."

"Don't they though?" Frank objected. "Do you mean to say I don't know that that little whatever-you-may-call-it in your hat is quite considerable----"

"Class?" finished Will, who had been busy tucking in the robe about Mollie's feet. "Personally I think we're a pretty fine crowd, take us all together."

"Well, did you ever hear such--Frank, don't you think we'd better get started before he says anything worse?" and Betty turned appealingly to Frank.

"Just as you say," he answered obligingly, and at his words the great car glided noiselessly down the drive and out into the street.

"Where to?" called Will from the tonneau. "How about a little spin in the country, Frank?"

"Ask the girls," was the reply. "What they say goes."

"Oh, yes, let's," said Mollie eagerly. "It is just getting so green and beautiful now. Summer is the only time in the year anyway."

"The winter didn't seem to bother you girls much last year," Frank broke in. "If I could go to Florida every winter, the cold and wintry blasts would have no more terrors for me."

"Oh, well, it was wonderful--in more ways than one," this last so low that only Will heard it, as Grace squeezed his hand under cover of the robe. You see, Will was her brother, and they were very fond of each other, as well they might be.

"Whom did you wave to then, Betty?" Mollie asked, as the car swung off into the country road. "I didn't see them till we were almost past."

"Alice Jallow and her friend, Kitty Rossmore. They're always together," Betty answered, then added: "By the way, Mollie, it seems to me you were just saying you had something good to tell."

"My aunt has a bungalow out on Pine Island. It's a lovely place, the bungalow, I mean, not the island, although if all they say is true, I shouldn't wonder if that's all right too."

"But, Mollie, what has that to do with us?" Grace interrupted. "Is she going to ask you to make her a visit?"

"No. It's lots better than that. You see Uncle James wants to take her to Europe this summer and so----"

"Oh, Mollie!" Betty interrupted, her eyes sparkling. "You don't mean----"

"Yes I do--exactly," and Mollie settled back with a contented sigh.

"I'm afraid I am very stupid to-day," Grace remarked.

"More than usual?" asked Will, the irrepressible, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Why don't you see, Grace?" Betty's face was radiant. "Can't you see Mollie means that we are to occupy that vacated bungalow this summer?"

"But please, girls, don't get your minds made up to it yet, for nothing is really settled, you know. Perhaps I should have waited till I was sure before I spoke of it." Mollie seemed to be doubtful.

"Oh, it's certain to turn out all right," said Betty, with conviction. "Everything has that we have ever planned before, and there is no reason why this should be an exception."

"And even if it doesn't, just think what fun we will have thinking about it," added Grace, philosophically, at which they all laughed.

"Anyway you are a dear, Mollie, for having such lovely relatives," cried Betty gaily. "If I could only climb over this seat, I'd give you two great big hugs, one for each of them."

"Nobody calls me a dear and offers to hug me, and I've got the loveliest relatives in the world--you can ask them if you don't believe me," and Frank managed to look very pathetic and forlorn.

All this time they had been getting farther and farther out into the country and now Frank put on extra speed to ascend the rather steep incline directly in front of them.

"Your car runs like a dream, Frank," Betty was saying as they reached the top. "Look at that great big haystack down there--it must have taken some time to gather it in. Why don't you slow down a little? Don't you think--oh, what is it, Frank?" for she had noticed the set lines of his mouth and the look of terror that had flashed into his eyes. "Oh, Frank!" she cried again.

"Sit tight," he muttered through clenched teeth. "The brake won't work!"

On, on dashed the great machine, swaying from side to side and gaining velocity with each second, while the girls, with terror tugging at their hearts, sat still--and waited.



CHAPTER II

A LUCKY ESCAPE

To those who are already acquainted with the Outdoor Girls, no explanations are necessary, but for the benefit of my new readers I will take advantage of this moment to make them better acquainted with the characters and setting of the story.

In the first book of this series, called "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale," the girls, Betty Nelson, sometimes called the Little Captain, because of her fearless leadership, Mollie Billette, Grace Ford and Amy Blackford, had gone on their famous walking tour, and during their wanderings had solved the mystery of a five-hundred-dollar bill.

The second volume, "The Outdoor Girls at Rainbow Lake," tells of a summer full of interest and adventure during which the horse Grace was riding ran away with her. This misfortune led to the loss of some very valuable papers, with a subsequent strange happening on an island, about which, and the recovery of the papers, you may read, dear reader, if you will.

"The Outdoor Girls in a Motor Car" is the third book of the series. Yes, there really was a house where all sorts of weird sights and sounds might be seen and heard at night if one had the courage to stay around. And you may imagine the consternation of the Outdoor Girls when Mollie was captured by the "ghost."

At the end of a delightful summer, spent in touring the country in Mollie's car, the girls had a wonderful chance to spend the winter in the woods. Needless to say, they took advantage of the opportunity. The fourth book, "The Outdoor Girls in a Winter Camp," describes the settlement of a certain property dispute, involving Mr. Ford. The happy result was made possible by the good fortune that favors our girls. This volume tells also how Amy was claimed by a brother, of whose existence she was unaware.

Then followed their adventures in Florida during which the girls had succeeded in finding Will Ford, Grace's brother, who had been virtually kidnapped by a villainous labor contractor and had been set to work in a turpentine camp. The fifth volume, entitled "The Outdoor Girls in Florida; or, Wintering in the Sunny South," tells of many other adventures the girls had during their winter among the "orange blossoms," but now it was over, and Deepdale, which they had left covered deep with snow, had begun once more to stir with life beneath the gentle touch of spring.

In the sixth book, "The Outdoor Girls at Ocean View," the girls have many good times and stirring adventures. The discovery of a box, containing veritable riches in diamonds, led to the kidnapping of Betty and Amy and their subsequent rescue.

And now that spring had dipped into summer, and they were again in Deepdale, was this ride of theirs, begun so joyously, about to end in tragedy?

"Frank, Frank!" screamed Grace, "if you don't stop, I'll jump, I will--I will!"

"No, you won't! Sit where you are!" her brother Will commanded sternly. "Sit still, I tell you!"

On, on, they went with ever-increasing speed, while Frank tried desperately to jam the useless brake--but to no effect! The car was like a horse with the bit between its teeth, plunging madly to destruction.

"Oh, oh, *oh!*" screamed Grace, pressing her hands tightly before her eyes. "We're going to be killed, I know it!"

There was a shock, a sound like tearing cloth, the big machine plowed half its length through the big haystack and--stopped!

"Frank, I'm getting smothered; won't you dig me out?" It was Betty's voice, plaintive and half hysterical.

Will and Frank shook the hay from their own eyes and then went to the rescue of the girls. Then they stared at each other. Gradually the look of utter bewilderment faded from their faces and a smile flashed from one to the other like a ray of sunshine.

Then suddenly Mollie laughed. "Oh, you look so funny!" she gasped. "Just when I thought we were all going to be killed----"

"You get disappointed," Frank finished with a rueful smile. "Just the same, it's lucky for us that big haystack was just exactly where it is," he added. "When I hit the rock I sure thought we were all goners."

"Oh, don't," begged Grace, then added, with a shame-faced little smile, "I'm sorry I made such a fuss--I always am ashamed of myself when the danger is over."

"You needn't apologize, Grace," said Betty, quickly. "If there's one time you ought to be excused for making a fuss it's when you think it's going to be your last chance."

That was Betty all over--bright, generous, fun-loving, the acknowledged leader of the girls. Grace was tall, graceful, slender, with a pretty face framed in a wealth of bright hair. She was accustomed to take life more easily than Betty and, although not a coward in the true sense of the word, she was always willing to have the other girls go first. Then there was Mollie, dark eyed and quick tempered, with more than a touch of the French in her, but Betty's equal in bravery. The last of the little quartette was Amy Blackford (formerly called Amy Stonington), who has not yet appeared in this book. Up to a year before she had been surrounded by a mystery which would have held great interest for the girls even had they not loved and admired her for her own good qualities.

Such were the girls who, with Betty's help, were fast recovering their good spirits.

"If we can back the machine out of this haystack," Frank was saying, "I guess we had better start for home."

"But don't you think we had better walk," Grace suggested nervously. "I'm afraid to trust myself to the old thing again."

"Oh, there won't be any danger now," Will assured her. "We can go back by a roundabout route where there aren't any hills to speed us into haystacks. How about it, Frank?"

"You're right! We are not going to take any more chances, I can tell you that." Then, turning to the girl beside him, he added, "How are you feeling, Betty? Awfully shaken up?"

"Not a bit," she assured him, gaily. "Why, after the first shock I really enjoyed it."

"That's the way to talk and I'm mighty glad no one's hurt. Now for home."

After a great number of half starts and sudden stops they succeeded finally in backing the great machine away from the haystack and out on the road again.

"Now remember your promise," cried Grace as they started off. "No more speeding, Frank, and no more hills."

"Right," he sang back, cheerily. "We have had excitement enough for one day. Just watch me."

And, true to his word, after an hour's roundabout trip, they swung quietly into Deepdale, without having encountered further mishap on the way.

CHAPTER III

FORTUNES

Early the next morning Mollie hailed Betty as the Little Captain went up the street.

"Where to, so early?" she called. "Why didn't you stop for me?"

"Oh, I was going to Amy's first, to find out how Mrs. Stonington is," said Betty as she turned back. "Then I was going to stop in to see if you would go with me to call on Grace. I promised her last night I would come over this morning."

"But isn't it early?" said Mollie, doubtfully. "Probably Grace won't even be up yet."

The Little Captain seated herself comfortably on the board step of the veranda. "Yes she will," she said decidedly. "I told her yesterday that if I came over this morning and found her in bed eating candy before breakfast instead of enjoying the wonderful morning air, I'd never come over again. She knows that I mean it, too."

"Well, in that case, she may be up," laughed Mollie. "If you will wait a minute I'll go with you to Amy's," she added and ran lightly into the house.

The girls found Mrs. Stonington very much improved and Amy only too glad to get out into the glorious sunshine of the summer morning.

As the three chums, clad daintily in white, with a background of velvety green lawn to set them off, approached the Fords' beautiful home, they were surprised beyond measure to see Grace swinging leisurely back and forth in the big hammock under the trees. They stopped short and gazed upon this spectacle.

"And she's not eating chocolates either," remarked Amy in an awe-struck voice. "What can have happened?"

"I wish you would stop gazing at me like that," said Grace, raising her head and looking at the three girls who were still regarding her fixedly. "Is it my hair, or is my nose red, or is it my skirt that's too tight? Please tell me and get it over with. I can stand anything but this suspense."

"A miracle has taken place--the impossible has happened!" cried Betty, striking a theatrical pose. "Never again will I doubt the wisdom of those so learned---"

"What is she raving about, girls, do you know?" asked Grace plaintively. "She never used to be like this."

"It's the shock, that's all," interpreted Mollie. "Never mind, Betty," she added soothingly. "You will get used to it in time."

"Amy, you're the only sane one in that crowd," cried Grace in desperation. "Will you kindly explain what those two lunatics are talking about--if they know themselves!" This last was uttered so vindictively that the girls came down from rhetorical heights with a bounce.

"Oh," laughed Betty, running up to Grace and giving her a hug. "You must really forgive us, Grace dear, we just couldn't help it--you reformed so suddenly, you know."

"Reformed?" said Grace, still mystified, while she made room for the other girls in the hammock. "What do you mean--'reformed'? I didn't know I needed to."

"Listen to the child," mocked Mollie. "Why, don't you know, Grace, that there isn't one of us that doesn't need a lot of reforming?"

"Speak for yourself, Mollie Billette," remarked Grace, a trifle shortly, for her natural good temper was becoming ruffled under the continued teasing.

"Now, please, girls," said Betty, fearing a storm, "don't let's quarrel, whatever we do. We were only surprised to see you up so early, Grace, that's all. But now I'm mighty glad you are, because we'll have a chance for a nice long talk. What time do you suppose it is now?"

"It was nearly ten when I came out of the house," Grace replied, placated by the Little Captain's tactful changing of the subject. "Can't you all stay to lunch? Then we can make a good long day of it."

The girls took a walk about town before lunch, just to "be sure of an appetite," as Amy said. During the tramp they

met Roy Anderson, an old boy friend.

"Are you doing anything particular this afternoon?" he wanted to know, and upon the girls replying in the negative, asked if he might bring some of the other boys around. "We have made a discovery!" he shouted after them. "We'll tell you about it when we see you."

And so, the noon meal over, the girls strolled out on the lawn again and waited eagerly for what the boys might have to tell them.

They had not long to wait--in fact they had barely had time to settle themselves in the comfortable chairs, when along the road came--not the boys, but a ragged, bent, old woman, leaning heavily on a twisted stick for support. Instead of going straight on, as the girls had expected she would do, the old woman turned in at the drive and made straight for them.

"What shall we do? Shall we go in the house?" whispered Grace to Betty. "I don't like her looks very much, do you?"

"She isn't particularly beautiful," Betty telegraphed back. "But she can't possibly do us any harm. Let's wait and see what she has to say."

As the old hag drew nearer, the girls instinctively shrank back in their chairs. And, indeed, she was not a prepossessing figure. Her head was bound about with an old red handkerchief, tied under the wrinkled chin and framing a face seamed and crisscrossed with a million wrinkles. An old, tattered shawl covered her bent shoulders, and the hand that grasped the knotted stick was claw-like and emaciated. Her eyes were the only part of her that seemed to retain some semblance of youth. They were little and beady and exceedingly keen, so that when she raised them to Betty's young face, that staunch little captain felt that she would almost rather be anywhere else than there beneath the trees with the searching eyes of the old crone fixed upon her.

"What do you want?" Betty gasped, trying to make her voice calm and steady, but with little success.

"I won't hurt you, pretty ladies," said the old woman, divining their repugnance and half-fear and desiring to placate them. "Won't you have your fortunes told? Only twenty-five cents, and I can tell you of your past and as much as you will of your future. Only a quarter, pretty ladies."

Betty glanced inquiringly at the other girls, but they shook their heads decidedly--the mumbling old crone was getting on their nerves.

"Not to-day," said Betty, as kindly as she could. "We are expecting company and we haven't time. Some other time perhaps."

"Some other day may be too late," said the old crone, leeringly. "Oh, yes, you will have all the time there is to be miserable in. And you will be! You will be! The curse be on you for refusing an old woman like me the price of her bread!" and she hobbled down the long drive muttering to herself and stopping once to shake her fist at the startled girls.

"Oh, did you ever!" Mollie exclaimed. Just then there was a sound of jolly, masculine laughter and around a corner of the house came the boys.

"Oh, I've never been so glad to see anybody in all my life!" said Grace with a little shiver, as the boys paused to gaze after the retreating form of the old hag. "It is such a relief to have some boys around!"

"I say! who's your venerable friend, Grace?" Roy inquired as he and his friends joined the girls.

"Yes, what did you do to her, Betty?" It was Allen Washburn who asked the question. He was a young lawyer, liked and admired by every one in Deepdale, and let it be said here that Betty was no exception to the general rule. And as for young Allen Washburn himself, he never sought to conceal his genuine admiration for the Little Captain. "The last I saw of her, she was shaking her fist at the house. She didn't seem to be in any too sweet a temper, either."

"It was just because we wouldn't let her read our fortunes," Betty explained. "Oh, I wouldn't let that old thing touch me!"

"I could tell your fortune for you, if you'd only let me," whispered Allen, so softly that only Betty heard. But that was as it should be, since it was intended for her ear alone.

"She looked just like a--oh, what do you call them?--the people that wander around all the time and never have any homes--oh, I know, gypsies," said Amy eagerly. "Wasn't she a gypsy, Will?"

"Oh, now she's gone and spilled the beans!" said Frank, so ruefully that they all laughed. "Here we come, all primed to give you a surprise, and we find you prepared beforehand."

"But what surprise?" asked Mollie. "She didn't tell us anything--we wouldn't let her."

"Yes, she did. She told you everything, only you don't know it," was Will's enigmatic comment. "You see," he went on, "there's a gypsy encampment near by and we thought you girls might like to visit it. The caravans they use and the strange costumes are all mighty interesting."

"Oh, won't that be fine!" said Grace eagerly. "I've always wanted to see one of those things near by. When can we go?"

"I thought you didn't like gypsies, Grace," Betty broke in.

"Well, I wouldn't if they were all like this," answered Grace. "But they're not, are they, Roy? There are lots and lots of really romantic-looking ones if all the books I've read know anything about it."

"Of course there are. You don't suppose we'd take you to see a lot of old crones like this peppery woman, do you?" Roy answered. "Why, I've heard there are some mighty good-looking girls in this crowd."

"Now I see why they're so anxious to go," laughed Betty. "I don't think we'd better chance it, girls. They might become so charmed with the fair gypsy maids that they'd forget our existence."

"I don't think you need worry too much about that," said Allen, answering the challenge in Betty's eyes. "The only question is whether we will have eyes to see the charms of the gypsy maids."

"Here! here!" shouted Will. "You're coming on, Allen, you're coming on. I wish I could reel them off like that. Well, ladies, what day shall we set for the adventure?"

"To-night," said Betty promptly.

"Good," Frank responded. "Betty has the right idea, all right. To-night it is!"

So it was settled, and when they parted eyes were bright with the excitement of the coming adventure.

CHAPTER IV

THE GYPSY ENCAMPMENT

Betty was ready before any one arrived that night. The boys and girls were to meet at her house and from there go on to the gypsy encampment.

She sat on the porch with a light wrap thrown over one arm and waited impatiently.

"Oh, why don't they come?" she thought. "The girls said they would be early, and the boys are always away ahead of time. Oh, here come Grace and Will, now if the others will only hurry."

"Hello, Betty! Been waiting long?" It was Will's cheery greeting.

"Oh, for hours and hours," said the Little Captain with a sigh. "I'd begun to think everybody had forgotten all about it. I'm so glad you're here. You can keep me company anyway."

"Oh, are we the first?" Grace was surprised. "I hurried Will till he nearly had a fit. Said we would be ahead of everybody else, but I didn't believe him."

"Some day," said Will in a prophetic voice, "some day, young lady, you will learn that I *do* know something."

"Oh, do you really think so?" said Grace, hopefully. "If that day ever comes, Will, dear, I will be the very first to congratulate you."

"Here come some of the others," Betty cried out. "I can't quite make them out, but it looks like Roy and Amy and--yes--there's Allen, too. But who is the other girl? It certainly isn't Mollie. I know her walk too well."

"No, it isn't Mollie," said Grace, slowly. "Do you know whom it looks like, Betty?"

"No," said that young person, straining her eyes in the direction of the newcomers. "Who is it?"

"I'm not sure but it looks like----" Grace paused a moment, then said with conviction, "I'm right! It's Alice Jallow, and I don't like her very much. What is she doing in our crowd anyway?"

"That's what I would like to know," growled Will. "We had just enough before. I don't know who's going to take care of her."

"Will, don't be ungallant," warned his sister. "Play the game. Probably there's some explanation, anyway."

But to the Little Captain, as she watched the quartette approaching, there seemed no plausible explanation. Why should Allen be paired off with "this Jallow girl"? Betty knew very little of the latter except that she was always trying to get in where she was not wanted. Well, she certainly was not wanted now. Oh, why did Allen look so happy? If "this Jallow girl" had her, Betty's, escort, where did she come in? Hot tears of anger and mortification rose to her eyes, but she drove them back mercilessly and her greeting to the newcomers was as merry as ever.

"Hello, everybody!" she called. "You surely took long enough to get here."

"Hello, Betty! This is----" Amy paused, then went on rather awkwardly. "You see, Alice happened to be at the house when the boys came and--well--we brought her along," she finished, lamely.

"And here I am," said Alice effusively. "I do hope I'm not putting any one out. The idea of visiting the gypsy camp was so fascinating that I simply couldn't resist the temptation. I think you might have let me in on it in the first place," and she looked reproachfully at Allen.

That young gentleman had been sending imploring looks in Betty's direction over Alice Jallow's head, which the former had chosen absolutely to ignore. Now, being thus appealed to, he smiled down at Alice.

"It certainly was a grave oversight on our part," he said.

Betty felt as if her little world had been turned upside down and she wanted to shake somebody--it didn't much matter who it was--but shake somebody she must, good and hard!

Just at this critical moment up came the two missing ones, Mollie and Frank--and a third.

"Now, who is that?" thought the poor Little Captain in despair. "If this keeps on, we shall have the whole town

assembled pretty soon. Oh, dear!"

"Betty, this is a friend of mine, Jack Sanford," Frank introduced him in his own pleasant way. "He's not such a bad chap when you get to know him well," he added, while his friend thanked him, ironically.

Betty acknowledged the introduction gaily. If Allen liked "this Jallow girl," why, he could, that was all! and she was not going to let them spoil the evening for her. Besides, here was one providentially sent, or so it seemed to her. And he was nice, too, very nice! He seemed to be hail-fellow-well-met with the boys. And the girls--well, one could see that they liked him from the start. But if only Allen would not look so happy!

"Suppose we start, now we're all here," suggested Roy. "The sooner we get there the more time we'll have."

"Bright boy," commented Allen. "How did you ever find that out?" Then, under cover of the laughter and the darkness, he found Betty's hand and held it for a moment. "Betty," he pleaded, "I----"

"May I, Miss Nelson?" It was Jack Sanford, bowing low before her.

"Sounds like a dance," laughed Betty, and added: "Indeed you may. Oh, isn't it a wonderful night?"

Allen ground his teeth and once more submitted to the effusive attentions of Alice Jallow. If Betty could have seen him then she would have been moved to pity.

"Is it very far to the camp?" Mollie asked, after they had been walking some time. "I'm anxious to get there."

"Not very far, now," Roy assured her. "It's just on the outskirts of the town. Just wait till you get there. When you see how interesting it is you won't mind the walk."

"I guess you don't know whom you are talking to," called Betty, just behind them. "You forget that walking is our middle name."

"Pardon, fair damsel," said Roy in mock humility. "I must confess I had forgotten for the moment that----"

"Oh, look! look! All the bonfires and things and people sitting around them!" Mollie interrupted. "That must be the camp, isn't it, Roy?"

It really was the camp. The young people drew closer together as they neared it, fascinated, yet half afraid. There were huge bulky objects in the background beyond the illuminated circle of firelight.

"Those are the caravan wagons, aren't they?" demanded the Little Captain in hushed tones. "Oh, I wish I could see inside one of them."

"Yes, they are the Pullman cars of the gypsies," laughed Jack. "Perhaps you wouldn't like them so much inside if you did see them," he added.

"Oh, let's go on," urged Grace at Betty's elbow. "I'm dying to see more of them, even if I am horribly afraid. Just look at all the tents they have put up. They must expect to stay a long time."

The girls' eyes grew wider and wider as they advanced toward the circle of flickering firelight. It seemed they were not the gypsies' only visitors, for there were many residents of Deepdale, some of whom the girls recognized.

The roving folk had set forth their wares upon rudely constructed tables, ready for the first purchaser. Some of the things were truly beautiful--pieces of rare old lace, chains and chains of many-colored beads, silver that was polished till it reflected dazzlingly the dancing firelight. There were rude tents set aside for the telling of fortunes, and somewhere further back in the camp the wild, sweet strains of a violin mingled with a man's sweet tenor voice.

"Some of those fellows surely can sing," Frank remarked. "I'd give a good hundred dollars this minute if I had his voice."

"I wish I could find one for you, Frank," said Grace. "I need the hundred badly."

The young people spent over an hour wandering about the place, enjoying to the full the novelty and the romance of it all.

Just as they had about made up their minds that it was time to go home, Betty, who had exclaimed more than once over the beauty of some of the young gypsy girls, their beauty being emphasized by the picturesque clothes they wore, stepped back to look into a tent they had passed a moment before.

Allen saw his opportunity and was quick to improve it.

"You must be careful how you trot about alone here, Betty. You know----" he began, when she interrupted him.

"Oh, it is!" she said. "It is!"

"What?" asked Allen, mystified.

She drew him back into the shadows before she answered. "I wasn't sure, but now I know," she said. "That's the very old woman who wanted to tell our fortunes at Grace's this afternoon."

"Well, what of it?" he inquired, with an attempt to be reassuring. "She won't hurt you--not while I'm around."

"Oh, but I don't like her looks," and the girl shivered slightly.

"You need your coat, Betty," said Allen. "Where is it?"

"Jack--Mr. Sanford has it. I'll get it."

She started forward, but he laid a restraining hand on her arm. "Betty, Betty," he whispered. "You're not going to keep this up, are you?"

"What do you mean?" she questioned, with an attempt at dignity that was not a very great success.

"You know as well as I do," he answered. "It wasn't my fault. Amy introduced her and I--well, I had to be decent. Betty, don't you know me well enough----"

"Where have you people been anyway?" It was Amy's voice. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Right here, every minute," said Allen cheerily, and the little party started on again. Not, however, before Mollie and Grace had exchanged very significant glances.

The young people turned for a last look at the gypsy rendezvous before a bend in the road shut it from view.

"I've had an awfully good time," said Grace, then added, irrelevantly: "I only hope those gypsies don't steal anything."

"That's a good hope," whispered Allen in Betty's ear. "They are dabsters when it comes to getting away with other people's property."



CHAPTER V

THIEVES IN DEEPPDALE

The door bell rang out its noisy summons.

Betty forestalled the maid on her way to the portal with a merry: "I'll go, Mary. It's probably one of the girls."

It was not one of the girls only, but all three of them, and seemingly in the wildest excitement.

"Oh, Betty, Betty!" Mollie cried, not even stopping to say "hello." "Have you heard the news--have you?"

"No, it's so early----" began Betty, but Grace interrupted her.

"But it isn't half as bad as what happened to us," she said, sinking into a porch chair and fanning herself violently, being overcome either by the heat or her emotions--possibly both. "Why! dad's running around the house like a mad man this morning, swearing all sorts of vengeance on the thief, whoever he or she is--I suppose it must be a he, though, because women don't steal----"

"Hold on, hold on a minute," commanded Betty, her hands over her ears. "How *do* you expect me to find out what has happened if you won't come to the point?"

"Well, I was going to tell you if you'd only have a little patience," Grace continued, in an injured voice. Here she paused to put into her mouth a chocolate cream, which she had taken from a little box she had brought with her. Then, seeing Amy about to speak, she went on hastily, holding the box out mutely toward her friends, who all shook their heads. "Here I rush all the way over and get all heated up and everything----"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Grace!" Mollie broke in, having come to the end of her patience. "If you don't tell the story I will. You have been half an hour already getting nowhere."

At this dire threat Grace continued quickly. "Oh, well," she capitulated, "since you are in such a hurry--well, the fact is, Betty, Beauty's been stolen," and she delivered the terrible news in a hushed voice.

"Oh!" said Betty, horrified. "And your father valued him above all the rest. Are you sure he was stolen, Grace?"

"Well, I don't see what else could have happened to him." Now that she had delivered her news, Grace was once more as calm and composed as ever. "The horse couldn't very well file the padlock from the outside or climb out the window, and the groom wouldn't be very likely to take him for a gentle stroll in the middle of the night. And unless one of those things has happened, Beauty has been stolen. Anyway, he's gone, there's no doubt of that."

"That's pretty bad--I can imagine just how your father feels, Grace," Betty's voice was grave. "I do hope they will be able to trace him. Does your father suspect the gypsies?"

"Yes, ever since the store was robbed the other night, dad has been suspicious of them," Grace answered. "He has tried to watch his horses with especial care, too. That's one thing that makes him so tearing mad to-day. Oh, you should have heard him!" and Grace sighed at the memory.

"I remember," said Betty thoughtfully, "that Allen said something the other night when we went to visit their camp about the gypsies being expert thieves. From the way things have turned out I guess he knew what he was talking about."

"And they looked so nice and romantic, too," said Amy, and drew a sigh at the irony of fate.

This conversation took place between the girls on a certain morning several days after their memorable visit to the gypsy camp. A day or so before one of the large stores of the town had been looted and practically cleaned out. For two days Deepdale had been in a furore of excitement and indignation, for in the memory of most of the inhabitants no such crime had ever been perpetrated. There had been small robberies, of course, but that Hendall's, traditionally the oldest store in Deepdale, should have been treated to such insult, and by a band of roving gypsies, too--for every one suspected them from the first--why, it was unheard of! incredible!

Detectives and sheriff had searched the town from end to end but had found no sign of the missing goods. They had visited the gypsy camp, too, submitting it to a strict investigation, but with no result. The countryside had been scoured for miles around, but no trace had as yet been found of the missing criminals nor of their loot. Indeed, the thieves had covered their tracks well, and the inhabitants of Deepdale were beginning to lose hope of immediate

reparation.

Such was the chaotic state of affairs on this beautiful summer morning when Mr. Ford had awakened to find his splendid horse, Beauty, the ornament of his stables and the pride of his heart, strangely and inexplicably missing.

For an hour or so the girls pondered on these two mysterious robberies and found themselves not one whit nearer the solution. It was Mollie who finally suggested that they go to her house and look at a couple of new dresses she had bought recently. "It will help get our minds off the robbery," she said.

The girls agreed readily, for they were always anxious to see Mollie's things. "They are always so novel," Grace had once said, and Mollie had been uncertain whether to ticket it a compliment or otherwise.

"Really, my head aches trying to figure things out," Amy complained, as they neared the Billette home.

"Well, it seems to me it is just about time some of those detectives found things out for us," Mollie rejoined. "Will ought to be able to help, Grace," she added, "since he is in the secret service."

"You may be sure he is doing his best," Grace retorted with spirit. "Those gypsies make thieving their profession and it isn't always as easy to track them as it seems. If you don't believe me, just try it yourself."

"I didn't say anything about not believing you," Mollie rejoined, icily. "And there's no reason why you have to go up in the air about nothing. I was simply suggesting, that's all."

"Girls, some day, I am just going to get terribly angry about something and then let fly," Betty broke in. "I'd just like to know what would happen and where we would end up if you didn't have me to act as peacemaker."

"Probably in the county jail for disturbing the peace," said Grace ruefully, and Mollie laughed, thereby restoring harmony, for the time being at least.

"Oh, hurry, please do hurry, Mollie!" A small cyclone precipitated itself out of the house and into Mollie's arms. "Muvver's cwysin' tuwible and she's telephonin' to evvybody to make you come home quick. Oh--oh----" This was the beginning of a muffled wail--silenced by Mollie's hand over the small one's mouth.

"Dodo, don't cry," Mollie implored. "What is the matter with mother? Is she sick? Oh, don't bother to tell me--I'll see for myself. Come on, girls."

"Had we better?" asked Betty, with instinctive delicacy. "It may be something she won't want us to know."

"Oh, don't be silly," cried Mollie, impatiently, shoving the three girls before her through the doorway. "You know as well as I do that we haven't any secrets from you. Oh, what can be the matter?"

They found Mrs. Billette in the library where her small daughter, Dora--nicknamed Dodo, and one of a pair of exceedingly mischievous twins--ran to tell her of Mollie's timely arrival.

The girls followed hesitatingly, as Mollie rushed forward and threw her arms about her mother's neck, crying: "Mother, dear, what is it? Dora says you have been crying and that you have been telephoning for me all over. Oh, I wish I had known! We would have run all the way."

"Oh, I suppose a few moments more or less would make no difference. It wouldn't bring back the silver," said Mrs. Billette, quietly. Hysterics had given place to a sort of despairing resignation. "Only, at first, I felt as if I must talk to some one about it. The twins didn't understand, of course, and I couldn't very well talk to Jane."

"But, Mother, what is it?" Mollie demanded again. "Has Aunt Elvira died or has Paul caught the mumps, or----"

"Of course not, Mollie! How silly of you," her mother broke in, impatiently. "Aunt Elvira will probably live another twenty years. And as for Paul's having the mumps----"

"Then what is it? Have we been robbed?" Mollie's little foot tapped a sharp tattoo on the floor.

"That is just what has happened to us," said Mrs. Billette, as the girls stared incredulously. "We've been robbed of some things that money never can replace. Oh-oh-oh, if I had only put it in a safer place! How could I have been such a fool! Oh! oh!" and Mrs. Billette, poor woman, was fast verging on another attack of hysteria.

Mollie put her arms about her mother soothingly. "There, there, Mother," she crooned. "It may turn out all right after all. But, remember, you haven't told us what is lost yet," she suggested, with a gentleness very unlike her former impatience. "I think it would make you feel much better to talk about it. Did you say it was the silver that had been stolen?"

"Yes, the silver tea service that has been in the family for over a hundred and twenty years." Mrs. Billette's French origin gleamed in her dark eyes as she added: "Oh, if we could only catch them! I'd like to make them suffer for this!"

From Mrs. Billette's rather disjointed story the girls gathered that not only the valuable tea service was missing, but also a number of smaller articles, such as knives and forks. Then there was a valuable jet necklace which Mrs. Billette had locked up with the silver for safe keeping.

The girls were stunned by this last calamity. They could think of one solution and one only, and that was--the gypsies.

As Betty took leave of the girls at her own door that noon, after vainly urging them to stay to lunch--they were too impatient to get home and spread the news to stop for anything, even lunch at Betty's--she heard the jangle of the telephone.

"Sorry you won't come in," she called. "I'll see you later, anyway!" and she flew upstairs to answer the insistent summons.

"Hello! . . . Oh, that you, Allen? . . . Yes, I've just come home from Mrs. Billette's. . . . She has lost a silver tea service and some other things. . . . What's that? . . . Yes, stolen. . . . Gone! . . . Are you sure? . . . Oh, now they will never get their things! . . . Yes, come over to-morrow and we can talk things over. . . . Don't be silly! . . . Yes, come early. . . . Good-bye."

As she hung up the receiver mechanically, Betty's gaze traveled out of the window and over the smooth, green lawn to the far-distant horizon.

"Gone!" she murmured. "The gypsies are gone! Oh, I wonder where they went to?"



CHAPTER VI

A WONDERFUL OUTING

"Hello, Betty, that you? Yes, this is Mollie, of course. It seems to me that I'm always at the 'phone these days. But, oh, Betty, I just simply couldn't wait a minute to tell you! . . . Yes, I've just received a letter. . . . What's that? . . . No, mother hasn't been able to trace her silver at all yet. Isn't it terrible? . . . Oh, well, she is becoming resigned to the worst. . . . But, Betty, aren't you a bit interested? . . . Yes, I know you are, dear, and it's very sweet of you. . . . Well, it's from Aunt Elvira. Remember I told you the other day that she intended to go to Europe? Well, it's about that. . . . Yes, there has been so much excitement about these old gypsies that I had almost forgotten I had such an aunt. . . . No, I won't tell you one thing more about it, except that everything is O. K. Will you come over to-night? . . . What's that--you can't? Oh, Betty, you just have to. Oh, well, if that's all why don't you bring him along? . . . Yes, all the boys are coming anyway. Will says he has something to talk over with us. . . . Then I may count on you, to-night, honey? . . . All right--good-bye till then."

This conversation took place in the morning. Promptly at eight that evening the door bell rang and Betty, after a last peep in the mirror and a finishing pat to her dress, flew down to answer the summons.

"Right on the dot, Allen," she laughed, flinging the door wide open. "The clock is just striking the hour--listen," and obediently he listened, his eyes on Betty's face, while the sweet chimes filled the hall with melody.

"No wonder I am on the minute," he said, smiling whimsically. "I have been wandering around for the past half hour trying to kill time. You see I didn't quite dare to come at half-past seven."

She laughed gaily. "You would have had to spend your time in the library if you *had* come early," she said. "Because I have been ready for only half a minute. Here's your hat, Allen," she added, taking it down from the peg where he had just deposited it for the evening. Her manner was grave but mischief sparkled in her eyes.

"What's the big idea?" he inquired, regarding the hat held out to him with a puzzled expression. "I am very well acquainted with the article in your hand. Too well acquainted, in fact, for this is the second season we have been chums; and I see prospect of a third, if the law business doesn't pick up. But, seriously, what is the idea, Betty? Do you want me to go home and spend a dismal evening all by myself--is that it?"

"Far from it, Allen. Oh, please don't look so glum," she added, and the mischief bubbled over from her eyes and she laughed happily.

Opening Allen's hand, she placed the unwelcome hat therein and closed his fingers over it. "The explanation for all this," she went on, making him a curtsy, "is very simple. We have been invited to spend the evening at Mollie's."

"Oh, bother M----" he began, then added, decidedly: "I came to see you to-night and I am not going to the Billettes' or anywhere else! Here, hat, get back where you belong," and he flung the offending article back on the hook with an air of finality that matched his words.

"Please don't be an old bear," coaxed Betty, and Betty knew how to coax to perfection. "Mollie has some perfectly wonderful news to tell us and all our girls and boys are going to be there to hear it. You wouldn't want me to be terribly disappointed--now you know you wouldn't," and she looked at him appealingly.

Mollie opened the door to them herself, radiantly eager to tell her news.

"Oh, hurry, you two!" she cried. "I thought you would never get here. We have been waiting for--oh, ever so long."

"Well, if we are the last, everybody must have turned over a new leaf just for to-night," remarked Betty, as she started for the library from which came a confused murmur of many voices, speaking all at once, with now and then a burst of merry laughter.

"Leave your hat here, Allen," said Mollie, and Betty threw him a merry glance over her shoulder.

"Hello, everybody," she called a moment later, as she flung aside the portieres and stood framed in the doorway. "Mollie tells us we are the last and----"

"Well, so you are. We thought you and Allen had mistaken the date," said Frank. "Accidentally on purpose," he added slyly.

"Not a chance in the world, Frank," said Allen, who had come into the room in time to hear the last remark. "I might

be afflicted with loss of memory; but, Betty--never!" They all laughed with enjoyment--all but Betty who threw him a reproachful glance which he refused to catch.

"Well, now we are here, let's have the news," said Roy, who was always impatient to get to the heart of things. "Come on, Mollie--out with it."

Nothing loath, Mollie settled herself with an important air and began her tale.

"Well, you see----" she began, when Will interrupted.

"No, we don't. What?" he asked innocently.

"Now I won't try to tell it at all if you are going to begin that," said Mollie with asperity. And Grace added:

"Do let Mollie tell it her own way, Will, and if you interrupt again, we will get the boys to throw you out. You will do it, won't you, boys?"

"Sure!" they shouted with one accord, and Will retired meekly into a corner.

"I'll begin all over again," said Mollie. "You all know, with the exception of Amy and Allen, and they soon will, that I have been expecting to hear from my aunt and uncle every day. They took rather a long time to make up their minds, but now everything is settled. They are really going to Europe, and we girls are going to have the use of their bungalow, 'The Shadows,' for the summer. Or at least for the month and a half that is left."

"Splendid, Mollie! Where is the bungalow?" inquired Betty, leaning forward eagerly. "We ought to have a wonderful time."

"Well, I hope we shall," Mollie continued. "The bungalow is on an island called Pine Island in Lake Tarracuso. They say it is a beautiful place, and it is only about a day's journey in an auto. We could make it easily."

"All this is very fine, but where do we come in?" Allen inquired. "There isn't room in this wonderful bungalow for us, is there?"

"Of course not!" said Mollie scornfully. "And if there were, do you think we would have you boys fussing around?"

"Well, I was just in search of information," Allen answered defensively. "And all I get is scorn and ridicule."

"Hard luck, old man," said Will, feelingly. "I am in the same boat. But you girls had better look out," he added threateningly. "Don't forget that I had something to suggest to-night and if you don't treat me better, I'll----"

"Will this do," interrupted Mollie, and, with hands clasped in prayerful attitude, she besought Will, with tears in her voice, to have pity. "Oh, kind and noble sir," she said, "be kind--be gracious to us, your humble slaves, and deign to honor----"

"Now that's something like," broke in Will, beaming around on the assembled company. "If you had done that from the first, Mollie----"

"Oh, Will, please hurry," Betty urged impatiently. "I know you have something good to tell us, and I wish you wouldn't keep us in such terrible suspense."

"Well, since you appreciate how great is the----"

"Yes, yes, go on," Grace interrupted.

"News I am about to impart," he continued without a glance in her direction.

"You will impart it," Allen finished for him.

"Thank you," said Will, bowing gravely in Allen's direction. "As our friend says, I will proceed. Well, to come down to brass tacks," he continued, dropping the air of dignity, which, considering his youthful appearance, was always very comical, "I thought maybe you fellows would like to put up a tent on the same island and camp there near the girls for the rest of the summer. We could have no end of fun."

There was a yell of joy from the boys, and the excited exclamations, questions and answers that followed showed that they agreed heartily with Will in his last prophecy that "they would have no end of fun."

"Oh, won't it be great!" cried Betty, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "I do believe this is the very best of all,"

then her face clouded as she turned to Allen, who had not been taking a very active part in the conversation.

"Do you think you can make it, Allen?" she asked, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice. "You said something about a change in the management of the firm----" her voice was questioning.

"Why, I was just wondering if I couldn't fix things up some way," he answered seriously. "It looks as if some of our work might have to lay over for a time anyway, and if it does----"

"Of course you will have to manage it somehow, Allen," Frank broke in. "Why, having you there would be half the fun!"

"Oh, I guess I can," Allen began uncertainly. Then he continued: "But you can just better believe if there is a chance in the world, I'll be there."

"That's the way to talk," cried Mollie. "Now there is just one important thing we haven't decided yet, girls, and that is, whom are we going to have for a chaperon."

"I have been thinking of that, and I am sure I know just the one," said Amy quietly; and they turned to her in amazement. Amy was like that, she didn't talk much, but when she did, what she said was usually to the point. "You all know young Mrs. Irving whose husband travels?"

"And she seems sort of lonely sometimes," Grace added, taking a chocolate nut from a dish of candy that Mollie had placed, for Grace's special delectation, on the table.

"Amy, you *are* a wonder," said Mollie, regarding her chum with awe. "I would never have thought of her in a thousand years, and of course she's just the one."

"Well, now that the all-important question of chaperon is happily settled," said Roy, veering back to the point like a compass, "suppose we decide when to start."

After much discussion it was finally decided they were to start a week from that day, which was Tuesday.

It was late when Mollie's guests started for home, and even then they were all reluctant to go. As Allen stood on the porch of the Nelson home a few minutes later, Betty turned to him impulsively.

"Oh, I do hope you will be able to go, Allen," she said.

"Would you be sorry if I didn't?" he asked her, eagerly.

"Why, of course."

"Then, I'll be there," he said, with a smile.

CHAPTER VII

CLOSED FOR REPAIRS

"Grace, Grace, do wake up!" Betty looked at her sleeping chum in absolute amazement. How could anybody sleep so soundly on this, the day of days, when one should have been awake at six o'clock thinking over the delights in store!

Grace had come over the night before to talk over some minor details of the outing, bringing with her a new and, she declared, a specially delicious brand of chocolates. It had been so late when she had started to leave that she had been prevailed upon to spend the night with Betty. And so it was that on that eventful morning she lay slumbering peacefully in the Little Captain's bed, defying all that impatient young person's efforts to rouse her.

"Grace! Grace!" Betty cried again. "Won't you please wake up? Why, it's seven o'clock this minute! We have to be out of the house in an hour."

Grace groaned dismally. "Oh, Betty, I will have to have some more sleep," she wailed, pitifully. "If I don't I won't be fit for a thing the rest of the day. Don't you suppose we could make it if we started by nine?" she added hopefully.

Betty paused in the act of putting on a shoe and held it poised in the air while she gazed at her friend incredulously.

"Grace Ford, of all the----" she almost stuttered. Then, as a thought flashed before her mind she laughed delightedly. "Can't you see them, Grace," she chuckled, putting on one shoe and picking up the other. "Can't you see the boys when I tell them they will have to walk around the block while Grace gets her beauty sleep. Oh! oh!" and even Grace had to laugh at the picture.

"They probably wouldn't wait anyway," Betty continued, with the tact of a diplomat. "They would go on to The Shadows and let you follow later at your leisure. It will be a nice, dusty, hot ride in the train, too," she added, examining the lace on her handkerchief with the air of a connoisseur.

Grace sat up on the edge of the bed and regarded her chum reproachfully. "Nobody has any heart at all, and you least of all, Betty Nelson," she complained. "Oh, where did I put my slippers? I was so excited last night I don't remember what I did with them," and she began a listless search under the bed.

"They are over by that chair," said Betty patiently. Then went on: "Oh, Grace, dear, please wake up. You will give me the blues if you don't shake off that dead and alive air. Imagine Betty Nelson with the blues to-day."

"It *is* rather impossible," remarked Grace, regarding Betty's flushed cheeks and dancing eyes with admiration. "I wish I didn't need any more sleep than you, Betty. Oh, well, the worst part of getting up is over now and I'll feel fine when I get some breakfast. You just watch me."

"That's something like," Betty said approvingly. "Oh, Grace, we are going to have one of the most glorious times we ever had in our lives to-day."

"Shouldn't wonder," Grace agreed. "What does that clock say, half-past seven? Oh, Betty, now I *will* have to hurry!"

"If you glare at the clock like that it is apt to develop palpitation of the heart and stop altogether," laughed Betty. "It can't help the time, you know."

"Well, that is the very first time I have ever been accused of stopping a clock," said Grace with dignity. Then added plaintively: "And by my best friend, too! Oh, well, I suppose you can get used to anything if you try hard enough."

"Oh, Grace, you're a dear when you look resigned like that," said Betty, dancing over to her friend and hugging her ecstatically. "If you weren't so pretty, I wouldn't dare talk about stopping clocks," she added, and peace was restored, and soon both hurried down to breakfast.

"Oh, there they are now," cried Betty, hastily swallowing the last of her cocoa. "I knew they would be here before we were half ready. Oh, Gracy, dear, hurry, will you!"

"I am all ready," Grace answered. "Suppose you go out and speak to them while I get the luggage. I'll bring down your hat and coat, too, if you want me to."

"You *are* a dear," said Betty, for the second time this morning. "Goodness, they are making enough noise with their

old horns. Anybody would think there were ten automobiles instead of two," and while she ran out to greet the newcomers, Grace hurried--yes, actually *hurried*--up the stairs to get the small bags they were to take with them for immediate use, in case the trunks, which had been sent on before, did not arrive in time.

Betty found the others all radiant. Roy was at the wheel in Mollie's car--she had invited him to act as chauffeur and he had gleefully accepted--with Mollie herself beside him and Will and Amy in the tonneau.

The others--Mrs. Irving, their young and jolly chaperon, and the four girls and boys--were to make the journey in Frank's big car, with Frank, of course, at the wheel.

"Hello, Betty!" Will shouted. "You are looking as sweet and fresh as a daisy! Jump in! Where's that runaway sister of mine? I hope you succeeded in getting her up in time."

"I did--after considerable persuasion," laughed Betty. "I came out to tell you we just have to get our outside things on and we shall be ready. I can see Grace beckoning now--just a minute," and she ran toward the house.

"Can't we carry the luggage--and the chocolates?" said Frank and Allen together.

"If you insist," Betty flung the answer over her shoulder as she joined Grace.

The boys had tumbled out of the automobile and were racing up the drive as if their lives depended on their reaching the porch at the same second. The girls adjusted their pretty panamas before the wide mirror while the boys picked up the bags and waited.

"Is my hat on right, Allen, or should it be tilted a little more over the left eye?" mimicked Frank, as they watched the girls. "Or, perhaps it should be made to cover my face entirely?"

"I think the latter--with places for the eyes and nose," said Allen in the same tone of voice.

"Anybody who invented such a hat would be a benefactor to the world at large, Frank," said Betty, as she swept past him--her nose in the air.

"Oof! That was an awful one," returned Frank, while Grace chuckled at his discomfiture. "A few more of those, Betty, and I am afraid I shall have to stay at home!"

"That sounds just like Percy," Betty remarked, as the boys deposited the luggage in the car and opened the door for the girls. "For goodness' sake, don't take him for a model, Frank."

"I wonder where the dear old chappie is, anyway," remarked Allen as he took his seat between Betty and Mrs. Irving in the tonneau. Grace was to sit with Frank. "I haven't seen him about town lately. I wonder if mother has taken her darling boy to the seashore," he added, as the car moved off.

"I hope so. If she would only take him to Kalamazoo it would suit me better," said Betty. "It's a wonder he didn't invite himself to come along."

"Nothing doing!" laughed Frank. "I can just imagine darling Percy sleeping in a tent and cooking his own meals. Can't you, Allen? Oh, what a circus!"

"It is rather hard to imagine the immaculate Percy in those surroundings," drawled Grace. "He would be running down to the river to wash his hands every two minutes. How do we get over to the island from the mainland, Betty, do you remember?" she added. "I know Mollie said something about a steamer, but I didn't get a very good idea of it."

"Oh, we will have lots of fun on it," Betty answered, enjoying the prospect immensely. "Mollie says it is an old, rickety thing that looks as if it were going to pieces any minute. She thinks it must be at least two hundred years old, if what her aunt says is true. It will be awfully interesting."

"Yes, especially if it fulfills its promise and goes to pieces in the middle of the lake," Grace remarked dryly. "I wouldn't mind the dip in weather like this, but I would rather choose the time and place."

"Well, perhaps it *would* be better if we put on our bathing suits first," Betty admitted. "Then we would at least be prepared for the worst."

"I wouldn't call that the worst thing that could happen to us," said Allen; and when the girls looked to him for an explanation he added: "It would be no end of fun to be dumped in the river with a boatful of pretty girls. Think of the good time we could have rescuing you."

"Well, maybe you call that fun, but I should say it was pretty hard work," said Frank, ungallantly. "Especially if the

girls should lose their heads and begin to choke you. All hail, for Davy Jones' locker!"

"You needn't worry," said Betty, with dignity. "In the first place we wouldn't have to be rescued. We can swim just as well as you boys can----"

"Now, now, Betty," Frank protested laughingly, "don't exaggerate."

"I'm not," she denied indignantly. "We haven't lived in the outdoors for nothing, you know."

"Well, we shall have a chance to settle all disputes when we get to Pine Island," said Allen. "To change the subject--has anybody noticed that the sun has gone under a cloud and that there is a stiff little breeze coming up? I shouldn't wonder if we were in for a storm."

"Yes, we may need our bathing suits even before we get to the island," said Betty, ruefully. "I hope you didn't forget to bring your suit, Mrs. Irving," she added, turning to the chaperon, who had been singularly silent during the ride. Perhaps she was realizing for the first time the great responsibility she had taken upon herself. However, she spoke now, accompanying her words with a bright smile.

"Indeed I did," she said. "There is nothing I enjoy quite so much as a good swim. From what you girls say of the island we ought to have as many as we want."

"I am very much afraid we won't leave to wait till we get there," said Frank, regarding the sky anxiously. "Unless I am a pretty poor prophet we are in for a considerable spell of bad weather. What do you say, Allen?"

"I say you are right and then some," Allen answered emphatically. "I think it would be a pretty good stunt to get the top up, Frank, before the girls are deluged."

Accordingly Frank slowed down and waited for Mollie's trim little machine to catch up with them.

"What do you make of the weather?" asked Will, as they came up alongside. "Looks pretty threatening, don't you think?"

"If you don't want to get wet, you had better do what we are going to," Frank advised them. "Put your top up."

"Oh, hurry, Frank, I felt a drop then!" exclaimed Grace. "And there's another! Oh, do hurry!"

The boys worked quickly and in a few moments had raised the tops and were ready to let down the waterproof sides that would make them comfortable in almost any weather.

"We are going to speed up some," Frank shouted to those in the other car. "When the roads get muddy it's going to be pretty hard going, so we want to make good time now."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Roy answered. "Lead, and we follow."

For a short distance all went well. In fact, the girls rather liked riding in the rain. Then suddenly, without any warning, Frank stopped the car.

"What is it, Frank?" cried Grace in alarm. "Did you run over somebody?"

"No, it's worse than that," he answered gloomily. "Look, the road's closed for repairs!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE JET NECKLACE REAPPEARS

The girls and boys stared at each other, dismay written on their faces. The road closed and the rain pouring down in torrents—a nice predicament! It was Mrs. Irving's calm voice which first broke the silence.

"There must be some way around," she said. "It will take us a little longer, that's all."

"Oh, of course we shall be able to strike the main part of the road again if we go a couple of miles out of our way," Frank agreed, a worried frown on his forehead. "The only question is, how are we going to find our way? I didn't bring a chart with me--worse luck."

"Perhaps Roy has one," Betty suggested. "He usually carries a lot of junk like that around with him."

"Well, if he has this particular species of junk it will come in mighty handy just now," said Frank, hopefully. "I'll stick my head out and yell at him. Gee, it sure is raining some!" and he craned his neck toward the other car, squinting his eyes to keep out the stinging drops. "Hey, Roy!" he shouted. "Do you happen to have anything like a map of the surrounding country in your inside vest pocket? If you have, throw it over. We are stuck good and plenty."

"I don't get you, old man," Roy shouted back. "Say the first part of that speech over again, will you?"

Frank drew in his head and mopped his face and hair with a huge silk handkerchief. "Two minutes before the next plunge," he announced to the amused occupants of his car. "Allen, if he doesn't get me this time you will have to change places with me. I'll be almost drowned," then he thrust his head out once more and shouted in the direction of Mollie's car.

"I said, have you a map of this here countryside?" he repeated. "Betty says you usually carry such things with you."

"Sorry I can't oblige," came his disappointing answer. "I left that home in my old coat this morning."

"Of course, just when you knew we would probably need it!" Frank retorted scathingly. "Now we'll have to hike along and trust to luck. Nobody knows where we will end up."

"Well, you needn't blame it on me," Roy shouted wrathfully. "I couldn't be expected to see twenty miles down the road from Deepdale."

"Nobody accused you of it," Frank answered, in the same belligerent voice. "But as long as you had the chart you might have thought far enough----"

Grace seized Frank's arm and pulled him back into the machine. "For goodness' sake, what is the use of making such a fuss about that old map?" she said. "And in the rain, too!"

"Yes, if that were you and I, Grace," said Betty, "the boys would say something about 'isn't that just like a woman,' or, 'aren't girls the limit--always arguing about nothing?'"

"Votes for women!" Allen shouted. "Since when have you taken to stump oratory, Betty?"

"Oh, she is just naturally eloquent," said Grace languidly and they all laughed, even Frank--although his brow clouded anxiously a minute later.

"However, all this isn't getting us anywhere," he said. "We can't stay out here in the rain all night, you know."

"I don't believe any of us expect to," said Allen, dryly. "What do you say we take that side road we passed a little way back, Frank? We can at least see where it leads and we can inquire our way as we go along."

"I don't know whom we shall find to inquire of," said Frank, who, contrary to his usual custom, persisted in looking at the gloomy side of everything. "We didn't pass a soul on the way down."

"Please cheer up, Frank," laughed Betty. "You ask us to make a suggestion and then when we do you scout it. Suppose you tell us what *you* would like to do."

"I know what I should *like* to do," he added, readily. "I should like to break down that board that is in our way and go ahead whether they like it or not. Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

"However?" suggested Allen.

"However, I know we'd get pinched--pardon, ladies--I mean, pulled in. That doesn't sound just right, either, does it?" and he regarded them with laughing eyes.

"I imagine 'arrested' is the word you want," said Betty, demurely.

"That's it, thank you," he said, all irritability gone as suddenly as it had come. "So, as long as that is understood, perhaps we might do worse than follow Allen's suggestion, after all."

"Genius always triumphs in the end," said Allen, with a gravity that set them laughing.

"Perhaps it would be better if we hurried a little," Mrs. Irving suggested, when they had had their laugh out. "With no delay it would take us almost till sundown to reach The Shadows and I don't want to be too late."

"All right, here goes to try to back the old bus out of this mud-hole and turn her around," Frank agreed. "I don't know how long it will take us, though."

"You had better tell Roy what you are going to do," Grace suggested. "We don't want any collisions."

Frank obediently thrust out his head, only to jerk it back quickly the next instant with a startled exclamation. "They are gone!" he said.

"Gone!" the others cried together.

"But they couldn't have gone far," Mrs. Irving added.

"Probably they have motored back to the crossroads to wait for us," Allen suggested. "When they saw the blockade they knew there was just one thing to do and they did it."

"Well, they might at least have told us where they were going," Frank grumbled. "They should have known Mrs. Irving would be worried."

"They probably thought they'd decamp before the mud got so bad," said Betty. "Just the same, they should have told us."

"You are right," Mrs. Irving agreed. "However, the only thing to do now is to follow them as quickly as possible."

For answer, Frank threw in the clutch, and the big machine very slowly and painfully plowed its way through the clinging mud of the road and turned its face toward the crossroads and, in all probability, Mollie's runaway car.

"No wonder they want to repair the road," said Frank when they were well under way. "If the rest of it is any worse than this I should think they would need a new one."

"There's Mollie's car, straight ahead," said Grace a moment later. "I wager they are just sitting there as large as life, laughing at us."

"Let them laugh," said Frank savagely. "It's good to see somebody happy."

"Well, if that's all you want," sang Betty, cheerily, "just look at Grace and Mrs. Irving and Allen and me. I, for my part, am having the time of my life. And look, everybody," she added, "it isn't raining nearly so hard as it was. We will be seeing the sun next!"

"There is just one thing that is better to have along than the sun," said Allen, softly. Mrs. Irving, hearing, smiled knowingly to herself.

When they overtook the car ahead, Roy explained that they had gotten out of the way to make room for Frank's big car to turn around.

"You surely gave us plenty of it," Frank remarked dryly, upon hearing the explanation. "But we will have to hurry now if we expect to get anywhere before dark."

As they all heartily agreed to this, especially Mrs. Irving, there was no further discussion and the cars swung down the narrow side road at a very good pace--good, that is, considering the going.

They had been riding for half an hour when suddenly Betty's prediction came true. The rain stopped entirely and the sun peeped out from behind the clouds, touching the leaden sky with gold.

"I knew it, I knew it!" cried Betty in delight. "Now we can take down the top, can't we, Frank? Oh, let's do it!"

"Mighty good suggestion, Betty," Frank agreed, bringing the car to a stop once more. "The good old sun sure does change everything, doesn't it?"

Five minutes later the cars started on again, with the breeze fanning the faces of the occupants and the sun pouring down goldenly upon them. As Frank had said, "The world was a different place to live in."

A moment later those in Frank's car were surprised to see Roy stop his automobile and signal them to draw up alongside.

"Did you see that gypsy girl who just passed in front of us?" Mollie whispered when they had done as they were desired. Then, as the girls nodded assent, she continued excitedly: "Well, I am almost sure she had on that jet necklace that disappeared with mother's silver! Oh, if we could only follow the girl we might find that too! Oh, can't we--can't we?" she added, fairly dancing with excitement.

"Sure, come ahead, fellows!" cried Allen, who was always ready for adventure. "Did you see which way she went, Roy?"

"Over this way, I think," Roy answered. "We may be able to trace her to the gypsy camp. There must be one near here, and it is probably the same."

"We'll be back in a minute," called Will, and then the boys disappeared in the underbrush.

"Oh, I'm afraid to have them go," whispered Betty fearfully. "Suppose one of those murderous-looking gypsies should stab them in the back!"

"One gypsy couldn't do it all," said Grace with a little nervous laugh. "I guess they can take care of themselves, Betty. We needn't worry."

"What do you think, Mrs. Irving?" Amy asked quietly. "The boys went off in such a hurry they didn't give you a chance to say anything if you had wanted to."

"I imagine talking wouldn't have done much good anyway," answered Mrs. Irving with a smile. "Besides, there should not be any danger if they only keep their wits about them."

"Oh, mother will be the happiest woman in the world if they can only find her silver for her." Mollie was so agitated she was actually trembling. "Girls, do you think they will?"

"There, there, don't get so excited about it, Mollie, dear," cautioned the Little Captain. "You may be sure the boys will do the very best they can."

At the end of the hardest hour they had ever spent, for inaction was not easy for Outdoor Girls, they heard the welcome sound of masculine voices and the regular tramp-tramp of the boys' feet.

"Oh, oh," they cried together in whole-souled relief, while Mollie added eagerly: "Did you get it--did you?"

Allen, who was in the lead, shook his head regretfully. "We couldn't find a sign of anything," he said. "Not even the camp."

"But if you didn't find anything, what ever in the world kept you so long?" Betty demanded. "We imagined all sorts of horrible things happening to you."

"Oh, you couldn't get rid of us," said Will, cheerily. "We hated to come back empty handed--that's all."

"Well, we are mighty glad to get you back," said Mollie, who, after the first disappointment, had become resigned to the inevitable.

"That's the way to make them appreciate us; eh, fellows?" said Frank, as he flung himself into the car. "They don't realize how good we really are till they think we are gone."

"Right you are, Frank," said Roy. "What do you say to full speed ahead?"

"Full speed ahead it is," Frank agreed, and they were off like a shot down the road.



CHAPTER IX

PINE ISLAND AT LAST

The Outdoor Girls and their boy friends made good time for the rest of the journey and it was not quite sundown when they came in sight of the beautiful shores of Lake Tarracusio.

"We will have to leave the automobiles somewhere in town, won't we?" asked Amy, as the two machines drew up side by side for a final consultation.

"Of course," said Grace. "According to Mollie's description of the rickety old steamer I should think it would have all it could do to carry us--let alone the machines."

"There ought to be at least one big garage in town, Frank," Betty suggested. "Let's move along the main street until we find it."

"Nobody asks me for my advice," complained Mollie, in an injured tone. "And I am the most likely one to know about it."

Mollie gave the directions for finding the garage which her aunt had written. A minute later they drew up before the place and tumbled out, bag and baggage, in obedience to Frank's instructions.

While the boys were in the garage talking to the proprietor, the girls had a chance to look about them.

"Isn't it lovely?" cried Mollie delightedly. "It looks just like the little colored pictures of towns they have in the magazines sometimes. The same quaint little frame houses with green shutters and well-kept lawns in front----"

"And flower beds with borders of white shells," Amy finished for her. "I know just what you mean, Mollie; I've seen them myself."

"Girls," said Betty, jumping up from the overturned suitcase she was using for a seat, and speaking impressively, "I have a feeling----" here she paused for effect. "I have a feeling," she continued, "that we are going to have a good time."

"Humph," snorted Mollie. "Why don't you tell us something we don't know?"

"Get off the luggage, you girls!" Will commanded, good-naturedly. "The man in there says we have just exactly five minutes to catch that joke steamer for the island, and if he is right, we've got to hustle. Sling over that bag, Sis, will you?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," said Grace. "But will somebody kindly tell me how we are going to make that boat in five minutes?"

"By running like the very wind," Frank declared, and, picking up two suitcases in one hand, he propelled Grace down the street with the other. "Please hurry," he urged. "Never mind about your hats, girls. It will soon be so dark nobody will be able to see them."

"Shall we give them a race?" asked Allen of Betty, as they prepared to follow Roy, who had taken both Mollie and their gay little chaperon in tow.

"Let's," said Betty with dancing eyes. "Nobody knows us here and I wouldn't care if they did--better people than you and I have run for boats before, Allen."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, argumentatively. "Just as good, possibly, but never better."

"All right, have it your own way," she laughed. "Now do we begin? One--two--three--come on. We'll beat them even with the head start."

Off they raced, light and graceful and buoyantly alive. It was no task at all to overtake Roy, who was hampered by gasping little Mrs. Irving--who, although young, was not--*so* young. Next came Amy and Will, running easily, but Allen and Betty passed them as if they had been standing still.

"Oh, you will, will you?" Will shouted as they went by. "We'll see about that. What do you say, Amy, more speed?"

"Sure," said game little Amy. "I can go lots faster than this." So the two quickened their pace, but Betty and Allen were on wings, and, try as they might, they could not lessen the space between.

"Oh, well, we don't want to beat them anyway, do we?" said Will, when they had to give up.

"No, we wouldn't think of taking the fun from them," she panted, and they both laughed merrily.

Meanwhile the two champion runners had overtaken Grace and Frank and had started on the last lap to the wharf.

"There's the little steamer now, Allen!" gasped Betty. "Oh, do you think it will go without us?" As if for answer the whistle on the curious old ferry shrieked a warning to all would-be voyagers to Pine Island.

Allen's hand tightened its grasp of Betty's arm. "Are you game for one last spurt?" he asked her. "We may be able to make it."

Betty nodded her head, for just then breath was precious and not to be wasted in idle words. Silently, the two called on their splendid reserve strength, while arm in arm they sped along the shore to the dock. They reached it just in the nick of time.

"Hold on there, will you?" shouted Allen, with what he had left of his breath. "The rest of the party will be up in a minute."

True to his prophecy, in a moment's time the entire company was assembled on the ancient dock, tired and out of breath, but happy to be there nevertheless.

"You two are some classy little speed merchants," remarked Frank, slangily, while he regarded the pair thus designated with profound admiration. "I never knew two people could run so fast before."

"So this is the steamer!" said Grace, as soon as she could find breath enough to speak at all. "It does justify your aunt's description, Mollie, although it doesn't look quite so rickety as I expected."

"Probably she will look lots worse in the daylight," Will prophesied cheerfully. "Say, folks, what do you say to our making ourselves comfortable? We have quite some ride before us; eh, Mollie?"

"About half an hour's *sail*," corrected Mollie. "You *ride* in an automobile, but you *sail* in a boat."

"I don't see why ride isn't just as appropriate as sail in this case," said Will, sitting on a suitcase beside Amy, with his back against the rail, prepared to argue the point. "Especially since this old tub has never known a sail."

"Betty," Frank said, turning to that young person who was gazing dreamily out over the water, "what did they put in that basket when we stopped at the hotel this afternoon?"

"What?" she said, bringing her mind down to every-day things with an effort. "Oh, the basket! I wouldn't dare tell you that," she added, with sudden animation. "Boys, boys, if you could only see inside--if you only could--oh, how your mouths would water!"

"Just think," said Grace, tragically. "Here we have everything that goes to make up a romantic sail----"

"What, for instance?" Roy demanded. "If you call a leaky old ferryboat with the weather so damp that you can't touch the rail without feeling as if you have had a dip in the briny--if that's what you call romantic, then give me a good open fire and plenty of chicken bones to gnaw."

"Oh," said Betty in sorrow, shaking her head at the depths to which the boys had fallen. "Frank, I would never have thought of you. Just the same," she added, in a stage whisper, "I wouldn't mind having a couple of them myself."

"Betty, Betty," Allen reproved her. "I thought----"

"Oh, Mollie, look there," cried Betty, pulling her friend towards her and indicating an indistinct shadowy bulk looming eerily before them. "Mollie, dear, that's the island, isn't it? I can't wait until I put my two feet on it."

"Oh, I wish we could see an inch before our noses!" said Grace impatiently. "I can't make out a single blessed thing."

"Probably going to rain some more," said Frank consolingly. "Never mind, Grace, whenever your heart begins to fail you, just think of--what, fellows?"

"Chicken!" they shouted, with one voice.

"You don't know you are going to get any, yet," Betty declared. "If I remember rightly, Frank is the only one who said anything about it, and he doesn't know what he is talking about."

"Betty, don't be heartless," Allen implored. "Is there or is there not a fowl in that basket?"

"There is!" she answered in solemn tones.

"Hoorah!" shouted Will. "Three cheers for the good old bird!"

As he spoke the little steamer scraped against the dock that was almost invisible to those on deck, then came to a full stop. The shrill whistle which Roy contemptuously characterized as a joke, broke the misty stillness with a shriek, that echoed and re-echoed, thrown back upon itself by some distant cave or hillside on the island.

"Goodness! I wouldn't mind a nice fire myself," said Mollie, shivering with something a little more than cold. There was something mysterious about this island, shrouded as it was in the clinging mist--something that made the girls draw close together for companionship. "I hope it will be more cheerful in the daytime--the island, I mean, not the fire," she added.

"Girls," cried Betty, "this looks like a regular adventure island. Maybe we'll find the gypsies here."

"Oh, don't," shivered Amy. "Don't talk about gypsies--until daylight, at least."

"Here comes the rain!" Roy shouted. "We'll have to hurry some, if we want to beat it to the house. Here, Will, take hold of this bag. Quick, I can't carry more than three at a time."

"Give it to Allen," Will advised, as they tumbled out on the tiny wharf. "I have more than my share already."

"Oh, all right," said Allen, "I'll be the goat. How about it, Betty--shall we give them another race? It looks as if a little speed would come in handy."

"No, let Mollie lead this time. I hope she knows the way."

"Of course I do," said Mollie, coming up behind them. "There isn't any way to find. The house is at the end of the wharf. Follow us and----"

"You'll get something to eat," Roy finished for her. "We have the basket."

"Then you needn't worry about our following you," said Allen. "Only if you don't look out we will get there before you after all. Come on, Betty," and for the second time that day the young folks had a chance to test their skill in running. The main thing was that they got there before the rain.



CHAPTER X

BRIGHT AND EARLY

The morning dawned clear and bright. Mollie woke first in the large, sunshiny room which the girls had chosen to occupy together during their stay on Pine Island.

It contained two large double beds--each in a little alcove of its own. The spotless grass mats, the flowers that bloomed on the wide-silled, latticed windows gave the room an air of cheerful hominess and comfort that was very pleasant.

All this Mollie took in subconsciously as her sleepy gaze wandered about the room. Then slowly full wakefulness banished the last vestige of sleep from her eyes and she sat up in bed.

"The sun!" she cried joyfully. "And I was sure it was going to be rainy this morning! Oh, now we shall see the island as it really is. Wake up, Amy, do! Oh, goodness, how the child sleeps!" and she shook her slumbering friend with no uncertain hand.

"There is no use, Mollie," said Betty's voice from the other end of the room. "You couldn't wake Amy or Grace without a good shaking."

"What's that?" cried Mollie, startled, as a loud knock sounded on the door. "I wonder who is coming to visit us so early?"

"Probably one of the boys," Betty suggested, "come to tell us it is nine o'clock and high time we were up and dressed."

"Nine o'clock!" Grace fairly stuttered, but just then Mollie called out an impatient:

"Who's there?" in response to a second and harder knock at the door.

"It's I, Will. Mrs. Irving sent me up to ask when in the name of common sense you girls are coming down to breakfast."

"What time is it?" Betty countered. "If you tell us that, we'll tell you what time we are coming down."

"It is half-past eight," Will answered. "We fellows have been up since six o'clock getting our summer quarters fixed up!"

"I won't believe it until I see it," said Mollie darkly. "Six o'clock, indeed!" and she sniffed disdainfully.

"Well, if you don't believe it," said Will, through the keyhole, "all you have to do is to come down and see for yourself. We've got everything fixed up O. K. all right. But say! when are you fellows--I mean girls--going to get up?"

"Right away, Will," Betty promised, popping out of bed and into her slippers all at once. "We will be down in a jiffy."

It required a great deal of tact to coax Amy and Grace out of bed, but it took a still greater amount of merciless driving to get them downstairs and into the big airy dining room, where Mrs. Irving was impatiently awaiting them.

"Here you are," she said, laying down her book as the four girls tumbled into the room. "I thought you would be tired after last night's fun, so I let you sleep it out."

"Well, we surely did sleep," said the Little Captain brightly. "I for one feel as if I'll never sleep again."

"And I feel as if I could sleep forever," said Grace. "You never saw anything like Betty, Mrs. Irving," she complained. "Why, I do believe she could have made a fortune in the old days as an overseer down South."

Mrs. Irving laughed. "You don't look especially brow-beaten," she said. "And anyway, I should think you would be glad to get up--you must be nearly starved to death."

"I thought after last night, and the chicken, I could never eat again," said Mollie, her eyes sparkling at the memory. "But I find that I can, very easily. Oh, Mrs. Irving, what is there?"

"Well," their chaperon began, "there are the eggs we had put up with the other things yesterday and some fruit and honey and we can make some fluffy white biscuits in no time----"

"Oh, oh, say no more!" said Betty, clapping her hands joyfully and executing a little dance about the room. "Honey and biscuits--I could make a meal of them alone. Mrs. Irving, show me the stove--lead me to it--and I'll make the biscuits," she finished importantly.

"Mrs. Irving," Grace pleaded, turning to the chaperon, "you are the only one here who could possibly make Betty do anything that she didn't want to do or stop her doing anything she had set her heart on. Won't you please interfere for the sake of the community? It might really be dangerous," she added plaintively.

"Don't worry," Mollie put in. "I have eaten Betty's biscuits of old, and, believe me, they are good. All I ask is that you hustle, Betty--shoo----" And she hurried the willing Little Captain before her into the kitchen.

Mrs. Irving followed more slowly with Amy and Grace, and they were just in time to hear Mollie's last sentence: "Where have the boys disappeared to?"

"They're out yonder in the woods," Mrs. Irving replied, indicating a spot beyond the cottage. "They were up very early this morning--couldn't wait to get the tents up. Allen left word that they would stop around in a couple of hours to say good-afternoon to you girls--if you happened to be up by that time," and the little chaperon's eyes twinkled as she saw the look of rising indignation in the girls' faces.

"If we happen to be up, indeed," sniffed Betty, bustling around the kitchen in a business-like fashion, sorting out pans and getting out the flour, which Mollie's aunt had very thoughtfully left in the larder. "If they talk like that much more, they won't get any of my biscuits. Just wait till they smell them, girls--they will go down on their knees."

"Yes, the only way to manage boys is to feed them well," sighed Amy, with a funny air of knowing all there was to be known about men.

"Oh, Amy! Amy!" gasped Mollie, "you will be the death of me yet. Anybody would actually think, to hear you talk, that you had really had some experience. Say, Betty," she added, regarding the doughy mixture--the result of Betty's skillful manipulation, "that looks mighty interesting--I shouldn't mind learning how to make them myself."

"Oh, it's lots of fun," Betty affirmed, cutting out the biscuits with an improvised cutter--this last being the top of a baking powder can. "Only take my advice," she went on, standing with the cover poised in the air and speaking earnestly. "Don't try it on your family first--they never appreciate you. Why, the first time I made biscuits, do you know what dad said?"

"No, but I can imagine," said Grace, who had also been regarding the operation, "judging from what dad and Will would have remarked."

"Well, he said," Betty continued, patting the last biscuit into its appointed place and regarding her work with satisfaction, "he said the best thing I could do with them would be to pack them and send them to the old country to use in some of the new howitzers or something like that they are getting out. How is that for a slam?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder," said Grace wickedly, "if he were justified."

Betty turned and shot a reproachful glance at her friend. "Just for that, Grace," she said, "I ought to say you can't have any of these--works of art," indicating the pan she was putting into the oven. "Why do you girls stand around staring at me anyway?" she added, a sudden note of impatience in her voice. "Why don't you do something to earn your living? Set the table or get the water boiling for the eggs. I can't do everything--now scatter! If you were all as hungry as I am you wouldn't wait to be told."

Laughingly the girls did as the Little Captain bid--somehow it was impossible to do anything else.

"Where is the table cloth, Mollie?" called Amy from the other room. "We used paper napkins and doilies last night." Then she added, as Mollie came to help her, "Did you ever see anybody eat like those boys last night?"

"It was a wonderful and awesome sight," Mollie agreed, as she and Amy spread the cloth. "I wonder," she added as a sudden thought struck her, "if the boys have had their breakfast."

"What a question!" said Grace, appearing at the door carrying a plateful of the most deliciously golden honey the girls had ever seen--or so at least it seemed to them. "Do you imagine they could exist from six o'clock to ten without eating? Mollie, I gave you credit for more sense."

"Is that so?" retorted Mollie, cross because she was hungry. "Well, I have a good deal more sense than some people I know. I mention no names, but see where I am looking," and she stared steadfastly at her unruffled chum, who was calmly setting the honey on the table.

"Here I am again," said Betty, "acting the part of peacemaker. Oh, girls, it is too wonderful a day for outdoor girls to quarrel. I am simply crazy to get out in the woods and just revel in the grass and the trees and the sunshine." And she glanced longingly out of the open door that led to the porch. "Oh, I wish," she said, "I wish the biscuits could be done and eaten all in five minutes. Amy, did you put the eggs in?" she demanded, and Amy, who had been gazing out of the window, scuttled out to the kitchen obediently.

The girls had nearly finished breakfast, when there was a sound of voices outside the door, and a moment later the boys burst in upon them.

"Hello!" said Allen, evidently surprised. "I didn't expect to see you for another hour."

"Say, those biscuits look good," said Roy. "I should say biscuit," he corrected himself. "Say, Betty, do you happen to have any more of those around?"

"No, and you don't get this one, either. It belongs to Amy," said Betty decidedly. "She has had only three and I made four apiece."

Frank was just about to protest when she added compromisingly: "I'll make some more for lunch."

"When is lunch?" inquired Will practically. "Twelve o'clock?"

"No, about one," Mollie answered. "We couldn't possibly eat before then."

Allen had been talking to Betty in an undertone, and now he broke into the conversation with: "Betty says she wants to see our camp. Who cares to go along?"

There was a clamorous assent followed by a faint little protest from Grace. "Don't you think we had better wash the dishes first?" she asked.

"Oh, hang the dishes!" said Frank, inelegantly. "Remember we are camping."

"We'll wash them up with the lunch dishes," Betty compromised, then added, with a sly little glance in Allen's direction: "We'll make the boys wipe them for us."



CHAPTER XI

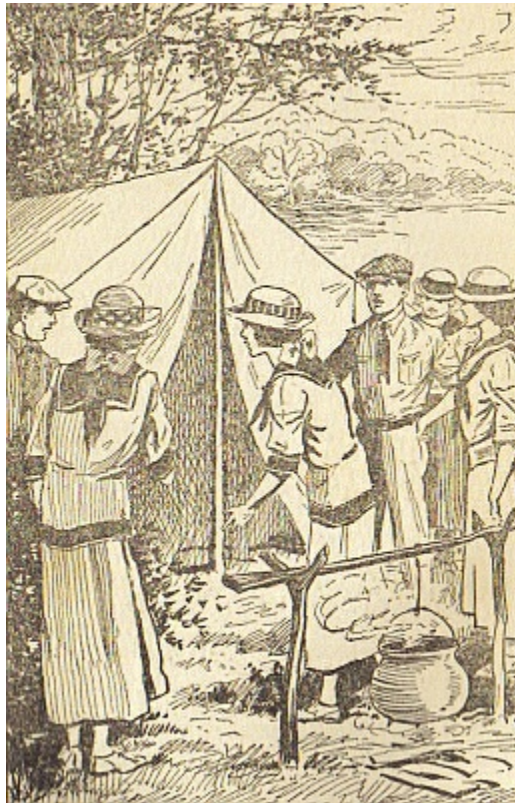
A JOLLY TRIP

The girls and the boys, laughingly driving Mrs. Irving before them, fairly tumbled down the shallow steps in their eagerness to feel the soft grass under their feet. As Betty said, it was a glorious day, a typical day in early August, when a soft breeze tempers the heat of the scorching sun, and sets the trees to murmuring.

The spicy air, sweet with the intoxicating scent of damp, moist earth and blossoming flowers, went to their heads like wine and they danced down the path that led through the woods on feet that scarcely touched the ground.

Soon they emerged from the dense shadows of the wood into the small clearing which was thick and mossy under foot, and there, nestling among the trees, were the two tents the boys had so laboriously constructed.

"Oh, it is ideal!" cried Mollie, delightedly, as they stopped for a moment on the outskirts of the clearing to survey the scene.



**THEY ROAMED ABOUT THE CLEARING
INSPECTING THE TENT CRITICALLY. Page**

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The Outdoor Girls on Pine Island.

"Glad you like it," said Frank, then advancing toward the nearer of the two tents, he paused, turned, and made a low bow. "Enter, fair damsels," he said.

"He thinks he is reading 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,'" drawled Grace. "However, we will deign to honor you with our presence." And she swept past him with a queenly air that elicited amused laughter from the others.

For more than an hour the Outdoor Girls and their friends roamed about the clearing inspecting the tent critically, inside and out, and picking flowers in between times. It was Will who first suggested a change.

"Why not take a walk about the country?" he asked. "I guess we have seen all there is to be seen here. Come on, everybody. I want to get a bigger appetite for lunch."

"All right; where shall we go?" Betty agreed readily. "Your aunt must have told you about this part of the world,

Mollie. Where can we find excitement?"

"Well, there is the summer colony at the other end of the island," Mollie began doubtfully. "But it is rather a long way off. The steamer touches there from here."

"Too far to go before lunch," Mrs. Irving said.

The party spent the rest of the time until one o'clock visiting the wharf and roaming the country in the immediate vicinity of the pretty bungalow.

True to her promise, Betty turned out at the appointed time a panful of the most appetizing biscuits, and let it be said here that the boys did them full justice--to say nothing of the girls.

It was well on toward three o'clock before the girls had changed their morning middies and skirts for dainty afternoon dresses, and had made all other necessary preparations for a trip to town. Mrs. Irving declined to go, saying she wished to write letters.

It was in the best of spirits that the party of young people stood on the end of the dock, waiting to hail the little steamer as it chug-chugged its way from the summer colony at the far end of Pine Island to the mainland.

When finally it did come in sight, the girls and the boys found themselves convulsed with laughter. If the shabby little craft had appeared grotesque in the mist of the night before, how much more forlorn did it look in the full, dazzling glare of the sun! As it came nearer they saw that the decks were crowded with people, the gay dresses of the girls mingling with the white flannel trousers and dark coats of the men.

"It's a wonder," said Frank, "that with all that crowd of people paying good money to be towed ashore, they couldn't get something a little more modern. My! it looks as if it had come out of the ark."

"Oh, well, as long as it is seaworthy, I suppose they think it will do as well as any other," said Roy. "The more some people make the less they like to spend."

By this time the clumsy ferry had plowed its way to the wharf, and had come to a stop, while the people on board eyed the waiting young folks curiously.

"Guess they will know us the next time they see us," whispered Allen. "We ought to hang out a placard: *Don't stare. We don't look it, but we are human.*"

Betty laughed gaily. "They do need a few lessons in manners."

The bungalow party thoroughly enjoyed the trip to the mainland. The scenery was as beautiful as it had been pictured, and when they got tired of looking at the sky, the water, and the mainland, they had plenty to occupy their attention in the people about them. Everybody seemed ready for a good time, and the old ferryboat was filled with shouts and laughter.

"I shouldn't mind knowing some of those people," Roy confided to Allen, as they leaned against the shaky, old rail. "There's certainly nothing slow about them."

"Well, there is no reason why we shouldn't know them," said Allen. "From what Mollie says, they are pretty close neighbors. In fact, the girls said something about going over there this afternoon."

"Well," returned Roy, "we can't go too soon to suit me."

"If you are thinking of girls," said Allen, as Mollie and Grace came up to them, "it is my opinion that they have nothing half so good to offer us as we have already."

"I guess you are right," Roy admitted, as they joined the rest of the party. "Just look at all those dudes, staring at Betty and Grace! Say! I'd like to teach them manners!" and he glowered at the unconscious boys from the summer colony with a ferocity that should have terrified the most hardy.

"Come away," said Allen. "You can't blame them for doing just what we have done for the last two years," he added, dryly.

"Here we are, almost ashore," cried Amy, a little later. "Have you got the list of the things we need, Allen? Let's see--butter and sugar and baking powder and eggs and--oh, we mustn't forget the meat."

"Chocolates," murmured Grace.

"Don't worry so soon, Amy," laughed Will. "There will be plenty of time for that when we get back to the island and find that we have forgotten half the things."

"Well, if we think of them now," said usually quiet Amy, "there won't be any excuse for our forgetting them later."

"Well, but perhaps we shall need an excuse," reasoned Will. "You would never make a good diplomat, Amy."

Betty put her arm protectingly around the younger girl. "There is no reason why you should want to be that, is there?" she questioned. "Amy thinks that as long as she feeds you boys well there is no need of----"

"Oh, Betty, do stop," begged Amy, her face flushing scarlet. "It isn't fair."

"I know it," said Betty soothingly, while the boys looked on, curious to know the meaning of this mystery. "I won't do it again, dear, I promise."

"I wish you would tell us----" Allen began, but once more Mollie interrupted.

"We had better get down near the front," she said, "or we'll not be able to get ashore in half an hour. Did you ever see such a mob?"

"It is considerable of a crowd," Frank admitted. "I think Mollie's suggestion is a good one, fellows. Let's try to make an opening while we can."

The boys managed so well that when the little boat scraped against the wall, their party was almost the first to set foot upon the land.

"That was pretty good work," said Will, with an air of satisfaction as they made their way to the shore, followed by a stream of laughing humanity. "I hope the girls didn't mind getting their dresses mussed. Say, fellows, if any one should ask me, I'd tell them it was one peach of a day!"

There being no disputing this fact, no one tried. The eight young people swung down the shaded street, feeling in tune with the whole world.

They succeeded in finding the general store.

"Now get out that list, Allen," said Betty, as they entered the wide doorway. "It would really be a shame to forget anything."

Allen began to search through his pockets, calmly at first, then in frantic haste. Seven pairs of eyes followed his panicky movements anxiously.

"You have never gone and forgotten it?" cried Mollie, in the awed tones of one announcing the end of the world. "Oh, Allen! you haven't?"

"Guess I have," he returned grimly, and, having searched through every pocket, began all over again. "It's strange--I could have sworn----"

"You're a nice one----" Grace began, but Roy interrupted her with a shout that made their nearest neighbors turn and look at them curiously.

"I have it!" he cried. "Don't you remember, Allen, that you gave it to me just before we left, while you ran back to get something for Betty? Behold," and he dangled the precious list before their eyes.

"Oh," sighed Mollie in relief, "now if we girls had done anything like that----"

"Hands up, don't shoot!" cried Roy. "We admit everything."



CHAPTER XII

"WHERE THERE IS SMOKE-----"

The Outdoor Girls must have a fire. That they had decided at the supper table. What was the use of having a big fire-place if they never used it? Betty's theory was, that it was wicked to let anything go to waste. All this being true, it stood to reason that a fire they must have.

"I wonder if the boys wouldn't come in and help us build it," Grace suggested, seized with a brilliant idea. "There are already some logs in the fire-place, but I feel that I would like to have somebody else work for me to-night."

"Why, of course," said Mollie. "That's what we brought them with us for--to help out when they were needed."

"They would be flattered if they could hear you," said Amy.

"I don't see why they insist on staying out in the woods and cooking their own meals. Just think what fun we could have with them, if they were here now," put in Mollie once again.

"Yes, but then think of all the trouble they would be making us," said Betty. "Besides," she added, "your aunt didn't say anything about a troop of noisy boys, Mollie, when she lent us her bungalow for the summer."

"That's right, too," Mollie reluctantly conceded. "Just the same I hope they haven't forgotten they are due here at six-thirty to wipe the dishes. There is *such* a pile of them!"

"Methinks," Grace announced solemnly, "that even at this moment I hear the sound of approaching footsteps."

"How can you hear footsteps on the grass?" Mollie demanded rudely. "You must have better ears than I have."

"Of course I have," Grace retorted calmly. "I knew that long ago."

Before Mollie could answer a head was poked in at the door and an accompanying voice asked cheerily: "May we come in? Are we on time?"

"You're as welcome as a day in June, Frank," called Betty, as she arose and started to take the dishes into the kitchen. "We want you to wipe these for us, and make a fire."

"Anything else?" Frank inquired mildly, while the rest of him followed his head into the room. "The fellows told me to come on ahead, and say to you ladies that they would be here as soon as they got through scouring their frying pan."

"Poor boys," said Amy impulsively. "Why don't they bring the things here?"

But Mollie's thoughts took another direction. "I hope they bring back the sapolio," she said practically. "It was the only cake we had."

Betty paused half way to the kitchen and balanced her pile of dishes on one hand. "Mollie," she cried in dismay, "they will never think of it! Don't you think you had better go back and tell them, Frank?" she said.

"Sure!" he answered obligingly, while he sunk into an easy chair with a sigh of content. Evidently he was settled for the evening.

"Then why don't you go?" Mollie demanded impatiently. "If boys aren't the most aggravating things, when they want to be!" she added.

"There's plenty of time," Frank assured her calmly. "I left the fellows in the first throes of cleaning up--they won't be through for half an hour at least."

"Well, I don't care," said Betty, continuing her journeyings into the kitchen. "If we haven't anything to scour the pans with, then they'll not get scoured--that's all."

"That's the spirit I like to see," said Frank, and Betty could have thrown something at him, with the greatest of pleasure. "It's fine to see anybody resigned to the inevitable."

"Well, I know one thing," Mollie threatened, "if you don't go back in five minutes, I will," and for emphasis she banged the salt cellar forcibly upon the table.

"What's the matter with our going together?" Frank inquired, moving his head slightly to bring Mollie within his range of vision. "The distance won't seem half as far if I have such pleasant company," he added gallantly.

"Don't do it," Betty, coming in from the kitchen, advised. "Make him work a little."

"Oh, you're only jealous because I didn't ask you," Frank teased. "I always knew you thought a good deal of me, Betty."

She made a little face at him, but did not deign to reply. Indeed, why should she--the accusation was so plainly absurd?

Long before they had expected, voices were heard in the distance and the most unearthly noises broke the woodland stillness. There was a banging of wood upon tin and the clatter of utensils mingling with the outrageous uproar from three pairs of sound and healthy lungs. There were shouts and war cries and yells, combining in a weird clamor that could be heard for miles around--or so it seemed to the girls.

The girls looked at each other inquiringly--then made a concerted rush for the door.

"Oh, what a noise!" cried Betty. "It's just as well there isn't anybody else in this part of the wood."

A moment later the boys rushed upon them, vigorously pounding utensils, and shouting at the top of their voices. The girls gave way before them, and the roisterers tumbled in and took possession as though they were really the Redskins, whose cries they were successfully imitating. They raced about the house like madmen, while the girls watched their antics in a peculiar frame of mind. If the truth must be told, they were undecided whether to be displeased or amused. Amusement conquered in the end, however, for the boys were irresistibly funny, and the girls laughed till they ached and the tears rolled down their cheeks.

After considerable time they all managed to quiet down enough to talk sense.

"The girls want us to make a fire, fellows," said Frank. "The idea looks good to me."

"It is good," Allen agreed. "Give us the wood and matches, and we will have a fire going in no time."

"The wood is in the fire-place," Betty answered, "and Mollie has the matches, I think."

With this the boys set to work energetically, while the girls and Mrs. Irving stood about them in a semi-circle.

"It's so different from building a fire in the open," Amy commented. "I always love them. Can't we toast marshmallows? That's the most fun of all."

"We could if we had any," Grace replied dryly. "I have some chocolates but you can't roast them, and nobody had the sense to think to buy marshmallows to-day."

At this last remark, Frank sat back upon his heels and favored Mollie with a sly wink--while that young lady smiled mysteriously.

"Thereby hangs a tale of which you shall hear later," he said, and, in spite of all their urging, he could not be made to say another word.

However, their curiosity was forgotten a moment later--forgotten in the excitement caused by a strange and curious happening.

Suddenly the smoke which had been rolling in clouds up the chimney, refused to roll farther. There being no other exit except into the room, the girls and boys suddenly found themselves suffocating. They choked, and the boys stumbled to their feet and followed the fleeing girls into the dining room.

There was a chorus of sneezes and smothered cries of "I'm choking! Open the window, some one, quick!"

"The windows are open and the doors, too," gasped Frank, in answer to this last request.

"Don't be alarmed, any one," Allen commanded. "It's nothing but a clogged-up chimney, and that won't hurt anybody."

"But the smoke!" gasped Mollie. "Why, the house will be ruined. What will Aunt Elvira say?"

"Oh, it won't hurt anything," said Betty, making a brave attempt to push her way through the smoke into the living room. "But it is terrible. Can't we do something to stop it, boys?"

"I don't know how we can--unless----" Roy turned quickly to Mollie. "Did your aunt say anything about a blower?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't remember--I--I don't remember," stammered poor Mollie, whose memory was being taxed to the utmost. "You might look though, and see what you can find."

"Oh, do hurry, somebody!" begged Grace. "I'll take to the woods in another minute."

"Oh, have a little patience, Sis, can't you?" cried Will, losing his temper. "We are all doing the best we can."

"But look," said Mollie, suddenly pointing to the other room. "The smoke is beginning to clear and the wood isn't half burned out yet."

"Let's investigate," Frank suggested. "Maybe we can find out what is wrong with the thing. Come on," and in they all trooped, coughing and choking, but dauntless.

"Get me a stick, will you, girls," Roy entreated, as he went nearer to inspect the fire-place. "A broom will do. Or anything else you happen to have around."

Mollie disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later, bringing back with her an old stick that looked as though it might have been a clothespole in its better days.

"Will this do?" she asked, holding it out to Roy. "It was the only thing I could find."

"Just what I wanted," Roy answered. "Now, fellows, let's see what we can do with the thing."

The four boys crowded around, peering up into the opening as if they hoped to find the solution of the mystery there, while the girls watched them with breathless interest.

It was then that it happened. Roy poked upward inquiringly with his stick, and for answer a cloud of soot and ashes discharged itself from the chimney, showering the boys' faces with grimy dust.

They drew back with cries of disgust and began rubbing their eyes and faces furiously. Then the four blackened adventurers turned to the girls appealingly. They looked so funny, standing there with their faces black and their clothes bespattered with grime and a look of sheepish chagrin on their faces, that the girls burst into gales of uncontrolled laughter.

"You look just like candidates for a minstrel show," gasped Mollie, while the boys stood regarding her reproachfully. "Oh, boys, if you only had a mirror! If you only had!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS

"If you got us some soap and water," Will suggested after they had indulged in some sheepish grins at their own expense, "you might be doing a little good in the world."

"Well, you ought to know how to find it yourselves," Grace retorted. "Suppose you go and wash, and make yourselves look like respectable citizens again--even though you aren't," she added sweetly.

"Look out, Grace, some time we will get even for all the knocks you have been handing out," Frank threatened, shaking a grimy fist in her direction.

"Now I don't suppose we can have a fire at all," sighed Mollie, as the boys made a rush for the stairs. "And I did so want one."

"If we can find a blower," Allen shouted from the landing, "we'll have a good fire yet."

"Yes, look around, girls, will you?" Roy added, "It will save no end of time."

"Do you know what a blower looks like?" Mollie inquired, a puzzled frown on her forehead. "How can I find anything when I don't know what it looks like?"

"Oh, I know," said Betty. "We used to have one at home before dad put the hood on the fire-place. Let's go on a still hunt."

This they did, and when the boys came down a few minutes later they proudly announced their discovery.

"This is it, isn't it?" asked Betty, indicating a big square of tin with a handle at the top. "It looks like the one we used to use."

"It's exactly the thing," cried Frank, pouncing on it eagerly. "Now if this doesn't make the wood burn, nothing will."

In less time than it takes to tell the boys had succeeded in igniting the green wood, and had applied the blower before the smoke had had a chance to get out into the room.

The fire danced and glowed, while its leaping flames sent fantastic shadows playing hide and seek around the room.

"How is this for a fire, eh?" said Will, holding out his hand to the welcome warmth of the blaze, for although the days were hot, the nights were apt to be damp and cool on this island, surrounded as it was by the waters of the lake. "Some time the girls will find out that we know our business pretty well. Oh, that feels good!"

"You are right," said Frank, as they instinctively drew their chairs nearer to the fire. "Now all we need is something to roast or toast, it doesn't much matter which."

"That reminds me," said Betty, turning accusing eyes upon Roy and Mollie, whose faces were clearly outlined in the dancing fire-light. "You two people over there seem to have a secret that you don't want to share with us. I think Mrs. Irving knows," she went on, turning an accusing eye on the chaperon where she sat in the midst of the circle, "but she won't let on. Suppose you tell the rest of us what it is."

"Well, Mollie said something about a fire," Roy admitted, "and I thought a couple of boxes of marshmallows wouldn't be unwelcome; so, when the rest of you were all busy buying other things, Mollie and I slipped off and got them. Where are they, Mollie?"

"I'll get them," she answered, rising reluctantly from her comfortable chair. "I hid them. I knew that if Grace once had an inkling they were in the house she would never rest till she found them. In that case----" she paused impressively, and looked about her, "there wouldn't have been one left by to-night."

They laughed, well knowing the truth of this remark, while Grace gave a sigh at being so misunderstood.

A few moments later, Mollie had returned with the cherished sweetmeats and the boys were busily engaged in the process of toasting them on the ends of long wire forks made especially for that purpose.

"Um--um, this is good," said Betty, biting off the end of a delicious morsel. "Why didn't you buy three boxes while you were about it, Roy?"

"That's all you get----" Roy was beginning, when Mollie interrupted him, speaking dreamily.

"Wasn't he a funny old man, Roy?" she said--"the one who sold us the candies, I mean."

"Yes, I guess he must have been in his dotage," Roy agreed. "In five minutes he told us all his life's history and then some."

"That's pretty good," said Allen with interest, while he dangled his marshmallow perilously near the leaping flames. "I bet you couldn't do as well."

"I know I couldn't," Roy answered modestly. "That old chap was a past master all right. Some of the things he said were interesting, though. Weren't they, Mollie?"

"Very," said Mollie, while she stared fixedly at the fire. "Interesting and--a little creepy," she added.

The girls started and leaned forward eagerly, Mrs. Irving and the boys evincing equal interest.

"Creepy!" Amy repeated, in awed tones. "Oh, Mollie, what do you mean?"

"Just that," said Mollie, enjoying the sensation she was making. "He was an awfully wizened old man, and when he heard we were from Pine Island--well, he told us some mighty queer things."

"Pine Island?" cried Mrs. Irving, the color flaming into her cheeks, whether from excitement or the warmth of the fire, no one could tell.

"What can be strange about Pine Island?" demanded Betty. "Mollie, I could shake you; why don't you tell us and have it over with?"

Mollie glanced at Roy. "Shall I?" she asked, just as if she had not been longing for the last half hour for the time to come when she could create a sensation by telling.

"You might as well," he answered condescendingly. "As long as we have to have them around for the rest of the summer, we might as well let them in on it."

"Well of all the----" Grace was beginning, when Betty nudged her sharply.

"Don't interrupt, Grace, whatever you do," she whispered. "They take long enough getting to the point anyway."

Grace saw the wisdom in this, and stopped short.

"Well," began Mollie, speaking slowly and with aggravating distinctness, "you see, in the old days, this island used to be a rendezvous for all the wandering gypsies for miles around."

"What?" Frank cried.

"Well, I am only telling you what the old man said," asserted Mollie defensively and with warmth. "I don't say he may not be mistaken----"

"Oh, that's all right, Mollie," Betty broke in quickly. "We understand that you are not vouching for the old man's honesty. All we want is his story. Please go on--I am awfully interested."

"Just think, gypsies on this island!" murmured Amy, shuddering.

"He says," Mollie continued, "in the old days there used to be as many as two or three hundred of the gypsies gathered around here--on this part of the island, too." She paused to see the effect of her words.

"But didn't your aunt say anything about that, Mollie?" Grace queried. "Why, it seems impossible. I don't wonder you felt creepy, especially if there are many like that old crone we saw in Deepdale," and she glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the open window.

"Don't you think we had better lock the door?" suggested Amy. "Some of those men in the gypsy camp looked actually murderous."

Of course the boys laughed at her fears, and Roy remarked casually: "The old chap told us something else, fellows, that may be of interest later on."

"What's that?" Will demanded.

"He said that when the tide was on the ebb, you could actually ford the lake to the islands farther south. It might be

worth while trying some time."

"You bet it will!" said Allen, and his eagerness was not feigned.

"We'll try it the first chance we get," Frank added.

"We're going, too," said Betty. "You needn't think you can leave us behind when there is anything like that afoot."

"We wouldn't try," said Allen, ruefully. "Especially as you girls say you can swim."

"However, they will have to prove that point," Roy put in.

"That's easy," said Grace fearlessly. "As we have remarked before, we haven't been outdoor girls all our lives for nothing."

"If you boys hadn't been so set on our looking at your old camp to-day," said Amy with unusual spirit, "we would have proved it to you before this. But do you really think there are gypsies on the island?" she added. "Because, if there are, we might be able to find some of their loot." She voiced this last desire in hushed tones.

The girls laughed even while they drew their chairs still closer to the fire.

"Such a chance!" giped Will, but Betty's eyes were shining in the glow of the fire-light.

"Oh, if we only could!" she whispered softly. "If we could only get the stuff stolen from Deepdale!"



CHAPTER XIV

A VICTORY FOR BETTY

Breakfast was cleaned away and Betty, with Mollie at her heels, made a rush for the bedroom.

"I'm willing to wager anything," called the former, gaily, "that I'll be in my bathing suit before any of the rest of you have started."

"I hope the water isn't too cold," Grace shivered, as she took out her bathing suit. "If there is anything I hate, it's trying to swim in icy water. It almost makes my heart stop beating."

"All right, we'll have the weather man heat it for you," said Betty, slipping into her neat little suit. "I don't know how the water can be cold, though," she added, "the air is suffocating to-day."

"Now--one, two, three--go!" and they were off like four little black sprites, down the broad stairway and into the living room where the boys were already assembled, talking to the chaperon.

The boys wore raincoats over their bathing suits; and, as the girls entered the room, they shouted a merry greeting.

"So soon?" called Frank in surprise. "Why, we didn't expect to see you for an hour at least."

"An hour?" said Betty, with feigned indignation--for she was a good little actress, was Betty. "Why, we thought you were never coming!"

"You mean to say you were waiting for us?" said Allen, incredulously. "Betty, are you telling the truth? Mrs. Irving, is she?"

"I assure you I was too busy finding my bathing suit and getting into it to know just when the girls were ready," responded the chaperon.

At one part of the island the ground dipped gradually so that one might have any depth of water desired, and it was to this part that the young folks made their way.

"Remember----" said Frank, referring to the conversation of the night before, "remember, you girls will have to prove your claims to championship swimming this morning. If you were just faking, now is the time we'll find you out."

"We're not faking," Mollie denied stoutly. "I learned to swim when I was nine years old, and I've been swimming ever since."

"Really?" Roy inquired with interest. "Then you must be Mollie's ghost, while the real Mollie is swimming around out there somewhere," waving his hand in the direction of the water, "chumming with some of the beautiful water nymphs. Just think, nothing to do but swim for--how many years is it, Mollie?" he asked.

"Goose!" was all she answered, but that one little word managed somehow to contain a world of scorn.

"You try it first, Will," begged his sister. "Then you can tell us whether it is cold or not."

"Say, what kind of sport are you, anyway?" Will demanded. "That's the way with girls--they all make a big bluff about being able to do what we can, and then when it actually comes down to business they want to try it on us first. I'd like to see one of you go in first!"

Betty made a dash for the water. "Wouldn't it be nice," she flung back at him over her shoulder, "if all wishes could be granted so easily. Come on, girls--we'll show them a thing or two," and she waded in till the water was above her waist, then plunged in over her head.

Mollie followed close upon her heels and it was a moment before the boys realized what had happened, and could rouse themselves to action.

"Come on, fellows!" Allen shouted. "We can't let two girls get the best of us like that."

Mrs. Irving, who was at home in the water, entered and swam out boldly.

"Are you going to stay there?" Frank shouted to Amy and Grace, who stood uncertainly on the bank, undecided whether to advance or retreat. "Come on in--the water's fine."

Thus encouraged, the two girls threw caution to the winds, and waded in till the warm water was up to their shoulders.

"Oh, it is wonderful!" cried Amy. "Look how far we are behind. Let's see if we can't catch up with them." And they started off with a will after their deserting comrades.

It was not long before the powerful strokes of the boys brought them up beside Mollie and Betty who were swimming easily.

"Hello, runaways," was Frank's greeting, turning over on his back and propelling himself by a whirlpool motion of his arms. "Thought you'd give us the slip, did you? Well, we shall see."

Betty followed Frank's example, floating lazily on the still surface of the water.

"We weren't running away," she said; "we just wanted to show you we weren't afraid, that's all."

"I'll give you a race to that floating log out there, Betty."

Betty turned over and regarded the log in question with thoughtful eyes. "All right," she agreed, after a moment's hesitation. "I guess I can make that easily enough. Will you call the start?"

"Just as you say," he answered. "We are almost even now, and when I say go, we're off. Agreed?"

"Uh'huh," answered Betty.

"All right. One--two--three--go!"

They shot forward together, side by side and shoulder to shoulder, each determined to save his strength for the final spurt.

By this time the others had come up and were watching the race with interest.

On, on the two racers went, with no apparent effort, until half the distance to the log had been covered. It was then that the watchers noticed the change. Betty lengthened her stroke a trifle and forged ahead, while Frank still kept the same steady stroke.

Then, when more than half of the remaining distance had been covered, Frank evidently made up his mind that it was time to show those people some real speed. Suddenly he dropped the lazy stroke, and it seemed as though he were imbued with new life. His arms and legs worked together with the precision of a machine and he shot through the water like a catapult.

Betty was not prepared for so sudden a transformation, but her surprise lasted only a minute. Gallantly she gathered all her strength and made a dash for the goal.

"I see Betty's finish," Will was saying, when Mollie cried excitedly:

"You just watch Betty. Did you ever see a girl like her?"

As Allen came up beside the pair he thought that at last he and Mollie had found something to agree upon.

They watched Betty with straining eyes.

"She'll do it!" cried Allen. "I never thought it was possible for a girl to swim like that. Look, she has caught up to him."

It was so. Betty had used the last ounce of strength in her strong, young arms and the result was a tie.

She and Frank laid hands upon the log at one and the same instant.

Frank shook the water from his eyes, and regarded his rival in amazement. "How did you ever do it?" he questioned. "I thought I had you beat a mile."

"Well, that's where you had another think coming." Betty would not have been human had she not gloried in this victory--for even a tie with one of Frank's strength and muscle was a triumph. "I told you I could swim."

"Hoorah for the champeens!" shouted Will as the others reached the goal a few moments later. "That's pretty good work, Betty. I have to hand it to you."

"Don't you think we had better get to the shore and rest a while?" Roy suggested. "Amy and Grace seem to have

gotten there before us, and Mrs. Irving has gone back to the bungalow."

The others agreed and they all swam lazily toward the mossy bank. Betty drew herself up and sank upon the grassy knoll with a sigh of utter relaxation.

"I'd like to give you a longer race," said Frank, whose near defeat at the hands of a girl was hard to bear. "I bet I could beat you easily on a long stretch."

Betty sat up suddenly and stared at him. "Frank Haley!" she cried, "I've a good mind to take you up."

"A race! a race!" cried Mollie, clapping her hands in delight. "Oh, I'd love to see it."

"Go on, Frank, set the day," Allen urged. "After what you said you are in honor bound to give Betty a chance."

"I am perfectly willing," said Frank, glancing toward Betty. "What do you say about it?"

"You can't arrange it too soon to suit me," Betty answered, undaunted.

CHAPTER XV

A SPLENDID CATCH

"Can't anybody think of anything to do?" Mollie queried impatiently. "I'll go crazy if I have to sit around here for another half hour," and she dug the toe of her shoe into the soft sward viciously.

"You are not very flattering to our company," said Roy, leaning on one elbow and smiling up lazily at the straight little figure beside him.

Mrs. Irving was lying down and the rest of the party was gathering about the camping place of the boys, some roaming about restlessly and others sitting upon the grass. It was a sultry, scorching day, when not a breeze came to temper the heat--a day when the slightest movement produces the effect, as Mollie had said, "of a fire lighted right under your nose." The young people were restlessly on edge, undecided what to do.

It was too hot to make the long-looked-for walk to the summer colony a possibility. Of course they could swim, but this they had done all morning long and one couldn't swim forever! This was the state of affairs then, when Mollie made her petulant remark.

"That's nonsense," she retorted, in reply to Roy. "It isn't the company I find fault with, it's the atmosphere."

Allen and Betty, who had come back from a little ramble in the woods, surveyed the scene thoughtfully.

"I tell you what we can do," said Allen, and the two on the grass regarded him hopefully. "We fellows have brought some fishing tackle--suppose we go out and try to get some fish for supper? That doesn't require much energy," he added.

"Allen, you have saved my life!" cried Mollie, springing up from the mossy rock, which had been her seat. "Can't we go right away? Oh, do call the others and ask them to hurry!"

"Take it easy," Roy cautioned, still stretched out on the grass. "You'll get all heated up again. Besides there's no such awful rush--we have all the time there is before us."

But Mollie was all action, now that there was some definite point in view.

She called the others to her, speaking quickly.

"We are going to catch some fish," she announced eagerly. "Or at least we are going to try to."

"Try is good," murmured Frank, but Mollie continued, unheeding.

"It is strange that I didn't remember before," she went on, "what Aunt Elvira said about the wonderful fishing pool about a mile away."

"A mile!" groaned Grace. "Do you mean to say that we have to walk a mile in this blazing heat?"

"Nobody *has* to," Mollie retorted. "It's only a question of wanting to. I'm going if I have to go alone."

"Oh, come on, Grace, be a sport," Frank coaxed. "Just think how nice and shady and cool it will be when we get there. It *will* be nice and shady and cool, won't it, Mollie?" he added, turning to her for confirmation.

"Nice rocks with great, big trees shading them and clear, cold water with lots of fish in it and--and--oh, everything!" she agreed in a burst of enthusiasm.

"That sounds mighty good to me," said Roy. "Now for the fishing tackle--where is it, fellows?"

"Oh, wait a minute," called Mollie, as they made a rush for the tents. "There are some rods up at the house, too. We might as well take all we can get."

"Good!" said Will. "I'll go with the girls, fellows, and help them while you are getting things ready."

Their present elation was very different from the apathy which had possessed them so short a time before. Indeed, Mollie's description of the fishing pool was very alluring.

"Whereabouts did you see the tackle, Mollie?" Will asked, as they entered the house.

"Oh, I can find it," said Mollie with conviction. "I think there were four rods. I hope I wasn't mistaken."

"If you were," said Amy, "one of us will have to sit still and watch!"

"And I think I know who that will be," said Will with a sly glance at his sister.

"Just for that," Grace retorted, "I'll show you the best catch of the day."

"We shall see," said Mollie, opening the door of a small closet under the stairs. "Look," she added, "there they are. You're a judge of rods, Will--how do these look?"

Will took them in his hands and examined them minutely. "They're pippins!" he exclaimed joyfully. "I don't know when I've seen a better outfit. You ought to be able to catch all the fish in the lake with these, girls," and he regarded them admiringly.

"We'd better watch out for the boys," said Amy, wisely, as they left the house. "They will be exchanging their rods for ours, if we aren't careful."

They all laughed, including Mrs. Irving, who had come downstairs. She had not been feeling well of late--the heat had been too much for her--but she had announced a strong desire to accompany the young folks, if they went very far from home.

They found the three boys industriously digging worms, and so intent were they in this absorbing occupation that they did not look up when the party approached.

"What are you doing?" Grace asked, and then, as Allen held up a wriggling candidate for the hook, she shivered and drew back in disgust.

"Ugh," she said, "how I hate the nasty things! Somebody will have to bait my hook for me. I couldn't do it in a million years."

"All right, nobody asked you to. How's that for a good fat one, eh?" asked Roy, as he held up an unusually fine one for her inspection.

"Why is it boys always have to tease?" Betty asked of the world in general. "We know you have to have worms for bait, but that doesn't make us like to look at them."

"Well, I guess that's enough," said Allen, clapping the top on the big tin box, and getting to his feet. "Now if the fish don't like the bait any better than you girls, I shouldn't wonder if we got done out of our supper."

"My aunt says they are wonderfully agreeable," said Mollie as they started down the path, "especially in that pool. She says they just fall over one another in their hurry to get caught."

"And you waited all this time to tell us about it," said Allen reproachfully. "And even then I had to suggest it."

"Yes, if it were just an ordinary pool you could understand it," Frank added. "But a marvel like this! Gee, those fish must be hungry!"

The Outdoor Girls and their companions tramped for what seemed to them a very long time, but at last they were rewarded by a vision of a beautiful glade--all trees and rocks and crystal-clear water.

"Well, this looks like something," said Will, drawing a deep breath. "I wouldn't mind camping here for the rest of the season."

Betty laughed. "You would either have to saw down about a hundred trees," she said, "or camp in the pool with the little fishes."

"Well, it might not be so bad at that," said Will, cheerfully, while he helped Amy over the uneven places. "I could have fish dinners if I wanted them anyway."

"Well, there is nothing like looking on the bright side of things," laughed Allen. "Look, Betty, here is a place that was just made for you. Seat and back and everything complete. Isn't it a dandy?"

"Do I dangle my feet over it?" asked Betty doubtfully, surveying the water beneath. "Suppose one of my slippers dropped off?"

"I suppose I'd go down and get it," he said, brushing the difficulty aside with a wave of his hand.

"But it would be ruined," wailed Betty. "They don't feel very tight, you know."

Allen ran his hand through his hair in evident perplexity. Then his brow cleared before the light of a sudden inspiration.

"Can't you take them off?" he asked eagerly.

"Allen!" she cried. "What an idea! Of course I can't."

"Well, what are you going to do then?" he demanded despairingly. "I've suggested everything I could think of and you certainly can't stand up all afternoon."

"What are you two talking about?" Grace demanded. "Don't you know you are blocking the way?"

"I don't want to put my feet over the edge," Betty explained. "And I don't know what else to do."

"Follow my example," Mollie suggested. "Sit on 'em."

"Good idea," Betty agreed. And she immediately plumped down on her two slim ankles, looking up at Allen invitingly. "You look so far away," she said. "When you sit down you are not nearly so impressive. There's plenty of room for two," and she patted the rock beside her.

Allen obediently stretched his long length on the turf at her side, letting his legs hang over.

"You see I'm not afraid to risk a dip in the aqua pura," he said. "It wouldn't ruin my dainty little gunboats."

"It looks as if nothing would hurt them but an axe," Frank remarked. He had seated himself next to Allen and Betty, after having made Grace comfortable, and was busily engaged in baiting his hook. "You'd better hurry up, Allen--we'll have all the fish in the place hooked before you get started."

"Oh, no you won't," said Allen. "Hand us some of those worms, Will, will you?"

"Don't let them come too near me, will you, Allen?" begged Betty. "I don't like them much more than Grace does."

"Anybody would think you were talking about some lion or tiger from the jungle," laughed Allen, as Will handed him the bait, "instead of three little, harmless, unoffending worms----"

"Who seem to be running in a streak of hard luck," Frank finished, as he cast his line into the water.

"It does seem foolish," Betty admitted, taking her rod from Allen's hand, "but I can't help it. Come, little fishes," she called, casting her line far out into the pool. "Right this way! You have got to live up to the reputation Mollie has given you."

Allen had just succeeded in landing a magnificent, big fish, and was holding it down to keep it from sliding into the water, when a terrified cry broke the stillness.

"Help! help! I am drowning."

For one stupefied instant, the fishers gazed dumbly at one another. Then Allen released his hold on the big fish, letting it slide unheeded into the water, and led the dash through the woods.

"Help! help!" called the voice again, fainter this time.

"Keep up your courage!" Allen shouted. "We are coming!"



CHAPTER XVI

NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON

"Oh, oh!" Betty almost sobbed, as they stumbled on over stumps and fallen logs. "If the boys can only get there in time--if they only can!"

As Allen was the first to start, so he was also the first to reach the water's edge. He was just in time to see two hands above the surface of the water--two hands clutching in anguish.

As he rid himself of his shoes in frantic haste, there was one thought and one only in his mind--to reach the helpless owner of those hands and bring her back to life and hope. He was sure it was a girl--those little appealing hands could belong to no other.

The next moment he was in the water, swimming desperately toward the point where he had seen the hands disappear.

Oh, he would never reach it! The water seemed to be some living thing, pushing him; driving him back to the shore in spite of himself! His muscles seemed weighted with lead, his sodden clothing dragged upon him mercilessly! Oh, he would never reach her in time--he couldn't!

Then a wild, hot thought flashed through his consciousness, searing it like a flame. Now was no time to say he could not! He must! *He must!* A life depended on his ability to reach that spot when the girl came to the surface again--if indeed she ever did. Ah, perhaps what he had seen had been the last time. Then he must dive, dive, dive until he found her, even though he lose his own life in the attempt.

But no--there right before him so near that he could almost touch it, a figure rose to the surface, struggling faintly.

With one supreme effort Allen forged ahead and grasped the skirt of the girl's bathing suit as she sank for the last time beneath the surface.

"Thank God!" he murmured, as he raised the girl's head, with its mass of tangled hair, above the water. "Oh, thank God!"

As he turned and started to swim slowly back to shore with his burden, he almost ran into the other three boys who had followed close upon his heels.

"Oh, you've got her, have you?" said Frank, unutterable gladness in his voice. "I was sure you would be too late."

"It may be yet," said Roy, "if we don't get her to shore pretty quick. Here, let me take her, old man--you're all tuckered out."

Allen willingly released his burden, and they swam as quickly as they could to the shore.

They found the girls waiting for them, with white, strained faces.

"Oh, oh!" cried Grace, as they lifted the poor little inert body on to the bank. "Oh, do you suppose she is dead?"

"Well, she will be if we don't hurry pretty fast," said Betty, her voice trembling but determined. "Boys, look about and see if you can find anything round and hard that we can use in place of a barrel. Oh, do hurry! Mollie, you take her other arm and move it up and down--that's the way--hard--hard."

Mollie did as she was told and in less time than seemed possible the boys returned bringing with them part of a fallen log. This Betty declared was the very thing.

For half an hour they worked over the unconscious form and more than once during that time, they had almost given up hope of bringing back the spark of life. Then, all at once, a change took place--the ashy look of her face gave way to a faint tinge of color--the blue lips parted in something very like a sigh, and her hands, which had been lying inert and lifeless at her side, twitched almost imperceptibly.

"Oh, she's coming back! she's coming!" cried Amy almost in tears. "Oh, I was sure she was dead!"

"Hush," Betty cautioned her in a whisper. "I think she knows what we are talking about," then bending over the girl she said very gently: "Do you feel better, dear?"

Slowly the eyelids fluttered, and the eyes gazed vaguely up into Betty's sweet ones. The lips moved and Betty bent

down closer to listen.

"I don't know you, do I?" the words were almost inaudible. "I--I--don't seem to remember----"

"Don't try, my dear," said Betty soothingly, while two tears made their way down her face, only to be dashed away impatiently. "You have been through a terrible experience, and you don't have to think very hard just now--there is plenty of time."

Slowly, understanding replaced the vague wonder in the girl's eyes, and she reached out with an unsteady hand to touch Betty's white dress.

"I wanted to be sure you were real," she explained, smiling wistfully. "I was afraid you might vanish. Will you help me to remember?" she pleaded.

Betty's warm heart went out to the girl, and when she spoke her voice was full of pity and tenderness.

"I'll help you as far as I can," she promised. "You were swimming and something happened that made you cry for help. Luckily we happened to be near and one of the boys got you and brought you back to land. And here you are getting strong and well again," she finished brightly.

"Well, whoever you are, you're a dear," said the stranger, the emphasis showing how quickly she was gaining strength. "I remember now all about it. Mother and dad have told me over and over that I must not come over here alone; but the day was perfect for a swim and no one else would come, so I slipped off by myself. I was swimming all right, and then I was taken with cramps. Oh, oh, it was terrible!" and she covered her face with her hands to shut out the memory.

"Don't think of it," said Amy compassionately, kneeling down beside the girl and taking the cold hand in hers. "It's all over now, and you are safe and sound. Try just to remember that."

The girl looked up wonderingly at the sweet girlish faces gathered about her. "I think you must be a--a company of angels," a sharp sob broke the attempt at a laugh--for she was still very weak. "You are all so good to me I----"

"You would have done the same for any of us," said Betty, trying hard to keep her voice matter-of-fact. "So you needn't thank us for it. How are you feeling--better?"

"A great deal," answered the girl, with a grateful glance toward Betty. "I almost feel as if I could stand up."

"If you want to try, one of the boys will help you," Grace suggested, turning to the latter, who had been standing several feet back from the little group, natural delicacy forbidding them to intrude.

But now, being thus appealed to for help, they stepped forward like one person, offering assistance. They helped the girl to her feet and steadied her as she stood, weak and trembling.

She looked from one to the other with a wan little smile on her lips. "Which one of you have I to thank for--for saving me?" she asked.

"None of us," said Roy, with an attempt at gallantry which was rendered funny by his extremely sodden aspect. "It was a pleasure."

Noting the girl's bewilderment, Betty hastened to explain. "They all did it," she said; "but if credit is due to any one of them it must be given to Allen for reaching you first."

"Nonsense!" said Allen, abashed at being brought into the limelight. "I was nearer than the other fellows, that's all. What's the use of talking about it, anyway?"

"There is a good deal of use, I think," the girl answered softly. "If you people hadn't been so good and kind to me, I would have----" she paused before the word, and shivered again in her weakness.

"Don't think of it any more," Betty urged. "Now, what you most need is rest. If we could get you back to our cottage or, perhaps, to your own people----" she paused questioningly.

"Oh, please," said the girl, "if you could only get me back to the hotel, you don't know how grateful I would be. Mother and dad will be crazy."

"If we were only nearer our bungalow, we might take you back there and then send word to your mother and father," said Mollie, thoughtfully. "But I guess it is just about as far one way as the other."

"Yes, the best thing we can do," Mrs. Irving decided, "is to get her as quickly as possible to the summer colony. That is where you come from, isn't it?" she asked.

The girl nodded. All this time she had been standing, supported on either hand by Roy and Will. But now Allen had a suggestion to make.

"We could make a seat," he said, "and carry her the rest of the distance to the colony. The sooner we start the better it will be."

On this plan they agreed. Very naturally the girl was strainingly eager to relieve the anxiety of her parents--to let them know she was safe again.

Allen and Frank, being the stronger of the boys, volunteered to carry the slight girl--she was young, scarcely sixteen--for the first half mile. Then the other two boys were to carry her the rest of the distance.

In a moment the little procession was formed, and it started off for the woods, toward the summer colony. Allen and Frank moved in front with their burden, followed by the four girls and Mrs. Irving, while Roy and Will brought up the rear.

The boys were wet to the skin, and even on a scorching day in August that is anything but a pleasant sensation. Then, too, the way was rough, and the briars and brambles along the path scratched their hands and tore at their clothing. Ordinarily all these petty annoyances would have tended toward making them irritable and cross, but on this day all such trifles passed over their heads unnoticed. For had they not between them done a marvelous thing? To save one life--to have brought back from eternity one little soul--was there not joy enough in that to last them all their days? The girls thought there was.

After a walk that seemed endless, Will called out to the boys in the front: "Isn't it time for relief work, Allen? We must have traveled more than half a mile."

"We're not tired," Allen shouted back. "The hotel is right ahead--we can carry her for the rest of the way."

"Just as you say," Roy answered. "But we are ready whenever you want us."

"All right," called Allen. "We may be glad of your help yet;" and so the little party went on.

A few moments later they heard voices directly ahead, and Anita--for that, she had said, was her name--raised her voice excitedly. "They are probably coming in search of me," she cried, cheeks flushing with the hope of it. "I knew they would! Oh, I knew it! Dad! Conway!" she called.

"Nita! where are you?" a voice shouted back, unutterable relief vibrating in every syllable. "Call again!"

Anita obeyed with a will. "Just keep on the way you are coming. I'm all right, but please hurry!"

Then the two relief parties came face to face. Frank and Allen set the girl gently upon her feet and her father caught her in his arms. "You're safe!" he murmured over and over again. "My little girl!" and the others turned away before the depth of his emotion.

His weakness lasted only a moment, then recovering his self-control he handed Anita over to the affectionate bear hugs of an elder brother, and turned to his daughter's rescuers.

"Madam," he said to Mrs. Irving, "if you will tell me to whom I am indebted for Anita's safe return, I will try to thank him or her or all of you as the case may be. Although thanks at this time seem a small return for such a service."

"I am sure none of us wish any thanks for whatever little help we may have been able to render your daughter," Mrs. Irving answered, with grave courtesy. "We can only thank a kind fate for leading us within hearing distance of her appeal for help. The rest is simply what you and your son would have done for any of us had we been in similar danger."

"That doesn't make what you have done any the less splendid," Anita's brother broke in impulsively, holding his sister as though he would never let her go again. "Anita is tired now, but when we hear the whole story, I know we are going to be even more grateful to you than we were before--eh, Anita?"

"Oh, they were wonderful to me," said the girl, her eyes shining like stars. "If it hadn't been for them--I don't dare--think----" and again her hand flew to her eyes to shut out the horror of that awful moment.

Suddenly all Mrs. Irving's mother instinct rose to the fore, and she spoke impulsively. "Take the child home," she begged; "what she needs more than anything else is rest. You can see she is at the breaking point."

Mr. Benton looked at his daughter, who indeed was trembling like a leaf in her brother's arms, and saw the truth of the statement. "You are right," he said slowly. "We can't get Anita home too soon." Then, turning once more to Mrs. Irving, he added, while his eyes traveled over the group of girls and boys behind her: "Although we haven't time now to become better acquainted, we are going to stay here the rest of the summer, and if you expect to remain our neighbors----"

"Yes, father," broke in Anita, "they live at the bungalow at the other end of the island, and they have already invited Conway and me to visit them. When shall we go, Con?"

"As soon as you are able, sister dear," Conway Benton said fondly. "I'll be glad to go any time. Now we will have to get you home."

So, after many words of mutual understanding and friendliness, they parted and went on their separate ways.

"I guess we shall have just time to get the fish and reach the bungalow before dark," said Mrs. Irving, as our party started to retrace their steps with weary feet and joyful hearts.

It was not till they had nearly reached the fishing pool that Allen thought of his big fish.

"It was wicked to let that beauty go," he said, gazing ruefully into the pool. "He was the king of them all."

"Yes, but just see what you accomplished," Betty said at his elbow, softly. "What you did to-day is worth a million fish."

"Yes, and there are plenty more where that came from," he added, smiling down at her. "Now let's hike along home--I am getting hungry."

CHAPTER XVII

BENEATH THE MOON

"I have often read about it, but I never thought I would be fortunate enough to actually see it," said Amy, clasping her hands behind her head, and gazing out at the blue of an azure sky.

The four girls were seated on the steps of the veranda talking, talking over the events of the day before and speculating as to the future.

"Well, it scared me nearly to death," said Grace, who was curled up on the lower step, with a cushion brought from the house acting as head rest. "I declare when I saw them drag her up on the bank, Betty, I thought that she was dead. She looked so drawn and white, and----"

"Well, you couldn't expect her to look particularly rosy and happy, after all she had been through," Mollie remarked. "If I had been doused under water as long as that poor girl was I would not only have looked dead, I'd have been it."

"Oh, I don't know," Grace retorted lazily. "If I'm not mistaken it would take a good deal to stop that tongue of yours, Mollie."

"Speak for yourself," Mollie was beginning angrily, when Betty entered into the conversation. She had been dreamily studying the shimmering ripples the soft wind had stirred upon the surface of the water.

"Some day," she began in a sing-song voice, her eyes still fixed on the distance, "I'm just going to let you two go on to the bitter finish. I shouldn't wonder if you will be like the two cats of Kilkenny. You remember what they did, don't you?"

"No, what?" asked Mollie, and Grace added: "We might just as well know where our bad tempers are going to land us. What did they do, Betty?"

"They fought and they fit and they scratched and they bit," chanted Betty, "till instead of two cats there weren't any."

"I guess we had better take warning while there is still time, Grace," said Mollie, with a little laugh. And so for the time being at least peace was restored.

"But when do you suppose Anita and her brother will come to see us?" asked Amy. "I do hope it won't be very long."

"I think Amy likes Conway," said Grace, then turning to Betty she asked meaningly: "Do you, by any chance, believe in love at first sight?"

"Oh, I think it can be done," Betty answered, her eyes twinkling with fun as she looked at Amy's flushed face. "At least, I do believe in strong attractions at the first meeting. Perhaps that is all Amy has felt just yet."

"Oh, girls!" implored Amy, in an agony of bashfulness, "I don't like Conway Benton one bit more than any of the rest of you, and you know it. I think it is mean for you to tease."

"Oh, Amy, dear, it is only fun," cried Betty, throwing an arm about her friend. "We don't really think that you have been smitten with a stranger's charms. Still *stranger* things have happened."

"I don't agree with you," said Amy, and they wisely forbore to pursue the subject.

"Oh, but didn't that fish taste good last night?" said Mollie, coming down to every-day matters. "I never ate anything like it in all my life."

"That's because we caught it ourselves," said Grace, unconsciously voicing a common trait in human nature.

"Let's take fish out of the conversation for a little while," Betty suggested, "and talk about something romantic."

"For instance?" Grace inquired, with uplifted eyebrows.

"The gypsies," Betty answered. "Ever since the other night I've been wondering if there was anything in what that old store-keeper said."

"I hope not," said Amy, with a shudder. "I am more afraid of them than anything else in the world, I think."

"I don't see why," Mollie reflected. "Probably they are a great deal more afraid of us."

"Well, all gypsies are akin, they say; so maybe we could find out something about Mr. Ford's Beauty and about Mrs. Billette's silver," returned Betty.

"Oh, don't talk about that," cried Mollie. "It fairly makes me sick, for I'm sure we shall never hear of the things again."

"I wonder when the boys are going to try to ford to the islands?" said Grace. "The tide's getting low now."

"Hello! where is everybody?" it was Will's voice calling from the woods. "We are going for a paddle--who wants to come along?"

"Ask us," called Betty. "We were just hoping you'd come to life."

"Ah, the voice of the siren," called Will, over his shoulder. "Come on, fellows, let's break up this galaxy of beauty."

The boys sauntered up to the group of girls, and sprawled upon the steps wherever there was room.

"Where *have* you kept yourselves all morning?" Mollie inquired, as Frank drew a bur from her white skirt. "If you hadn't come pretty soon, we were going over to look for you."

"Oh, just around clearing up," Frank replied, with a vague little gesture. "If we had known how much you wanted to see us, we would have left some things undone."

"You needn't have hurried on my account," Grace drawled. "I don't know when I have ever felt happier than I did before you came. Oh, Roy, do look out, you are sitting on my dress."

Roy rose with alacrity. "Gee! a fellow can't do anything around here without getting sat on," he complained.

"It seems to me it was Grace's dress that was being sat on that time, not you," Betty remarked, with a glint of mischief in her eyes. "I wonder if anybody else has ever noticed," she went on, "the funny habit all you boys have of blaming somebody else for blaming you."

"You're away too deep for me, Betty," Roy protested with a shake of his head. "That must be a mighty funny habit."

"To change the subject," said Allen, rising and stretching his arms far above his head, as if to make sure his muscles were still in good condition, "who wants to share a nice little canoe with me? Your aunt sure knew what she was doing, Mollie."

"We would all like to go, I know," said Betty, with a doubtful glance at the fast sinking sun. "Only I am afraid it is pretty near dinner time."

"Well, I tell you what we'll do," said Frank, with sudden inspiration. "We'll postpone our canoeing trip till to-night. There is going to be a fine moon."

"What difference does that make?" Grace asked severely. "I think we had better go now, and have a fire this evening."

"Oh, Grace, don't be a kill-joy," said her brother. "It is going to be too wonderful a night to spend indoors."

"Well, if Mrs. Irving says so," she began, and they all knew it was settled.

"Have dinner early, will you?" Roy urged, taking out his watch. "It is a quarter past five now. Can you be ready to start by six?"

"Oh, long before," Mollie assured him, rising hurriedly, and starting toward the house, while the others followed her example.

Then after a whispered consultation with the girls at the door, she turned and threw the boys a merry glance.

"If you are very good," she said, "we will let you eat with us to-night."

"Fine!" cried Allen. "And biscuits, Betty?"

"Biscuits," she answered.

They were hilarious all during the meal. In the first place, everything was delicious, and in the second, everybody was in the best of spirits.

Afterward they cleared away the dishes in no time, and the four girls, Mrs. Irving having refused to be of the party, ran upstairs to get the light wraps that were always needed at night. The boys met them outside as they rushed down laughing and breathless, and ready for a good time.

"I hope it doesn't take the moon till twelve o'clock to show itself," said Will, as they made their way down the walk and on to the float where the canoes were attached. "Mrs. Irving says that we are to be back by ten o'clock at the latest."

"That will give us plenty of time," Frank answered. "Don't you remember we saw it a little after seven last night?"

"It's lucky these canoes are eighteen feet long," said Allen, as he unfastened the rope. "Otherwise we would have to take turns paddling."

"Who's going to do the work first?" asked Betty. Then she added: "I love to paddle."

"If nobody has any objection," said Allen, "you shall. Grace, you drop into the middle with Frank, until it comes your turn to do the work. Betty may like it, but I must say I'd rather watch you people slave."

"All right, we'll go fifty-fifty with you," Frank agreed cheerily. "Here, Grace, step in the middle--that's the way. Now we are all settled. Let her go, Captain."

Allen swung himself into the stern, and deftly pushed the canoe clear of the swaying float. "All right," he sang out. "Left hand or right, Betty? It makes no difference to me. Now for the moon."

"Look out, Allen, you are getting poetical," warned Betty, as she dipped her paddle into the clear water. "Many a man has reached for the moon, only to find that he had plucked some green cheese."

"Are you sure it wasn't limburger?" asked Frank, mildly for so strong a subject.

"Ugh, don't!" cried Grace. "How I hate even the name of the horrid stuff!"

"And on a night like this, too," said Betty. "Can't we talk about something less odoriferous?"

"Remember you started it," said Frank defensively.

"Yes, I know, but what I spoke of is such a wee little cousin to----"

"Is that the dipper up there, Frank?" Grace asked, in haste to change the subject. "Somehow it doesn't look natural."

Frank squinted aloft. "That's our same old friend," he said. "By the way, speaking of dippers, I am getting thirsty."

"Well, I can't give you a drink, but I can feed you. Have a chocolate?" cried Grace.

"Oh, Grace!" protested Betty, "you never brought chocolates along?"

"To be sure I did. Why not?"

"You are hopeless," laughed Frank.

"Look at that shooting star," said Betty, pointing with her paddle. "Oh, that was a beauty!"

"Did you wish on it?" asked Grace eagerly.

"I didn't know I had to. Goodness, did I throw away an opportunity?" Betty's tone was dismayed.

"Why, of course," said Grace, with an air of superiority. "It's bad luck if you don't."

"All right, I won't let the next one escape," Betty promised.

And so they went on and on, enjoying the shadowy stillness of the night, and later revelling in the silver radiance of the moonlight.

It was not until they started on their journey side by side with the other canoe that Allen broached a subject that had been almost entirely forgotten in the excitement of the last few days.

"Say, when are you and Frank going to practice for the big race, Betty?" he asked. "I am mighty anxious to see it."

"To-morrow morning, I guess," said Betty, then added suddenly: "I don't see why Frank and I should furnish all the fun. Why don't you all join in? It would be ever so much more exciting."

"That's a good idea," said Allen. "I'll do it if the rest are willing. How about it, Grace?"

"I'm willing," she replied. "Oh, I have a bright idea!"

"Shoot!" said Frank inelegantly.

"Suppose we take our lunch," she went on enthusiastically, "and have a regular old-fashioned picnic in the woods beyond the camp."

"Grace, you are a marvel," cried Betty. "I can't think of anything I'd like better. Swimming in the morning and a party in the afternoon! Oh, every day is more wonderful than the last!"



CHAPTER XVIII

WATER SPRITES

The sunbeams danced across the shimmering water and into the room where the Outdoor Girls lay sleeping. They made patches on the floors and ceiling, and showered Mollie's face with golden darts.

She moved restlessly and raised her hand as though to ward off this invader of her dreams, muttering softly, "Oh--don't---" Gradually she passed from sleeping to waking and, realizing the cause of the disturbance, sat up in bed with a start.

"Oh, the world's on fire with sunshine! What a day to swim! Now, as soon as I can rouse these sleeping beauties, I'll proceed to get breakfast."

"Oh, A--my!" she called aloud, giving the bed such a thump that Amy's eyes sprung wide open on the instant--wide and startled. "Are you going to sleep for-*ever*? Oh, I'm hungry!" with which words she sprang out of bed and began dressing hastily.

For once Amy seemed to agree with her chum, for the moonlight sail of the night before with only Grace's candies to nibble on had left them ravenous.

"All right," she said, sitting up and looking toward the bed in the far corner of the big room. "Betty and Grace are just yawning themselves awake. We ought to beat them dressed easily."

"We don't care," came Betty's sleepy voice. "Whoever gets down first has to get the breakfast, you know."

Even this did not daunt Mollie. She did not mind getting breakfast at all. In her own words, "she could smell the good things that much longer." So now her only answer was: "Sleepy-head," uttered in a severe tone.

"I don't care," came the defiant answer, "it's mighty nice to feel sleepy sometimes," and Betty stretched luxuriously.

"Oh, dear!" said Grace irritably, "it seems to me life is one long succession of getting ups and going to beds."

"The last isn't as hard as the first, is it, Gracy?" Mollie teased.

"Probably if you *could* sleep, you wouldn't want to," replied Grace.

"Oh, if any one would only give you the chance!" and Betty gave Grace an affectionate little shake. "Some time we won't call you, Grace," she laughed. "I'd like to find out just how long you could sleep, if you were left to yourself."

"Goodness, I wouldn't like to chance it," said Mollie, slipping a middy over her head. "I am afraid we would have to carry her home at the end of the summer--a sleeping beauty still."

"Or a still sleeping beauty," Betty suggested. "That would be more to the point."

"Suits me exactly," Grace drawled, "as long as the prince is handsome enough."

"Always the prince," groaned Mollie, giving Grace up in despair--then added, as she opened the door preparatory to flight: "Frank is quite good looking. Come on, Amy!"

"I don't see what that has to do with it!" Grace retorted; but only a sharp click of the door and a little derisive laugh in the hall outside answered her. "Oh, well," she added, sitting up and regarding Betty reproachfully as if that young person were responsible, "I suppose I have got to get up."

"Of course, and make yourself charming for the prince," said Betty, pinning a rose at exactly the right angle in her soft white waist. "You don't have to be a *sleeping* beauty to find him, you know," she added sagely.

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Grace, regarding her friend soberly. "I shouldn't wonder if you had found him, Betty."

Betty turned sharply to see if she were joking, then the soft color flooded her face. "Nonsense!" she said, but her tone was not convincing.

"Yes, you have," said Grace, not to be put off. "I can tell by the way you look at him, and the way he looks at you and oh--and--a hundred little things." She waved her hand vaguely.

"Oh, Gracy, don't be foolish," said Betty, recovering her usual composure. "If you don't look out *I'll* begin to get personal. You needn't think you are the only one that has eyes."

"Oh, well," said, Grace, flushing in her turn. "If you are going to begin that---- Oh, Betty, just smell the bacon! Please hand me that shoe, quick!"

"Oh!" cried Betty, and drew back as a small stone flung by some one below hurtled through the open window and fell to the floor at her feet. "Look! It has something tied to it," she cried, and, stooping, picked it up.

"Bring it here," called Grace excitedly. "Oh, this is romantic! Betty, let me see it, quick!"

"Wait a minute, I haven't seen it myself yet," said Betty, as she unfolded the tiny slip of paper attached to the stone. "Well, of all the----"

Grace looked over her shoulder and this is what the two girls read:

"When are you coming out? The water's fine."

With one accord they rushed to the window through which the message had come and leaned far out. But look as they might in every direction, there was no sight nor sound of human beings. The grounds about the house and even the woods seemed deserted.

The girls drew back in, looked at each other in perplexity, then their gaze instinctively traveled to the note still held in Betty's hand.

"Well," Grace announced, "it seems that we have here a key to some mystery----"

"Mystery nothing!" Betty interrupted disrespectfully. "We know who wrote this--there is no mistaking Roy's scrawl. The senders have decamped--that's all."

"Speak of princes----" said Grace, as they went out arm in arm.

"And they are sure to turn up," Betty finished merrily.

Mollie's breakfast was good. And the young folks ate with the healthy appetites of youth. Mrs. Irving left the table early to get herself ready to go over to the summer colony where she had promised to spend the day with friends who were summering there. The girls had scarcely finished their breakfast when the boys broke in upon them.

"You girls eat too much," Frank complained, when the first greetings were over. "Now, if you only had our dainty little appetites----"

"The best way to treat some people," put in Mollie significantly, "is to pay no attention to them or their remarks."

"Is she speaking to me or at me?" Frank inquired good-humoredly.

"Oh, it is just a general slam at the sex," laughed Allen, who had not taken his eyes from Betty and the pink rose. "We ought to be hardened by this time."

"Yes, you are terribly ill-treated, aren't you?"

Betty sympathized and remarked: "It is truly a case for the S. P. C. A.--I mean the S. P. C. C.," she corrected hastily, while the girls laughed merrily and the boys looked injured.

"That's the worst yet, Betty," Will reproached her. "You needn't make out you didn't mean it, either--we know better."

"Oh, all right," said Betty, her eyes twinkling. "Have it your own way."

"To change the subject," Roy broke in, "what are you girls all togged up for--didn't you get my message?"

"Of course," said Grace. "You nearly put Betty's eyes out with it."

"Sorry," said Roy, with a quick glance at Betty's nearly injured eyes, which had never looked brighter than at that instant. "They look pretty good to me. But that brings me back to my first query--why are you girls all dressed up?"

"Well, you know we could hardly wear our bathing suits down to breakfast. Imagine a lot of sea nymphs boiling eggs and frying bacon!" ejaculated Mollie.

"Besides," Betty argued, "it's just as much trouble to put ugly things on as it is pretty ones----"

"And they don't look as nice," Frank finished.

"Exactly!" said Betty. "And now if you will excuse us we'll put on our suits, and show you boys how to swim. Come on, girls!"

"You can't be too quick to suit me," Allen called after them.

Mollie made a little face at him from the doorway. "Anxious to meet your Water-loo?" she mocked impishly, and before he could answer had followed the girls up the stairway.

The boys raced back to camp to prepare themselves for the swim, and a few minutes later met the girls coming from the house.

"You see you didn't have to wait," said Amy. "We are as anxious as you to get into the water this morning. Oh, I can almost feel it!"

"Let's run," suggested Mollie. "Somehow to-day I can't be sedate. I'll race everybody to the bank."



THEY RAN OUT INTO THE TEPID WATER.

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She broke into a run, and the others followed--bringing up at the edge of the water a moment later, breathless but glowing. This time no one hesitated, not even Amy. They ran out into the tepid water, then plunged in, swimming with strong, even, steady strokes.

It had been decided that all were to take part in the race--consequently all were bent on losing not one moment of practice. They swam, off and on, for the whole morning--occasionally throwing themselves upon the mossy bank, to rest and get their breath, then going at it again with renewed vigor and resolve.

It was only when the position of the sun and acute pangs of hunger warned them that it was long past their luncheon hour, that they decided it was time to turn their attention to other things.

"I left the basket back at the house," said Mollie, when they had come to this conclusion. "I thought probably we would like to get dressed before we ate."

"Oh, why?" Will protested. "It's a scorching hot day, and we'll probably want to go in for a swim later on, anyway."

"Why not slip a skirt and middie over our bathing suits?" Betty suggested. "By the time we reach the house, our suits will be dry. Mine is almost, now."

"Good!" said Grace. "We'll feel more respectable, and if we do want to go in for a swim later it won't be any trouble at all to take them off."

So it was decided, and they all tramped off through the woods, laughing, merry, and friends with the world.

CHAPTER XIX

A MARVELOUS DISCOVERY

Upon reaching the house the Outdoor Girls ran upstairs while the boys went back to camp to get some things they thought they might need. A few moments later the girls rejoined them.

"Where shall we go?" Roy, who was leading the van, paused and looked behind him. "Let's take some different part of the wood--some place we haven't explored yet."

"If there is any," Allen agreed.

"There is some place, for we have not yet found the gypsies Mollie's old store-keeper told her about," put in Betty.

"Very well, then, trot ahead, Roy, we'll follow you."

"All right, but don't blame me if we are lost."

"Oh, if there is any danger of that," said Amy, pulling away and looking back longingly, "perhaps we better stick to what we know."

"Oh, Roy is only talking to hear himself talk," Will assured her. "It isn't possible to get lost on this island, even if you wanted to. All we would have to do would be to follow the shore and sooner or later we'd be bound to come upon The Shadows."

Amy saw the reason in this and was reassured. "All right," she said; "but it wouldn't be very much fun to get lost."

"Why not?" demanded Will, and she looked at him in surprise.

"Well, would it?" she asked wonderingly.

"It would be the greatest little lark ever," he said so decidedly that Amy blushed. "We'd have some excitement for a little while, anyway."

When they had walked a little farther into the woods Roy stopped again, and, pointing before him, called out: "We have found just the place, people--it's Arcadia itself."

They crowded about him, gazing in the direction he had pointed out. It was a wonderful island, this--where you were always stumbling into some little glade or woodland bower made especially for you. Surely this tiny garden spot of nature was even more alluring than the famous fishing pool, and the girls pushed forward eagerly.

"That big flat stone over there will be just the very thing to spread the eatables out on," said Grace, "and I guess we can all manage to get around it, too."

"Of course we can," said Mollie enthusiastically. "It's exactly the right height. Oh, every thing is perfect!"

"If you girls will only stop raving long enough to get us something to eat," said Will plaintively, "you'll be doing some good in the world. Gee, but I'm hungry!"

"Poor boy," said Betty, with ready sympathy, "I know just exactly how you feel, because I'm nearly dead myself. Hand over the basket, Allen, please, and I'll spread the cloth."

"You bet I will!" said Allen readily. "I'll help you fix things."

"Look out for him, Betty," Roy cautioned. "He's got his eye on the good things."

"What good does that do?" sighed Allen. "I'd rather have my teeth on them."

"So say we all of us," laughed Frank. "Can't I help, too, Betty?"

"Of course--all of you," the Little Captain agreed, magnanimously. "Come on, girls--stop admiring the view and help with these things."

"Oh! will we?" cried Mollie, and all made a rush for the baskets. "What's first? You've got the table cloth? Well, then the napkins next and the sandwiches--and the biscuits, and--oh, boys, you never could guess----" Mollie sat back on her heels and regarded them laughingly. "Think of the thing you want most in the world," she said. "That's it!"

"There are lots of things I want," Frank began, but Roy interrupted him.

"There is only one thing in the world that is better than anything else," he said.

"And that?" the others queried breathlessly.

"Plum pudding!" He pronounced the two words with the reverence due them.

Grace stared at him in amazement. "How did you know?" she stammered. "It's almost uncanny."

"Not at all," said Roy, with a superior air. "It's perfectly simple--I smelled it."

"Oh, so that was the blithe and savory odor that assailed our nostrils a short time ago," said Frank. "But my hopes never soared to the heights of plum pudding."

"And here is the hard sauce," said Mollie, passing it around from one to the other as though it had been a precious jewel. "Amy made it--all of powdered sugar--with perhaps a little egg and butter thrown in--and I know it is delicious."

"You had better put that out of sight till we get through eating other things, Mollie," Betty cautioned. "The boys will be starting at the wrong end of the meal."

"Yes, and spoil their appetites," Amy added, while Mollie removed the temptation.

However, from the way the good things disappeared, there seemed no reason for Amy's fears--appetites like those were proof even against plum pudding.

At last the picnickers stretched themselves, replete and happy, upon the soft grass, to discuss a further course of action.

"What shall we do next?" asked Betty, after a somewhat lengthy pause. "Are we going to take a walk or swim some more or just stay here?"

"You've got the right idea," Roy commended.

"Which?" she asked, with uplifted eyebrows. "I suggested three things."

"The last of course," he answered, plucking a piece of long grass and beginning to chew the end of it. "I don't know what you put in that plum pudding, but it has made me everlastingly sleepy. I'd like to take a nice long nap;" and a prodigious yawn gave truth to his words.

"How interesting," Grace mocked. "Mrs. Irving warned Mollie that it might have such an effect--in fact, she said it was too hearty for hot weather. Behold we have the proof of her words."

"For goodness' sake, Roy, brace up!" cried Will, in a stage whisper. "Can't you see what you are doing? If you keep this up they won't give us any more. Brace up!"

Seeing the wisdom of this, Roy did his best to "brace up," but the girls only laughed at him.

"We are sleepy, too," Amy confessed, "so we won't tell. Besides, don't you suppose *we* like plum pudding?"

"Good!" said Roy, leaning back against the tree with a relieved sigh. "Now we can act naturally."

However, the Outdoor Girls and their boy chums were too active to remain quiet long, even after plum pudding. Allen was the first to become restless, and the others soon caught it from him. He rose, went through some gymnastic exercises, then looked about him curiously. "I wonder if there are any more places like this hereabout?" he said. "Does anybody want to take a little tramp and find out? You look about as energetic as a bunch of turtles. Come on, let's do something."

"Why do something when we can get lots more fun out of doing nothing?" asked Roy lazily. "What wouldst have us do?"

"I just told you," Allen's tone showed disgust. "Isn't there one among you with any pep at all? How about you, Betty? You're usually the one to start things."

Betty looked up at him with a slow, tantalizing little smile. "That's why I am letting you take the lead this time," she purred. "I thought I'd wait and see who'd make the first move."

"And I am going to force the second move," and before she could guess what he was going to do, he leaned over, caught her two hands in his and pulled her to her feet. "Now, you are going to take a little walk with me, young lady. If

the rest of this lazy crowd don't want to come along, they know what they can do!"

The Little Captain blinked at him uncertainty. "You might tell me what you are going to do," she complained. "Look, Allen--you hurt me!"

He regarded the brown little hand, held up for his inspection, anxiously. "I don't see anything," he said. "But if I hurt it I am sorry," and he stroked the place that should have been red.

"If you are going, why don't you go?" Grace demanded, then added meaningly: "I guess they *are* glad we are lazy."

"Please don't make any insinuations," said Betty, her nose in the air, but Allen sent a laughing shot back at them before they disappeared into the denser wood.

"You can eat another plum pudding if you like," he said.

Frank chuckled audibly. "Wise old chap--Allen," he remarked.

"I wish we could take his advice," mourned Amy. "If you boys hadn't been such pigs, we might have had some pudding left."

"Oh, why didn't you make more?" was Will's uncivil comment.

For a long time Allen and Betty wandered through the woods, seeing nothing and hearing nothing but the usual sights and sounds of the forest--and seemingly quite content to go on in that way forever.

It was Allen who first broke the silence. "I wish you would tell me what you are thinking about so hard, Betty. It must be very interesting, because you haven't said a word to me since we left that lazy crowd back there. 'Fess up!"

Betty flushed faintly. "You should never ask what a person thinks about on a beautiful summer, day when she is wandering through the woodland with--with----"

"Whom?" Allen prompted softly. "Go on, Betty, finish the story."

"Can't," she smiled up at him roguishly. "It's one of those 'to be continued.'"

He caught her hand, but she drew it away quickly. "Allen, what's this?" she cried.

She had accidentally brushed aside some brambles that had caught on her dress, and there close beside them, so near that she could thrust her hand into the opening, yawned the cavernous black mouth of a cave.

Allen drew her aside quickly. "Don't go near it," he commanded, in a tone that made Betty look at him in surprise. "I'm suspicious of these caves until I have investigated them myself. I am going to have a look, Betty. You stay where you are."

But the Little Captain had not been so named for nothing. She seized Allen's arm, and drew him back from the opening.

"Allen, if you go in there, I'm going, too," she cried, her eyes blazing. "Do you suppose I'm going to stand here, and see you get eaten up by a--a----"

"A what?" said Allen, putting his hands on her shoulders and laughing down at her.

"Well, whatever there is in the cave," she finished lamely. "Anyway, I'm going in with you."

"Betty, do be reasonable," he pleaded, but she flared up at that.

"Do you know, Allen, there is nothing a girl hates more than to have a boy ask her to be reasonable, when she knows she is? Anyway," her voice lowered and she pleaded her turn. "Anyway, it's lots worse to see anybody get hurt, anybody that you like, that is, than it is to get hurt yourself."

"You little soldier," Allen murmured. "But can't you see, Betty, that I am here to protect you from danger if there is any--not let you run right into it?"

"Then there is no reason why you should, either," she said obstinately.

"Will it make you feel any better if we get the others?" Allen asked, just a little exasperated, for he liked mysteries and hated to leave them unsolved. "We can get to them in five minutes if we run."

"Yes, that will be better," Betty agreed, seizing the suggestion eagerly. "But do you think we can find the cave

again?"

"Easily," said Allen. "You see, we are pretty near the water right here and that bent old tree at the edge of the lake--see what I mean?--well, that's right on the line with the mouth of the cave. I guess it will be easy enough to find."

So it was settled, and they raced back hand in hand to the spot where they had left their friends, eager to tell the news.

"So here you are," cried Mollie, at sight of the runaways. "We thought you were never coming back."

Allen wasted no time, but told his story in the fewest words possible. They were all tremendously excited, and followed the two adventurers eagerly as they led the way along the shores of the lake.

"Are you sure you can find it again?" Grace was asking when Amy seized her arm and pointed out over the water.

"Look!" she cried. "Gypsies!"

CHAPTER XX

DANGEROUS VISITORS

"Gypsies?" Betty echoed. "Where?"

"Can't you see?" returned Amy. "They are fording just as that old man said they could. Oh, what are we going to do?"

The boys had been gazing with interest toward the little group of wanderers, but at Amy's cry they were aroused to sudden action.

"Get to a place where we can see, and not be seen," said Frank. "I'd like to watch this thing through."

"They are coming right this way, too," said Grace, delightfully afraid. "Oh, what have they got on their backs?"

"Looks like loot of some sort," Will volunteered, peering forth from his tree trunk. "Say, this promises to be a lark, fellows."

"We'd better get back a little farther, if we don't want them to run right into us," Roy suggested. "They are headed this way."

The watchers retreated still farther into the woods until they came to a dense overgrowth of foliage which effectually screened them from prying eyes.

"This is just the thing," Roy exulted. "I tell you we are running in luck to-day."

"I am glad you think so," said Amy. "If one of those gypsies discovered us, I am afraid we wouldn't live long."

"Well, they are not going to," said Roy, overhearing the last remark. "Don't be a wet blanket, Amy. Anyway, just because they are gypsies they needn't be murderers."

"I'm not a----" Amy was beginning, when Allen hissed a sharp warning. "Keep still, everybody," he said. "They are not a hundred yards away!"

After that silence reigned, broken only occasionally by a nervous whisper from one of the girls as they watched the approach of the enemy--or so they regarded them--with breathless interest.

There were about twenty in the group, of which the majority were men. As they came nearer, the girls and boys could see how greatly their ages varied. Some were old men with white hair and flowing beards, while others were young striplings scarcely out of boyhood. Their clothes were many hued and picturesque, while each one carried on his back a huge bundle. They traveled along the bank, speaking in a low mellow tone, a language which the Outdoor Girls and the boys had never heard before.

Grace crowded close to Betty, and the Little Captain squeezed her arm reassuringly. "I kind of like them," she whispered. "They look so interesting. They look like bandits or----"

Frank's hand closed abruptly over her mouth--for low as her tone had been the gypsies were near enough now to hear the slightest whisper.

On, on came the little procession so near that the girls, by stretching out their hands, could almost have touched them. They scarcely dared to breathe.

The gypsies moved on for a short distance, then gathered about something the nature of which the girls and boys could not discern. In his curiosity, Allen forgot caution and rising from the protection of the bushes he tip-toed over to a more advantageous lookout. In a moment he was back again on his knees beside the crouching group crying in an excited manner: "It's our cave--the cave Betty and I discovered--they are going into it. Say, I wish we had gone in when we had the chance!"

"I don't," said Mollie, "they might have found you there and knifed you in the back or something."

"Especially something," mocked Roy. But Mollie was too excited to hear him.

"Look!" Grace cried. "Now that they are all inside, you wouldn't know that there was any opening there at all."

"It *is* tough to have to sit outside and look at nothing," Roy began.

"Don't look at me when you say that," complained Mollie, with a little grimace.

"When we ought to be in there capturing the thieves--if that is what they are," he finished.

"I'd bet on it," said Frank. "All gypsies are born robbers. Just the same, I wouldn't mind having some of their loot."

"Frank!" Grace exclaimed, in a shocked voice. "You know you wouldn't like anything of the sort."

"Why not?" he said, his eyes twinkling, for teasing Grace was one of his greatest delights. "I wouldn't go in anybody's house and deliberately steal anything, but if somebody is kind enough to do it for me----"

"It will do you as much good as it will them, eh, Frank?" finished Will, companion in crime.

"I think you are just talking to hear yourselves talk," Grace commented, and Betty heartily approved. "That's the most sensible thing I ever heard you say, Grace."

"I'm getting stiff sitting on my heels," Mollie complained. "I wish those old gypsies would go home where they belong, and let us get up."

"Seventh inning," said Frank. "All get up and stretch."

Willingly they followed his example, but no sooner had they risen to their feet than they were sent scuttling back again like rabbits into a burrow. The bushes were pushed aside and an aged gypsy stepped forth from the opening. With a little gasp of excitement the girls realized that he was without his heavy pack. Whatever it was they had brought evidently had been left behind in the cave. One by one they emerged until their number was complete. The last of the little band, a lad apparently no more than sixteen years old, replaced the screening bushes very carefully across the mouth of their hiding place. Then they turned, and retraced their steps, still speaking that strange melodious tongue of theirs, until they had reached the shore and departed the way they had come. It was not till then that the watchers ventured to speak above a whisper.

"Now for the cave and what it contains!" cried Will, and started for the spot the gypsies had so lately occupied.

The girls and boys followed him, the former excited yet half fearful.

"Do you think we had better?" asked Amy, as Will pushed aside the curtain of foliage and peered inside. "It's getting dark, and besides the gypsies might come back. Please don't, Will."

"Do you mean to say that you girls want us to go home without seeing what is in there?" asked Frank incredulously. "It can't be done, Amy."

Nevertheless, the boys hesitated before the entrance to this mysterious hole. After all, it was getting dark and the very blackness of the place was forbidding.

"If we only had some matches," said Roy uncertainly. "It wouldn't do us much good to go stumbling around in the dark."

"And I presume Mrs. Irving is back and will be terribly worried," Mollie added, seizing upon the most effective argument she could think of. "She told us to be home before dark."

"Yes, and we can come here to-morrow, anyway," Amy added. "What do you think about it, Betty?"

"Well, I am just crazy to see what the gypsies left there," the Little Captain answered, "but I do think it's a little late now to begin exploring. It isn't as if this were our last day on the island."

"I think Betty is right, fellows." It was Roy who spoke. "Mrs. Irving left the girls in our care and she won't do it again in a hurry if we don't get them home pretty soon."

"That's so, of course," Allen admitted reluctantly. "Just the same, it's a crime to leave a discovery like this without getting to the bottom of it."

"But we can come to-morrow," Betty pleaded. "It isn't as if----"

"Oh, I know all about that," he interrupted. "But we probably can't find the place to-morrow."

"Well, we will have to take our chances on that," cried Mollie, tapping her foot impatiently. "The rest of you may stay here all night if you want to, but I'm going back to 'The Shadows.'"

"Hold on a minute, Mollie, can't you?" said Will. "I wish it weren't so late, but since it is, I suppose we shall have to

act accordingly. Who's got the lunch basket?"

"Frank had, the last time I saw it," said Amy, looking about her at the gathering shadows uneasily. "Oh, please let's hurry."

"I forgot all about the basket," Frank confessed. "I think I left it over there behind the bushes."

Allen went with him to find it, while the girls stood huddled together, wishing themselves back at the bungalow. Mystery is wonderful in the glaring sun of noon-day, but in the chill dusk of evening, with a damp mist rising and touching all the land with clammy fingers--at such a time it is not so alluring. All they wanted was home and a fire and a chance to talk things over.

Allen and Frank, carrying the basket between them, soon rejoined those who were waiting at the cave, and they started along the shores of the lake, keeping a sharp lookout for anything that looked like a gypsy.

However, they reached home at last without encountering anything more formidable than their own shadows.

"But I *would* like to know what they had in those bags," sighed Betty, as the boys took leave of them. "Can we go back the first thing in the morning, Allen?"

"We can't go too soon to suit me," Allen agreed. "But aren't you going to let us fellows come over to-night to talk things over?"

"Of course," said Mollie, "and we'll have a fire."

"That sounds good," said Roy. "We won't keep you waiting."

Then the girls went in to relieve Mrs. Irving's anxiety and to tell her the wonders they had witnessed that afternoon.



CHAPTER XXI

THE LOST TRAIL

Before the cheerful glow of the fire, the young people talked long that night, while Mrs. Irving listened with interest. Her eyes sparkled at the description of the cave and the gypsy troupe and once she broke in with:

"You needn't think you are going to leave me behind when such exciting things are happening. After this, I am going to be on the spot with the rest of you."

"I wish you would," Mollie answered. "We thought you didn't care to go along."

"Ask me in the morning," she said.

And now the morning had come at last. Betty had lain awake most of the night, too excited to sleep and impatiently awaiting the first streak of dawn.

Now it had come after a wait that had seemed interminable and she slipped silently out of bed, determined not to awaken the sleeping girls. But before she had time to move half way across the room, Grace hailed her.

"Hello, Betty!" she called, "I'm glad you are up--I haven't been able to sleep for the longest while. What are you going to do?"

"Get dressed, I suppose," Betty answered. "I simply couldn't lie in bed any longer."

"Guess I will, too," said Grace; and that being the first time she had ever agreed with Betty on that subject, the latter looked at her in surprise.

"You must be all worked up, Gracy," she commented, "to be willing to get up at this time in the morning. I don't think it can be six o'clock, at the very latest."

"Well, anything is better than lying in bed awake," yawned Grace, sitting up in bed and curving her arms behind her head with that slow, instinctive grace that was part of her. "Look at Mollie staring at us for all the world like a little night-owl," she added.

"Thanks," said Mollie dryly. "I feel highly complimented, I'm sure. I'd hate to tell you what you look like."

"Don't," said Grace. "What I don't know won't hurt me."

"Let's all agree that you both look as bad as you can," said Betty crossly, for the strain of a sleepless night was beginning to tell. "It would be a relief to know the worst, anyway."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Betty, don't you begin to disturb the peace, too," Amy broke in sleepily. "It was bad enough before with Grace and Mollie always at swords' points, but if you begin it, I don't know what I shall do."

Amy's despair was so comical that the girls had to laugh in spite of themselves. As if at a signal, the sun broke through the heavy mist that had risen over night and flooded the room with golden beams. Somehow the world suddenly seemed a better and a happier place to live in, and the girls' spirits rose like mercury.

"Do you suppose Mrs. Irving will really want to go?" Amy asked, as they finished dressing. "She seemed eager enough last night, but she may have changed her mind by this time."

"I don't think so," said Betty. "She is as game as we are for things like that."

"Yes, and she is feeling better now," said gentle little Amy.

The boys called for them bright and early. It seemed that they, also, had spent a rather restless night, and were glad of the sunshine and warmth of the morning.

The party started off in high spirits to find the cave and solve its mysteries. Mrs. Irving was with them, for, as Betty had said, she was a game little person and in for a good time whenever one could be found.

"Suppose we can't find the place?" it was Grace who voiced the thought that had been secretly troubling them all. "Betty just found it by accident yesterday."

"Don't cross bridges till you come to them, Grace," Frank admonished her. "We'll find it, all right, if we have to cover

every square inch of the island."

"I vote that we let Allen and Betty take the lead," Roy suggested. "They know more about it than we do--or at least they ought to."

"What's that?" asked Betty, who had been deep in a conversation with Amy. "Who's talking about me now?"

"They are shifting the responsibility to our shoulders, that's all," Allen explained. "Roy says because we found the cave in the first place, it's sort of up to us not to disappoint them now."

"You may be sure we'll do our best," said the Little Captain, with her whimsical smile, "since we'd be disappointing ourselves at the same time."

"Wasn't it somewhere about here, Allen?" asked Mollie, pointing into the woods. "The place looks familiar."

"I don't think so," said Allen, puzzled. "Betty and I noticed a big tree that was almost directly on a line with the cave, but I don't see it to-day. I wonder----"

"It's a little farther ahead, I think, Allen," Betty volunteered, trying to force conviction into her tone. "I'm sure we haven't passed it."

"Well, I'm not," said Mollie, abruptly. "I'm positive I saw the bushes where we hid yesterday quite a distance down the road."

"Well, why on earth didn't you say so," Grace demanded, "instead of letting us wander on ahead?"

"Well, I wasn't sure," Mollie retorted. "And besides, I thought Betty and Allen knew what they were doing----"

"Sh-h!" warned Mrs. Irving. "There's nothing to get excited about. We all want to find the cave, and we are all going to do our best to find it. Remember, we are equally interested."

"Well, but it's very strange that we can't locate that tree," said the Little Captain, a troubled frown on her forehead. "Allen and I were so particular about it yesterday."

"Well, we surely won't accomplish anything by standing here," said Will, a shade impatiently. "Let's travel ahead a little--it seems to me it was farther on."

So they started again, troubled and perplexed and scanning every step of the way. Half an hour later they halted for another conference. The tree was nowhere to be found--neither was the cave. It seemed as if their adventure of the day before had been a dream which had faded and vanished into thin air with the advent of the morning.

"Every place we look at seems to be it, and then it isn't," wailed Amy.

"That's fine English, I must say," Will teased. "Where did you go to school?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, let her English alone, Will!" Grace admonished. "It isn't *that* we're interested in just at present. Oh, where has the old thing gone to?"

"I guess it never was," Roy replied gloomily. "We just imagined it."

"Imagined it!" sniffed Betty. "If I thought I had an imagination like that I'd write books or something."

"I wish I knew what the something stood for," said Frank, laughing at her. "It must be good."

"I imagine it would be," said Betty, laughing back at him, "if I only knew myself."

"Stop fooling, you two, and help us think of something," Mollie demanded. "We can't stand here and admire the view all day."

"What would you suggest?" Frank asked politely. "We are willing to give weighty consideration to anything you say."

Mollie looked weakly about her for support. "Grace, can't you do anything with him?" she pleaded. "He does nothing but talk nonsense all day long."

"And just after he's paid you a compliment," Grace drawled. "I wonder you call that nonsense."

Mollie had opened her mouth for a stinging rejoinder, but before she could voice it there came a disturbance from a new and unexpected quarter. The bushes parted and two figures emerged--a young man and a girl.

Astonishment held the little group motionless, but the strangers, or so they appeared, stepped forward impulsively.

"It's no wonder you don't remember me," said the girl impulsively, "since I was dressed very differently when you last saw me. I am Anita Benton--the girl you rescued the other day."

As usual, Betty was the first to find her voice. "Oh, we *are* glad to see you!" she said warmly. "We were wondering when you and your brother were coming to pay us that promised visit."

"Oh, we would have been here long ago, but, you see, I was rather, well--shaken up," Anita explained, with a merry little laugh that made the girls warm to her at once. "Conway could hardly wait to come to tell you all how grateful he was--and is," she added, with a quaint little sideways glance in the direction of her tall brother.

"Anita's right. I almost came alone when I found she was inconsiderate enough to get sick," said Conway, who had been regarding the scene with lively interest. "You see, I never knew before what it was to almost lose a small sister."

"He speaks as if he had any number of them," cried Anita, gaily; and one could see at a glance the perfect understanding and union between the two. "But, really, this is the very first day I have been able to walk any distance at all, so Con and I thought we'd take advantage of it."

"Well, we are mighty glad you did," said Roy heartily, and Mollie glanced at him sideways. "I wonder if you two could help us solve a riddle," he added. "We had just about given it up for a bad job when you came along."

"What is it?" asked the girl eagerly. "I love riddles."

"Don't let him get your hopes raised," Betty warned. "It isn't a riddle at all. The thing is, we found a cave yesterday, and to-day it has simply vanished, disappeared, gone up in smoke."

"A cave?" said Conway, interestedly. "A cave around here? Why, I never heard of any."

"Well, we are beginning to think that *we* dreamed it," said Allen, pessimistically. "The only strange thing about it is that we all should dream the same thing."

"But please tell me what you mean," begged Anita. "Caves are even better than riddles. Why did you say you dreamed it?"

There could be no escaping this emphatic young person--that they realized--so Allen started to explain. When he had finished the two visitors were almost, if not quite, as excited as the Outdoor Girls and their boy chums had been.

"You think it was somewhere about here, don't you?" Anita asked. "It ought to be easy enough to find."

"That's what we thought before we started," said Grace, "but after you have been hunting for an hour or two you begin to realize your mistake. I vote we do something else."

"Grace! And leave the cave?" Amy cried, amazed at her friend's lack of romantic fervor.

"Why not?" said Grace. "It won't run away. Besides, I guess everybody's forgotten this is the day we set for the race."

They stared at one another dumbfounded. It was as Grace had said--this was the day they had decided on for the race and they had forgotten all about it. Had ever such a thing happened before in the annals of history? If so, they could not remember it.

"A race?" demanded Anita. "What race?"

Betty looked at her dazedly. "What race?" she repeated. "Why, *the* race, of course. Oh, I beg your pardon--I forgot you didn't know. The fact is, we have been planning a swimming race for--oh, ever so long--and now this gypsy-cave business put it clear out of our heads. Oh! how could we have forgotten it?"

"Well, it isn't too late yet," said Will, practically. "That is, if you aren't too set on finding this elusive cave to do anything else."

"Oh, that's safe enough where it is," said Allen. "If we can't find it, it's a pretty safe bet that nobody else can."

"I vote we get into our bathing suits just as fast as we can," said Frank. "That is, if our visitors don't mind seeing a crazy race," he added, half-apologetically; for he remembered his manners just in the nick of time.

"There's nothing we would like better," Conway assured him heartily. "And I don't think it will be crazy, either, from the way you fellows demonstrated your swimming ability the other day."

"Oh, it would be all right if we fellows could be in it alone," said Roy, wickedly. "But, you see, the girls have a mistaken idea they can swim, too, and so, just to encourage them, we have let them in on it."

"Let them in on it, indeed!" sniffed Betty. "If I remember correctly, we were the first to propose the race. That doesn't look as if we were particularly afraid of getting beaten."

"Sheer nerve, that's all," said Frank, snapping his fingers with an air of superiority.

"We don't need to talk," said Mollie; "we will *show* you what we can do."

"All right, we're from Missouri," Will announced, cheerily. "All we want is to be shown."

By this time they were well on their way to the bungalow, and now the subject of the cave was overshadowed by the excitement of the approaching race.

As the young people neared "The Shadows" their excitement grew, and when at last they reached the house the girls fairly flew up the stairs, dragging Anita with them, Conway going with the boys, of course.

"Don't you want a suit?" Betty inquired of her visitor, pausing in the act of slipping her skirt over her head. "I brought an old one in case of emergency that I think would fit you."

Anita shook her head. "Thanks just the same," she said. "But the doctor says I mustn't think of swimming for some time."

"It's pretty hard luck," said Mollie, sympathetically, "to have to stay out of the water on days like this. Say, girls, do you think we have a chance in the world of even keeping up with the boys?" she asked, anxious, now that the moment of the test had come.

"Why, of course we can," said Betty, pretending a confidence she did not feel. "Especially if the boys give us the heavy handicap we agreed on. I didn't want them to, but I guess it may come in handy."

"Well, are you ready?" cried Mollie, jumping up. "I am. Come on, girls, let's show them something!" and she was off down the stairs with the others close behind.



CHAPTER XXII

MOLLIE WINS

The Outdoor Girls found the boys waiting for them, and evidently as eager as the girls to begin the race.

"Well, it didn't take you very long," Frank remarked; for the boys had never ceased to marvel that girls could be on time.

"What point do you start from?" asked Conway, as they started off together. "How long is the race, anyway?" he added.

"Well," said Allen, electing himself spokesman, "we decided on a starting point about a quarter of a mile from here. You see, from a sharp turn there, there is, for about three-quarters of a mile, a course almost straight. So, you see, that makes a fairly good course."

"I should say so," Conway commented. "Why didn't you say something about it to the folks over at the hotel--you'd have had considerable of a crowd for an audience."

"Oh, we didn't want it," cried Amy, shrinking from the very mention of such a thing. "I couldn't swim at all if I thought anybody was looking at me."

"Don't you make any exceptions?" asked Anita, twinkling. "Con and I don't feel like going home just yet, and Mrs. Irving has elected to be audience instead of actor."

"Oh, of course I didn't mean you!" Amy exclaimed, embarrassed at the slip. "I don't mean one or two----"

"Of course you don't," said Anita remorsefully. "I only wish I could go in with you."

They soon reached the bend of the river which Allen had indicated, the girls growing more nervous with every step.

"I tell you what you can do," said Allen, struck by a sudden thought. "You and your sister can be the judges. In case there are any ties--although, of course such a thing is improbable"--the girls refused to become indignant at this shot--"we'll need somebody to settle our dispute, and Mrs. Irving has flatly refused to interfere before this."

"All right, that will be fine--provided everybody agrees to abide by our decision. You see, we are absolutely neutral."

"Oh, we won't kick at anything you say," Frank promised. "There is not much I can say for this crowd. But one thing--we are good sports. All in favor of Allen's proposition say 'Aye.'"

The vote was carried unanimously, and the newly made judges were instructed by Will to "trot along to the finishing point" and wait till they saw him leading the van. Then they would know who had won the race. There was an ironic shout at this assertion and Conway's laugh came back to them as he and his sister started to obey orders.

"Well, now, is everybody ready?" Roy asked, surveying the group critically. "Suppose you girls get started. We won't jump in until one of you gets well past that jut in the shore--then it's our time to show a little speed."

"All right, we are ready," said Mollie. "Frank, when you say the word we'll start."

The girls lined up with beating hearts, waiting for the word that would relieve their taut muscles.

"One--two--three--go!" Frank counted, and the Outdoor Girls made a running dive into the water, which was deep at this point, and struck out strongly for the goal.

"Those girls sure can swim some," was Will's admiring comment.

"For girls," grunted Roy.

"Get ready now, fellows," commanded Allen. "They've almost reached the point."

"I think we gave them too big a handicap," said Frank doubtfully. "They swim like fish."

"You old croaker!" Will exclaimed. "Why, we ought to be able to beat them with twice that handicap."

"Look out, Mollie has reached the point, fellows!" Allen shouted. "Now's the time!"

Without more ado, the boys struck out bravely, determined to overtake the girls in the shortest time possible. They found it was not so easy, however, as might have been anticipated. The girls had had a big advantage and were still swimming strongly. Will and Roy began to agree with Frank that they had given them too long a handicap.

On the other hand, the girls were not so confident. The strain was beginning to tell even upon their tried young muscles. Their breath was becoming labored and the goal seemed terribly far away.

Mollie and Betty had fallen a short distance behind the other two. They had felt the tax the speed was making on their strength, and had decided wisely to save the rest of it until it was more needed than at the present.

Naturally Amy and Grace thought their friends were giving up and marveled at it. How on earth could they have lost out so soon? Had they been more versed in races they could have answered that question themselves.

Meanwhile the boys, pulling hard, had managed to make up half the distance between them and the girls, and in sight of Betty's and Mollie's evident weariness their hopes soared high. Why, with these last two out of the running the race was as good as won.

On, on they came, hand over hand, stroke following stroke, rhythmic and strong and confident.

Betty looked at Mollie and Mollie looked at Betty, and each knew she had discovered the other's secret and at the same time recognized a rival.

Amy had come to the limit of her strength with the goal an eighth of a mile away. She knew that for her the race was over. The waters pushed her back, forced her back, seeming like some pitiless enemy bent upon her downfall.

And what of Grace? She would not acknowledge to herself that her strength was leaving her--why, she had swum as far as that many a time before--it was absurd that she should give up now. Besides, she was leading them all. With this thought she put the remainder of her waning strength into a few last desperate strokes.

Meanwhile, the boys had caught up with Mollie, and seeing this she quickened her stroke, forging ahead again. But Betty kept the same calm, steady stroke which had so deceived the boys--and the girls, too, for that matter, with the exception of Mollie.

On, on they came--almost abreast now. The boys, tired from the long chase, were resting, gathering strength for the last spurt.

The finish line had been very conveniently marked by a slender tree which had evidently been torn down in some terrific storm and now lay half on the shore and half upon the water. This, then, was their goal.

Conway was the first to see them coming. "Look, Nita!" he cried, seizing his sister's arm and drawing her to the edge of the water. "From the way they are all lined up I should judge this is nobody's race yet. That's the kind of a thing I enjoy--where there is occupation at the end. And look----"

"Look at Betty," cried Anita, interrupting him. "She can swim better than I can, and I thought I was pretty good." There was no conceit in this remark--it was simply a statement of fact.

Out on the water the girls and boys knew the time had come when they must show what was in them. Grace and Amy, with the discomfited Will, had fallen to the rear, and the race lay between the other five. Allen was leading, and the two young judges on the bank had just decided that either he or Frank would be the winner. Then it happened! The two girls gathered all their energy, that splendid reserve strength they had kept so well in check--summoned every ounce of vitality they had and gave it full rein.

Their muscles, trained to outdoor life, gallantly responded to the call. They passed first Frank, then Allen, who stared after them stupidly. You see, the boys were not believers in miracles. However, they rallied their reserved strength and shot ahead until they were even with the girls again.

The goal was close before them. Now, if ever, must come the last desperate spurt. Could they make it? They must! they must! The thought kept hammering itself over and over in the girls' consciousness. They were so near now--they couldn't lose--oh, they couldn't!

And the girls were right. Anita almost fell into the water in her excitement as the four swept on, swimming as though they had just touched the water.

"Mollie! Betty!" she cried. "Go it--for the cause!"

Whether this encouragement reached the ears it was intended for is doubtful. Suffice it to say, the girls followed her

instructions to the letter.

Conway stretched forward eagerly as the swimmers rushed on toward the mark. Four hands closed over the fallen tree trunk almost at the same instant--but not quite. Mollie reached the goal a fraction of a second ahead--the race was hers.

As the dripping contestants drew themselves up upon the bank, Anita and Conway rushed forward eagerly. "Mollie had it!" they cried together, and Nita added:

"I don't see how you ever did it--it was the closest thing I ever saw."

For a few seconds the swimmers were too spent even to congratulate the winner. But when they did recover sufficient breath, they fairly overwhelmed her with praises. As Roy had said, "they were nothing if not sports."

"It was lucky you did have a judge, or, I should say judges." Conway glanced apologetically toward his sister. "Otherwise I don't believe anybody would have known which of you got there first. It was as near a tie as anything I have ever seen."

As the four lagging participants in the race came up to them, rather sore and disgruntled, the young folks delicately forbore to look in their direction and Frank covered their coming with a remark. "I don't know how you girls ever accomplished it--I thought you were done almost at the beginning. Tell us the secret."

Mollie and Betty looked at each other significantly. "That's our secret," said Betty. Then, springing to her feet, she cried: "Let's give three cheers for the winner of the race, Miss Mollie Bilette!"

The cheers were given with a will that awoke the answering echoes on the island.

Mollie flushed gratefully. "Thank you," she said. "It was only luck anyway that I happened to touch the tree a second before the rest of you."

"Don't be modest, Mollie," Roy entreated. "You beat us all fairly--especially me," he added ruefully. They laughed and Betty added whimsically: "I thought I had you up to the last, Mollie. It wasn't fair to lead me on like that."

"Well, you sure know how to swim--all of you," Conway commented admiringly. "You must do a lot of it."

"Oh, we are at it a good deal of the time," Frank agreed carelessly. "And the girls--well, they have formed a club for all sorts of outdoor stunts. You see the results."

"Oh, isn't that great!" exclaimed Anita with genuine enthusiasm. "I love all those things, too. I wish I could belong to such a club."

"If you lived anywhere near Deepdale," said Betty warmly, "we should be very glad to have you join us."

Only too soon--for Anita and the Outdoor Girls had taken a great liking to one another--the former declared that it was time she and her big brother must be starting for home. "Dad and mother worry whenever I am out of their sight nowadays--even though Con is with me," she explained.

"Come again soon," Betty called after them.

"Will you have another race?" asked Anita.

"Yes, especially for your entertainment," laughed the Little Captain. "And we won't let Mollie win it either."

"All right, then, I'll come," Anita promised.

"Humph, we'll see about that," said Mollie, referring to Betty's last remark. "History often repeats itself, you know."

Allen sighed as they started homeward. "We won't be able to come anywhere near them now, fellows," he said. "They'll have suffrage banners hung all over the house."

The girls laughed, for after all they *had* won through Mollie, and the taste of triumph was very sweet.

"Wasn't it grand!" cried Betty.

"The best ever!" returned Grace, as she popped a chocolate candy in her mouth.

"I'd like another such race," said Mollie, wistfully.

CHAPTER XXIII

HIDDEN TREASURE

The week that followed the Outdoor Girls remembered as just one endless round of fun. With the exception of two days, the weather was perfect. They traveled over to town on the rickety ferryboat several times. They took the cars out of the garage for short spins about the country, and otherwise amused themselves.

Then, too, the fish in the unrivaled fishing pool proved just as agreeable as they had on that first day, and provided many delicious suppers for the young people. The only thing that served to mar their pleasure was the continued reluctance of the mysterious cave to come to light--it was as though the earth had opened and swallowed it up.

"I'm beginning to think it just never was," Grace remarked, as she contentedly munched some chocolates that Frank had laid on her altar. "Will is terribly worried about it. He thinks since he is in the secret service that he ought to investigate it."

"How can he if there isn't anything to investigate?" asked Betty. And in truth there seemed some reason in her query. "It makes me angry every time I think of it."

"Yes, the fellows say Will even talks in his sleep about the cave," Amy volunteered. "Probably they exaggerate, but I don't wonder he is all on edge about it."

"And we have to leave so soon, too," Mollie commented. "We haven't much more time to look for it."

"It doesn't seem possible we have to go back home in less than a week," sighed Amy. "I just hate to leave this place."

"To change the subject," said Betty, "I wonder what's keeping the boys. Let's get the lunch and go to meet them."

The girls agreed, and Betty ran in to get the luncheon and tell Mrs. Irving where they were going.

Before they had gone more than a hundred feet from the house they were met by the boys, who seemed in a great hurry.

"Oh, did we keep you waiting?" Roy inquired anxiously, evidently relieved to see them. "Old Will here disappeared and we had to go on a still hunt to find him."

"Yes, he still has that confounded cave in his head. I'd given the thing up. Why worry about a thing you can't find?" Frank demanded.

"But we saw it," Will argued, relieving the girls of the basket. "And as long as we saw it, it's got to be on this island somewhere--that's a sure thing--and I'm going to find it."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Allen gloomily. "Blow a horn when you find it--we all want to be in at the death."

"If you are going to be so lazy I'll keep it all to myself," Will retorted. "That cave is somewhere on this island, and I intend to find where if I have to stay for another six months."

"Hear! hear!" cheered Roy. "That's the way I like to hear a fellow talk."

"Yes, you do," Will was beginning when Betty interrupted him.

"I'm on your side, Will," she said staunchly. "I'm not going to stop looking for the cave until we have to go home. Why, just think of the things we might find. There is probably loot in that place that is worth a great big lot of money, and in some cases they might be things that money couldn't replace. It's not a question of mere curiosity, it's a duty we owe to society."

"Speech! speech!" Roy cried again. "We have some little orator in our midst! But may I ask," he added, with exaggerated politeness, "how we are to go about accomplishing this service to society?"

Betty's patience was at an end. "Ask something you can answer yourself!" she said shortly, and Roy was silenced.

They deposited the basket at what seemed to them an ideal spot and were about to examine the contents when a sharp cry from Mollie arrested their attention.

"Look! look!" she cried. "I've found it! Girls--boys, come here! Quick!"

There was no need of urging, for they fairly flew in the direction of her voice. There she was down on her knees before an opening much lower and narrower than the one they had discovered before, but nevertheless unmistakably another entrance to the cave.

"I caught my foot in a twig," she explained, as they crowded around her, wild with excitement, "and I almost fell into the cave." So, as in the first place, the discovery had been made through an accident.

The cave seemed to have been formed in a rise of the ground--it could hardly be termed a hill--and as the young people looked inside, its black interior stretched as far as they could see.

"Who wants to go in first?" asked Amy, her tone low and awed in the presence of the unknown. "The boys will have to stoop to get in."

"I'll go," said Will, pushing his way past them, and in his tone was a ring of command. "Come on, anybody that wants to. I'm going to find what's in this place before it disappears again."

The place had a damp and earthy smell, and Amy drew back uncertainly. "The rest of you go first," she said. "I'll come--later."

Nothing loath, Mollie, Betty and even Grace pressed into the opening after Will, the boys standing aside--this last bit of self-control proving that chivalry was not all dead yet. The first temptation had been to run pell-mell after Will, regardless of girls or any other disturbing element that might be about.

However, as has been said, they allowed the girls to go in first and followed them as closely as they dared, Amy, however, going last of all.

After several feet of back-breaking progress the girls came out into another portion of the cave, where the roof was high enough to admit of an upright position. As they stood up, nerves aquiver with suppressed excitement, Will rushed back to them.

"There is another entrance at the other end," he cried. "That must be the one you and Allen found, Betty. Come over here where you can get more light," he added. "It filters through the leaves and twigs at the opening."

All this time he was leading the way to the spot that he was describing, the others following breathlessly. Once there, he grasped Allen's arm excitedly, crying in a tense voice: "Look here, old man, here is one of those bags they carried the other day--the place is full of them. Now I am going to open this one. You keep a good lookout."

"Hush!" cried Allen, and they listened, scarcely daring to breathe. From the mouth of the cave, soft but unmistakable, came the sound of voices--voices speaking in a tongue the boys had heard before. There could be no mistake--the gypsies were visiting their hiding place!

"Get back," breathed Will. "Back into the other mouth of the cave." He pushed the others before him with all his force and they obeyed without question.

They shrank back in the darkness and waited for what was to come. They might have fled, but curiosity held them chained to the spot.

Once Amy uttered a weak protest, saying: "Don't you think we had better go back?" when Will silenced her, none too gently. The moment was a critical one.

The little group of young people held their breath while the gypsies entered, silent now. In the dim light of the cave their features could not be seen, but there was something about the bent old figure of the foremost gypsy that proclaimed the leader of that other day. They were as velvet-footed as cats, and as the girls' eyes became more accustomed to the gloom they discovered that the gypsies were not hunch-backed, as had first appeared, but merely carried upon their backs packs like those others scattered about the cave. These they deposited on the floor without much ceremony and were gone before the girls and boys had fairly realized it.

The watchers stood motionless even after the footsteps had died away in the distance. It seemed as though a mystic spell had been woven about them, which, for the time, they were powerless to break.

It was Roy who first "came to life," as Mollie expressed it. "I say, what's the use of standing here?" he inquired. "Let's have a look."

"Oh, hush, please!" begged Grace, alarmed at the unrestraint of his tone. "They might come back."

"No, they won't," Will asserted, for he had suddenly acquired great dignity. "They have probably gone for another

haul. In the meantime it is up to us to inform the authorities, and mighty quick, too."

"But we don't even know that it *is* loot, Will," Betty protested. "We ought to make sure first."

"That's easy enough," Allen commented. "Besides I've been anxious to examine the contents of that bag for a long time. Now, I'd like to see anybody keep me from it!" and he rushed over to the other side of the cave and was opening one of the bags even as he spoke.

The others crowded close beside him as he knelt on the ground, taking advantage of the meager light from the cave mouth to examine its contents. What they did see literally made them gasp. Gold and silver and strings upon strings of beads--some very valuable, others less so--and trinkets of all sorts and descriptions.

"Say, those gypsies are experts!" Frank exclaimed, awe in his tone. "I think I'll go into the business."

The girls didn't even pretend to be shocked at this--they were too taken up with their own emotions--too excited to notice such trivial remarks.

"Oh, aren't they wonderful?" cried Amy, down on her knees before the bag, and running her fingers through the brilliant mass delightedly. "How do they ever get such things?"

"That's a funny question to ask," Grace remarked. "They steal them, of course."

"But what are we going to do?" asked Betty practically. "If all the bags contain things like these, this cave is a mighty valuable place. Oh, and to think that we were the ones to discover it!"

"Well, you people can stay here and guard the loot if you want to," said Will. "But I'm going over to the mainland to hunt up a couple of ancient sheriffs--I suppose they are ancient," he added whimsically. "In stories, you wouldn't recognize a sheriff without his whiskers."

"Never mind the whiskers," said Mollie impatiently. "The thing is, somebody has to stay and guard the cave or it will disappear the way it did the other time, and you will bring the authorities over here for nothing."

"Well, of course you will have to stay until I get back," Will decided. "In the meantime, you can eat lunch. Good-bye, I'm off." And he led the way into the sunlight, which dazzled their eyes after the semi-gloom of the cave.

"But you will have to wait for the ferry," Allen called after him, "and it may not be along for some time."

"I'll take a chance," Will flung back. "I'll get there if I have to swim!"

"Maybe if you swim you can beat the ferry," suggested Allen, with a laugh.

"Say, that's a scheme! I guess I had better try it."

"Nonsense! You take the boat, old as it is."

"All right, Allen."

CHAPTER XXIV

LYING IN WAIT

Somehow the lunch did not taste as good that day. Excitement had robbed the Outdoor Girls and their boy friends of appetite. They ate in a preoccupied way, eyes now on the cave so close at hand, now wandering in the direction from which the gypsies had come. If these latter should return before Will--well, then it would be time for a hurried exit on their part. They had no intention of being caught in the wolf's lair.

It was Will, however, who reached the place first, and those waiting for him could have danced with relief when they heard his voice. A moment later they caught sight of him, accompanied by two men from the town. Judging from their gesticulations, the latter were more than ordinarily excited. Incidentally, let it be recorded that neither of them, the sheriff nor his deputy, had a beard.

"Here they are!" Will cried, as he caught sight of his friends. "I thought I was on the right track. Any news since I left?"

"Not a thing," Frank answered. "The place has been absolutely deserted."

"Good," said Will, then, turning to the men beside him, added: "This is the entrance we found to-day--you see the bushes hide it completely. But there is another and a larger opening at the other end--that's the one we stumbled into in the first place."

The two men listened to his words attentively, and when he had finished set about little explorations of their own.

"You say there is another opening at the farther side?" one of them inquired, pausing in the act of pushing aside the bushes. "That probably is the main one."

"I think so," Will agreed, "but they both lead to the same place."

Satisfied on this point, the two continued their investigations. They disappeared within the cave and the young folks waited impatiently for their reappearance.

"Do you suppose they will bring the bags out here?" asked Mollie eagerly. "If they do, then we can really see what the things are like."

"I hope so," Amy stated. But Betty started to speak dreamily, saying:

"What will those poor old gypsies do when they come back and find the place cleared out?"

"They'll probably all go to the penitentiary," said Frank calmly. "The authorities will be on the lookout for them and they'll get caught all right when they do come back."

"Oh!" said Grace, horror in her tone; for so far that side of the question had not occurred to her. "It's terrible to think of sending those poor things to jail."

"Well, but they have earned it," Allen argued. "They must have been getting away with this thing for years."

"It's a wonder Aunt Elvira never suspected anything," said Mollie, frankly puzzled. "Why, she didn't even mention the gypsies."

"Probably thought the story too old to tell," Roy suggested. "We wouldn't have believed there was such a place on Pine Island ourselves if we hadn't seen it with our own eyes."

"I suppose not," Mollie admitted, and then the sheriff and his deputy emerged into the daylight once more and each brought with him a bag.

"Now we will find out how far their rascality has gone," one of the men, the elder of the two, asserted. "Perhaps you don't know it," he added, untying the fastenings of the first bag, "but you young people have done the community a great service. People all over are complaining of stolen property, and, although we have suspected the gypsies for some time, so far we haven't been able to prove anything. However, this discovery of yours changes things considerably. Ah, what have we here?"

The sun struck full upon the brilliant mass, making it glow and sparkle like a jewel. There were other and real jewels, too, in the collection, which they were soon to discover.

"Oh," murmured Mollie, "if I could only find some trace of mother's silver service among those things!"

The detective looked up sharply. "Have you folks lost anything?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" Mollie explained. "Mother lost her silver tea service that has been in the family for ever so many years, besides an expensive jet necklace. And, besides that, Miss Ford's father had his pet thoroughbred horse stolen."

"And one of the big stores in Deepdale was looted," Betty added. "Oh, there was tremendous excitement there for a time."

"Hum," said the spokesman, stroking his beardless chin thoughtfully. "It looks as if we might be able to trace a good many things." And he continued to explore the contents of the bag to the very bottom.

The other one was treated in like manner but nothing familiar met the watching eyes. Of course, all were disappointed, but Mr. Mendall, for such was the sheriff's name, warned the young people that it was not yet time to give up hope--there were plenty more bags where these had come from.

"But we haven't time to go through all of them now," he stated. "I simply wanted to assure myself that the things were valuable. Now that I am satisfied on that score, the best thing to do is to get the loot away as soon as possible and then set somebody to watch for those gypsies. I never saw anything like them when it comes to nerve," he added, waxing enthusiastic on the subject. "Why, I believe if you were crossing a chasm with only a board between you and eternity, and they happened to need that board for kindling wood they would pull it out from under you without the slightest compunction."

The girls laughed, but they could not help thinking that the statement was somewhat exaggerated.

"But you are not going to leave the cave unprotected until you get the loot away?" Mollie cried. "Suppose they should come back in the meantime?"

"Then they would fall into a very prettily laid trap," was the grim answer. "No, my dear young lady, we are not going to leave the cave unguarded. I'll have men watching day and night until we catch them red-handed. It is sure to come sooner or later."

The girls drew a relieved sigh. They had not liked the idea of being alone on this end of the island when the gypsies returned to find the cave empty.

Mr. Mendall rose to his feet, gripping a bag in each hand, but together they were all that he could carry. "Here, Trent, you take one of these," he ordered. "I'll take the other and, armed with proof like this, we ought to be able to convince even those skeptical people on shore." Then he added, turning to Will: "If you will keep watch for another hour we will be back with more men to relieve you."

Will readily promised, and once more the young folks were left alone.

"You people don't have to stay just because I do," said Will, meaning to be generous. "You can go home, or go in swimming, or anything else to amuse yourselves you wish, while I do the sentry act."

"Go home!" Mollie cried indignantly. "Why, how can you think of such a thing, Will, when you know how interested we all are? I, for one, can't do anything but wait."

"Nor I," said Grace. "They may be able to find your mother's silver, Mollie, but I'm afraid our poor dear Beauty is gone forever."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Betty argued cheerfully. "Just because they didn't sew him up in a bag and stick him in a gloomy old cave is no reason why we can't find him. We may come across him any time."

"Well, maybe," sighed Grace, and her tone was anything but optimistic.

The friendly sheriff had set an hour for the time of his absence, but long before the hour had sped he returned, bringing with him six other men and a small hand-cart.

"I don't see how you managed to get it through the woods," said Allen, referring to the hand-cart.

"Oh, we stuck to the shore most of the time," said Mr. Mendall, cheerily, "and the rest of the way there are pretty broad paths. Now for the clearing up," and he led his half dozen followers after him into the cave.

They made several trips until the crazy cart was heaped high with veritable treasure bags.

"Oh, aren't you going to let us see what is in them now?" Betty entreated, intense disappointment in her voice. "We are so anxious to know."

"Sorry," said the big man kindly, "but I'll feel safer when this loot is safely locked up on shore. We'll let you know exactly what's in them as soon as we know ourselves," he promised.

"Nothing could be fairer than that," said Allen cheerfully. "I guess since we've waited so long, we can afford to wait a little longer."

"It won't be much longer," Mr. Mendall responded. "We want you all to know how grateful we are for this assistance. Without it we would probably have been a long time getting to the bottom of things. As I said before, you have rendered a great service to the community."

And with this graceful little speech, Mr. Mendall and two of the men he had brought with him took their leave, carrying with them the precious bags, one of which Mollie so hoped would contain some, at least, if not the whole, of her mother's silver. The other four men were left behind to watch for the return of the gypsies.

"Oh, I don't know how I can wait till to-morrow," wailed Mollie, as they started homeward. "I'm simply dying to know. I think they might have opened the things while we were there. Horrid old things! The gypsies probably wouldn't be back for another two weeks, anyway, and there really wasn't any danger."

"But to think we had the luck to find it!" cried Betty, her eyes still glowing. "And after we had given it up, too. Goodness, I'm glad you had that tumble, Mollie."

"Thank you," sniffed Mollie. "Just the same," she added with a gleeful little laugh, "I'd give a great deal to see Aunt Elvira's face when she hears the story."



CHAPTER XXV

GLORIOUS NEWS

"I guess they will never come," said Mollie, gazing despairingly out over the water. "They must have been gone at least an hour."

"Goodness, Mollie!--an hour," echoed Betty, in imitation of Mollie's tragic tones. "Don't you know that it would take at least three hours for the boys to go over, find out what Mr. Mendall has to say to them and get back here? Remember they have to wait for the ferry," she added significantly.

"Well, I know, but if it is going to take that long, we won't get home to-day," Mollie grumbled. "Besides, I've *got* to hear the news."

It was early in the morning of the day on which the Outdoor Girls and the boys had decided to start for home. For days they had expected word from Mr. Mendall. The boys had haunted the town hoping to hear from him--but no word had come. Then suddenly Will had burst in upon the others with the great news that he had almost run into Mr. Mendall turning a corner, and that genial man had expressed great pleasure at sight of him.

"Why, he said----" Will had reported excitedly, "he said that if he hadn't met me, he fully intended coming over to camp--that he had something to tell me that might be of great interest. And he wants us fellows to come over first thing in the morning," he had finished exultantly.

So it was that the girls were waiting impatiently for confirmation of their hopes.

"We don't really have to go home to-day," Amy was saying doubtfully. "I don't see why we couldn't have waited until to-morrow."

"It does seem a shame to leave this wonderful place," sighed Grace looking about her. "It seems to me it is more beautiful now than it ever was. September is the best time in the year, anyway."

"Why can't we stay over anyway--to-morrow is Saturday. I think we might as well finish out the week," cried Grace, seized with a bright idea. "Maybe Mrs. Irving will consent, since it is bound to be late when we do get home." She popped a chocolate in her mouth as she finished.

Betty regarded her chumpily.

"That *is* clever," she said. "Especially since the boys have taken down their tents, and we have everything packed up."

Grace looked rather crestfallen.

"Well, I suppose we couldn't," she admitted. "Just the same I would be glad of any excuse that would keep us on the island a few days longer. Oh, dear----" and she gazed about her longingly.

"Haven't we had a good time?" asked Betty, as she settled herself on the steps. "This last week has been great, too--even though we were so anxious to hear about Mollie's silver."

"Oh, and do you know what Anita said the other day?" Amy broke in suddenly. "She said she had some distant relatives in Deepdale, and that if she could fish around and get an invitation, she might see us there."

"Oh, wouldn't that be great!" said Mollie, with genuine enthusiasm.

"Yes, she's a fine girl," Betty echoed. "I only wish she lived in Deepdale, so we might invite her to join our happy little party."

"Yes, and the boys like her brother, too," said Grace. "Will says he is a fine fellow; and Will never says a thing like that unless he means it."

"Do my eyes deceive me?" cried Betty, springing up and pointing toward the mainland, "or is that the good old Pine Island dreadnaught steaming majestically from the harbor? Tell me some one--am I right?"

"You are!" cried Grace, dramatically. "That noble ship could be no other."

"Oh, do stop your nonsense," cried Mollie impatiently. "Are you sure that's the ferry?"

"Since it is the only apology for a boat that ever comes this way," Grace remarked lazily, "I guess it must be."

"Oh, Grace, don't tease," warned the Little Captain, in an aside. "Can't you see how worked up Mollie is? No wonder she is excited--the news may mean a lot to her."

Grace glanced at her chum and saw that Betty had spoken the truth. Mollie's hands were clenched tight to her side, crimson flamed in her face, and her foot tapped nervously on the ground.

"Oh, they'll never get here," she was saying over and over again. "Can't the old ferryboat get up any steam at all?"

"Perhaps we might help tow it in?" Betty suggested, striving to break the tension. "I think we could paddle lots faster in the canoes."

"Goodness, I would almost like to try it!" Mollie exclaimed. "I think they might get something modern on the lake--something real modern--around the eighteenth century."

"Oh, isn't she sarcastic," said Amy, putting an arm about her friend and patting her hand gently. "Never mind, Mollie, all things come in time."

Of course she was right, even Mollie had to admit it.

At the end of one of the longest half hours the girls had ever spent, the rickety little ferryboat scraped against the dock, and they ran down to meet the boys. The latter almost fell out of the boat, careless of what any one might think. At the first sight of them the girls were convinced their news was of the best.

"Oh, oh, hurry!" cried Mollie. "I thought you would never get here. Oh, you have something wonderful to tell us--I know it!"

"You bet we have!" cried Allen. "We have the very finest news you ever heard."

"Oh, what is it?" the girls cried in unison, and Mollie added pleadingly: "Don't keep us waiting any longer, boys, please."

"All right," Will agreed; for he was as anxious to tell as the girls were to hear. "Come to the house and we will tell you the whole story."

"But did you get them?" Mollie demanded. "I don't see why you have to wait till you get to the house to tell me that."

"You can see by their faces they have, Mollie," Betty assured her. "You had better not interfere--they will tell the story their own way, whatever you say."

By this time they had reached the house and called to Mrs. Irving to come and hear the news.

She joined them in a moment, and Will began.

"Well, you see," he said, "in the first place, Mr. Mendall didn't want to raise our hopes until he found out definitely whether anything there belonged to us."

"Yes," broke in Mollie quickly.

"Don't interrupt," Will warned her. "You might sidetrack me or something."

"Oh, Will, don't be a goose!" cried his sister. "Go on."

"I'm not a goose," he declared with dignity, "and I expect to go on if I am given half a chance."

He paused for a reply, but as none was forthcoming and as only threatening looks met him on every side, he continued hurriedly.

"Well, as I was saying," he went on, "Mr. Mendall did finally succeed in getting the information he wanted. Then yesterday afternoon I happened to meet him---"

"Yes, we know all about that," said Betty, dancing with mingled excitement and exasperation. "Please get to the point."

"Since you insist," Will answered gravely. "The fact is, Mollie, that all your mother's silver is there--even down to the little sugar bowl."

"Oh!" gasped Mollie, and for a moment she could say no more.

Then the flood gates of speech opened, and her questions poured forth.

"Oh, Will! isn't that wonderful?" she cried. "I didn't dare really to believe till this very moment. Are you sure everything is there--not a thing missing? The creamer and teapot? And oh, Will!" she grasped his arm beseechingly, "did you find the necklace?"

Will looked evasive.

"Why, you see----" he was beginning, when Frank interrupted him.

"The necklace is probably gracing the swarthy neck of some fair gypsy damsel," remarked the latter, rather flippantly. "Here we offer you a whole silver service, and you're not satisfied."

Mollie looked from one to the other of her two tormentors in pathetic bewilderment.

"Please, *please!*" she begged. "Mother'll be wild when she hears about the silver. But oh, I do want that jet necklace almost more than anything in the world! Don't tease me any more, please."

At this appeal, Will's heart softened, and, with a quick movement, he drew his hand from behind him, disclosing to four pairs of incredulous eyes the precious jet necklace.

"Here it is," he announced triumphantly.

Mollie grasped the heirloom with a little cry of joy. Then she threw her arms about Betty's neck, and began to laugh hysterically.

"Don't mind me," she gasped, as the boys looked on mystified. "I--I can't help it! I'm just so--so happy!"

Betty patted her chum's shoulder, soothingly.

"Now, see what you've gone and done," she accused poor Will.

"I--I didn't know----" he was beginning, but he seemed destined not to finish his sentences that day.

Mollie, a creature of moods, withdrew herself from Betty's arms and favored the promising young detective with an ecstatic little hug that amazed and delighted that young gentleman immensely.

"I say, Mollie, do it again," he pleaded, while the other three boys hastened to demand their share of the reward.

But Mollie had caught Grace about the waist and they were engaged in what might be called a cross between a Virginia reel and an Indian war dance.

When they were forced to stop from sheer lack of breath, the volcanic Mollie flung herself upon the steps, and beamed upon them.

"And that's not all," Will said, and glanced instinctively toward his sister.

Grace started, and leaned forward beseechingly.

"Will?" she breathed.

"Yes," he continued, answering her unspoken question, "we found Beauty."

The girl's eyes opened wide at this new disclosure, and Grace grasped her brother's arm imploringly.

"Oh, Will, where?"

"He was found by one of the farmers near the town. Looked as though he'd broken away from whoever'd had him. The farmer saw he was a thoroughbred, and guessed at once that he had been stolen. Luckily for us he was an honest man."

"Darling old Beauty," murmured Grace, tearfully. "Oh, wait till dad hears!"

"I guess he'll get a welcome, all right," Will agreed gleefully. "Poor old Beauty! I saw him myself this morning."

"Mr. Mendall says," Allen volunteered, "there are traces of a good many other things from Deepdale. We'll probably have a triumphant home coming. And they have captured the gypsies and put them in jail."

"Oh, oh, and to think we did it!" sighed Amy, contentedly.

So joyful were they at the outcome of their detective work, that the long journey to Deepdale was almost forgotten. It was Mrs. Irving who brought them to their senses.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that if we don't start pretty soon, Deepdale won't see us until to-morrow morning, and that will never do. Come, girls, get ready."

"Oh, I don't want to go home," wailed Amy, as they rose to follow instructions.

"But just think what we will have to tell them when we get there!" said Betty, and the thought lent wings to their feet.

Once more the Outdoor Girls and their comrades assembled on the wharf, waiting for the ridiculous little ferryboat that had been the butt of their jokes during the summer. Now that they were going away, however, the sound of the shrill little whistle, as it panted up to them, seemed somehow strangely typical of their life on the island, and they felt an unexpected throb of home-sickness.

"We'll have to come back to it some time," Betty said. "I love the place."

"I wonder if there are any more mysteries floating around loose," said Roy, pausing for one last backward glance over his shoulder. "If there are, I'm going back."

But Allen seized him and drew him aboard.

"Come on," he cried, "we're off!"

The four girls linked arms, as they gazed back at the familiar bungalow.

Suddenly Mollie chuckled irrepressibly.

"Oh, girls," she murmured softly, "I must be on the spot when Aunt Elvira hears the news."

The little ferryboat steamed away from the dock, carrying with it our happy Outdoor Girls, to whom we must once more wave a reluctant farewell.

THE END

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