THE S.P. MYSTERY

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Jean, whisking back from the truck, almost ran into Greta.
(Page 190)

The S. P. Mystery

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CHAPTER I

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Jean Gordon rushed into the house, her face all aglow. There was some fire within which made her eyes bright and the sharp wind, which came from lakes not too far away, gave her rosy cheeks and nipped her nose as well.

Without stopping in the hall to take off her pretty red coat or the close little hat that left little but eyes, nose and mouth to be seen, she opened the door into the dining-room, from which the sound of her mother's machine could be heard.

"O Mother! May I have the room in the attic for a club room?"

Jean had opened this door a little more decorously and now she closed it more softly than she had opened and closed the front door, whose bang her mother must have heard. With an amused smile Mrs. Gordon turned from her work. "Is this my dear hurricane, home from school?"

"It is," laughed Jean. "Please excuse the front door, Mother. It slipped out of my hand. And I suppose I should not have shouted right out. Good afternoon, fair lady!" A deep courtesy was made in grave exaggeration before Jean ran to her mother and deposited a quick kiss upon her cheek.

"Your apology is accepted, Miss Gordon," said Jean's mother, with a pat upon the cold hand which Jean laid upon her chair. "Now, what is it that you want?"

"The attic room for a club,—please, Mother!"

"It is cold up there," returned Mrs. Gordon, starting to baste the hem of a blouse which she was making for Jean.

"Oh, that is going to be precious!" exclaimed Jean, stopping to look at the garment. "I'll be all fixed for school now. I don't see what makes me get so shabby."

"Nor do I," said Mrs. Gordon with a comical look. "But clothes will wear out."

Jean sat on the arm of her mother's chair to continue the original subject. "There's a radiator there, isn't there, Mother? Couldn't the heat be turned on?"

"I suppose so; but that one always turned hard, and it has not been used for a long time. But why the pressing need of a club room and who will clean it?"

Jean laughed. "Ay, there's the *rub*! I hope you appreciate my smart remark, Mother. But March is almost time for house-cleaning, isn't it? Besides, the club members will fix up the room. I promise not to bother you about it. There isn't much in it. Why couldn't we have the old chairs that are in the rest of the attic?"

"You could. You *may*. Tell me about the club. This is something new, isn't it?"

"Rather: but if you don't mind, Mother, I'll tell you more about it to-night. There is a reason why I have to call up the girls *right away*!"

"Run along, then." Mrs. Gordon looked after her daughter with a twinkle in the brown eyes that were so much like Jean's. What new scheme did those children have now?

Jean pulled off her hat and hung it upon the hall rack, but without removing her coat she sat down at the little table near to telephone.

"No, Central, it's one—O—two—O, please,—yes, X."

A long pause made Jean tap her feet impatiently while she waited. Why didn't Central ring again? But here came the "hello" Jean wanted. "Hello, Molly. I'm glad that's you. Can you call up Phoebe and Bess and Fran for me and all of you come right over? There's something I have to see you about right away. It's terribly important and I want to get everybody here the first minute possible, or I wouldn't ask you to telephone. I've just *got* to see you before the party to-night! Oh, good! Thank you so much. Tell them there's a mystery and that'll bring 'em. I'm going to get Nan over and start making fudge. Wasn't it *grand* that we got out of school so early?"

Molly evidently agreed that it was "grand," and in a moment the receiver was hung up, Jean hanging up her coat in the interval between calls.

Again Jean was sitting at the small table. "That you, Nan? Since I saw you something has happened and if you want your old Jean vindicated, as

’twere, come on over and help me out. Just walk right in, because I’ll probably be telephoning, or may be, anyhow. We’ll make some fudge before the girls get here. What? Oh, I’ll ’splain’ when you get here. I’ve a great scheme,—only maybe you won’t like it, of course.”

Nan must have asserted her interest in Jean’s schemes, for Jean turned from the telephone with a dimple in one cheek fully evident and a funny quirk in her smile. Nan was her chum in chief, and a girl of some originality. What Jean could not think of, Nan proposed. Between them had some interesting experiences, though usually within the bounds imposed by their very sensible parents.

Next, a number had to be looked up. “I do hate to call the Dudley’s,” Jean was thinking. She stood a moment, thinking, then went on a run through the hall and into the kitchen, neat and clean and orderly. Jean made a dash for the aluminum sauce-pan in which she always made her fudge. Another dash, and she had measured out the sugar, put a cup under the faucet for water, set out another pan, to receive the fudge when done, a bottle of flavoring extract and a big spoon. Then she looked for milk and butter, changing her mind a time or two about the ingredients.

While Jean was in the midst of these hurried proceedings, the kitchen door opened after a short rap and a girl with a blue coat over her head and shoulders came in, though stopping in the door to take off her rubbers. “My, it’s muddy in your back yard, Jean,” said she. “I just took a notion to come over this way, since you said fudge. Why aren’t you telephoning?”

The enveloping coat came off as Nan Standish talked, revealing a girl of about Jean’s height, the usual height of girls about fifteen. Nan’s clear eyes were blue and her hair fluffy and yellow. She was as light on her feet as Jean and came dancing over to where Jean stood. “Here, just skeedoodle, Jean Gordon. I’ll start this, while you do whatever else you want to do. I’m dying to know what it’s all about.”

“I’ve only got one more place to telephone, Nan. I’ve decided to use milk instead of water, since there seems to be plenty. So put in one cup to the three cups of sugar, already measured. See? I’ll be back in a minute and tell you all about it, the plan, I mean, not the fudge.”

“Yes, I’ve made fudge with you before. Trot along.”

Jean trotted. “Is this Mrs. Dudley?” she asked, when she had the proper number. “This is Jean Gordon. Would it be too much trouble to ask Leigh to come to the telephone?”

Jean's tone was very formal now. She did not know Mrs. Dudley very well, and she stood just a little in awe of the Dudley formality as expressed in Leigh. But Phoebe would not enjoy a club without Leigh, and Leigh was a girl that any club would be glad to have. To do without Phoebe, too, was not to be thought of!

It was plainly not too much trouble to notify Leigh, for presently she came to talk with Jean. "A little meeting of a few girls, Jean,—to do something about something? That's very clear!" Leigh's low laugh came over the wire. "Why the mystery? Yes, of course, I'll come, and stop for Phoebe, too. Oh, it may be fifteen minutes. I'll have to tell Mother and get my wraps. I'm terribly curious."

"Wasn't that nice, Nan?" asked Jean, in the kitchen again. "Phoebe told me yesterday that Leigh is just shy, being new here this year, you know, and not knowing any of the girls before."

"We-ell," Nan replied, with a spoonful of the hot fudge to try it in a glass of cold water, "I do think that the Dudleys think pretty well of themselves, with that big place and all,—but I suppose, for that matter, all of our families do, and Leigh—gracious, Jean, this fudge is ready to come off! Is that the pan of cold water to set this in?"

The fudge cooling before being beaten, our two girls linked arms and ran upstairs to Jean's room, where with many giggles Jean imparted her news to her friend. "Do you think it was so awful, Nan?" she asked. "I feel dreadfully guilty, yet I just did it on the spur of the moment and if you girls only do it, it will be a lot of fun."

"Of course it will. I'm for it, Jean. Why haven't we done it before?"

"But how about the name? Do you suppose—?"

"Oh, that will be all right. If I were you I'd tell them all about it. What is a secret society without a secret to keep? Jimmy has been awfully smart about his pin, and if we *could* keep it quiet about our plans—"

"Especially as we haven't any," laughed Jean.

"Yes, but they need not know that. Oh, there's the doorbell! The girls are coming. I'll slip down the back stairs and beat that fudge while you let them all in. But don't do anything till I get there,—*please*!"

"Not a word, Nan. It shall remain a mystery till you come in. But don't you want some help beating that fudge?"

"Not *necessarily*, Jean, but send anybody out you like."

By this time Jean was at the foot of the front stairs to open the door, and Nan's quick feet were pattering down the uncarpeted back stairs to the kitchen. The Gordon home was almost like her own.

The last girl to be reached by telephone was the first to arrive. Leigh Dudley and Phoebe Wood stood at the Gordon door, giving bright greetings to Jean's welcoming words. "Come right in," she cordially urged. "Isn't this a March wind, though?"

Leigh was taller than Jean, with a vivid color, almost black hair and dark blue eyes. She slipped out of a handsome fur coat, which Jean took from her and put upon a hanger. Phoebe, little and dark and quick, waited upon herself. A wood fire was burning in the living room fireplace and to this the girls betook themselves, warming cold hands.

As Leigh rubbed her hands together in front of the blaze, she said, "I thought at first that you wanted us for something about the party. Phoebe thought it a birthday party. Do you suppose we ought to give a present?"

"No," replied Jean. "I know that it is not a birthday celebration. Excuse me,—there come Molly with Bess and Fran. Oh, look at Fran's new hat. Isn't it *darling*?"

With this Jean flew to the hall again, while Leigh and Phoebe looked out of the window to behold the "darling" hat, a very cocky felt affair. Only girls could have told any difference in the style from those of the other girls. "Isn't it a shame that Fran had to get a new hat this late in the winter?" asked Phoebe.

"Why did she? They're wearing straw hats now in some places."

"Why, don't you know, on the bob-sled last night Fran's hat got knocked off and Jimmy Standish stepped right into it and through it! Fran managed to fix it up enough to wear to school this morning. Then at noon Fran went and got a wonderful bargain because it is so late."

More raw breezes entered with the newcomers, who talked about how the snow had turned to slush and how raw the wind was and how Fran would have her hat for "next fall" if the styles didn't change. Then Nan came in with a plate of fudge, divided into squares and still hot. "Your mother came out and gave me the plate, Jean," said she.

The girls ate fudge and toasted their toes by the fire. Molly French was a plump, happy looking girl with a way of looking at one and considering a moment before she spoke. "Molly always thinks twice before she speaks," said the girls sometimes. But then Molly was "the preacher's" daughter.

Frances Lockhart was as tall as Leigh and very thin. But her features were good and her humor so jolly that even if her clothes usually hung on her, as she herself declared, “Fran” was very popular in her class at school, as well as with other young friends. Bess or Elizabeth Crane had grown up “next door” to Frances, as Nan and Jean had lived. Now both girls were united in an admiration and friendship that bound them to the capable and friendly Molly, whose father was their minister. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the appearance of Bess. Brown hair, hazel eyes, a nose inclined to turn up a trifle and a slight figure as graceful as Fran’s was awkward, were what one would observe as Bess entered the room.

Like so many butterflies settling after uncertain movements, Jean’s guests turned from the closer proximity to the fire and took seats. Four of them bounced on the cushion-covered springs of the big davenport that was placed at an angle where the cozy warmth of the fire reached them. Leigh sank into a big overstuffed chair. Nan perched on its arm, as she happened to be near with the plate of fudge, just passed again. Jean, now thinking thoughts of new presidents or promoters of clubs, stood with her hand on one end of the mantel and surveyed the girls with a smile half embarrassed.

“What’s the great excitement, Jean?” asked practical Molly, tossing back a flaxen bob and leaning forward on the davenport, with her hands around one knee. “What scheme have you and Nan gotten up now?”

Blue eyes and brown eyes exchanged an amused look, though Jean grew rather sober, while Nan spoke up. “I haven’t a thing to do with this one, except to stand by Jean. She’ll explain.”

“All right. Explain and satisfy our curiosity, Jean, or else forever after hold your peace!”

“There must have been a wedding at the parsonage, girls,” suggested Fran. “Were you a witness, Molly?”

“Not this time. Go on, Jean, and tell. I have to get home early and help get supper.”

“All right, Molly. I’m just thinking it out. This is a ‘S. O. S.’ call girls, and if you don’t help me out, I’m disgraced for life, I guess.”

“It is *very* serious,” remarked Nan, with mock soberness and an air as important as she could manage while still holding the fudge plate, sadly depleted.

CHAPTER II

SEVEN S. P'S.

Jean now drew up a straight chair and sat down, facing the others from the other corner of the mantel. Then she began, soberly at first, but frequently displaying her pretty dimple in smiles, chuckles and even grins as her story proceeded.

"It's this way, girls. We just—simply—have to have a club, and I don't mean an ordinary club or society, but something different, a *secret* club!"

"Sakes!" exclaimed Molly, "something like Grace's sorority at college?"

"No. That wouldn't be any fun for us. Well, perhaps. But have you noticed how mysterious some of the boys have been lately?"

Several girls said that they had not seen anything unusual. Leigh remarked that she never paid any attention to what they did, except at parties. But Molly remembered that when they were skating recently "a knot of the boys" drew together, talking about something and that when she and Bess happened to skate near them, to avoid a rough place in the ice, "the bunch" broke up and skated apart.

"How about Jimmy, Nan?" asked Molly.

"He's in it, but the first I noticed was his new pin, this morning, though he may have been wearing it before, out of sight. When I asked him about it, he said, 'Oh nothing. Bottle up your curiosity, Nan'!"

This called forth various comments on brothers and whether the boys' club was a senior fraternity or not. Jean waited till the opportunity came.

"No, it can't be a real fraternity," said she, "for they aren't allowed. Besides Billy Baxter belongs and he's only a sophomore, like us. Nobody wants to know, of course, just what boys do; but this time they have gotten up some sort of a secret society and feel so snippy about it that we just ought to do something, too."

"And be called 'copy-cats'," Nan suggested.

"Yes, that's so," acknowledged Jean. "But just wait a minute. Perhaps you won't think that what I did was so terrible, then; for I thought of that, too. Billy, you know, comes home my way from school, and to-night he whistled and called 'Je-an,' and caught up with me. Well, in a minute I knew

it wasn't for anything else than to show me his new pin and crow over us girls a little. I didn't know about Jimmy, of course, and there must be several sophomores in it, I'm sure. We'll have to find out how big a crowd belongs." A wide grin now almost obscured the dimple in Jean's cheek.

"Girls, they call themselves 'The Black Wizards' and their pin is a most terrible lookin' snake in a queer W! Billy was full of it, and by a few little innocent questions I got a lot of news! I wasn't pretending either, when I told him that I was awfully interested, and that it must be fine and lots of fun. I imagine that they must have made it up to wear their pins,—they'd just come,—and not keep *everything* to themselves any longer.

"So I said, 'Why isn't that *grand*,—just like us girls, only, only we haven't such a scarey sign as a snake, and our pins haven't come yet!'" With this Jean looked around with an expression like that of the cat after it had eaten the canary.

"Oh, you whopper-teller!" cried Molly. "And did you say it after he told you they wouldn't keep the fact of their having a club secret any longer?"

"Oh, no! I put that in just now. He just said that the boys had a new club, and told me the name and how they had lots of great plans and things like that. What I said wasn't exactly untrue, for I formed a club of one member then and there, and I felt pretty sure that Nan would help me out, so I could say 'girls,'—and Billy was gloating so!

"There isn't a thing in this little town like Girl Scouts or Camp Fire Girls or anything, and nobody to start them. Don't *you* think that we ought to have something besides the school societies and the church things, Molly?"

Molly gave Jean a look of amusement. "It would be fun," she answered.

"It's a jolly idea," said Fran decisively. "Go on, Jean. What else did you and Billy say?"

"Of course Billy wouldn't believe me. 'You're just kidding,' he said. 'But if we get up a secret club, of *course* you *girls* would have to have one, too! What's the name of yours, if you *have* one?' I could see that he was *real suspicious*, and I didn't blame him. It did *look* suspicious!"

Nan almost fell off the arm of Leigh's chair at this, and the fudge plate tilted precariously. "I should think it did!" she cried.

While the girls laughed, Jean dimpled and rose to take the fudge plate from Nan, passing it around once more. Placing the plate upon the mantel, she continued:

" 'It isn't best to tell our name yet,' I said to Billy. 'It's sort of secret, too'."

"I should say so!" gasped Leigh.

"Sh-sh," said Phoebe. "Let Jean tell it."

"Billy said much the same thing, Leigh," laughed Jean. "He said, '*Yes* it is!—'cause you haven't any!' "

" 'I'll tell you the initials,' I said,—thinking awfully fast, girls! But I couldn't seem to think of a thing but 'Busy Bees' or 'Happy Hearts' or something like that. Just then we passed a sign that said 'S. P. Smith,' so I tossed my head a little and said, 'They're S. P. What do you think of that, now?' I was getting in deeper and deeper, you see."

" 'H'm,' he said, 'what are you going to do?'

" 'That,' I said, 'is sort of a secret, too. You never heard of a secret society that told everything, did you? We may tell our name later, though.'

" 'It won't be long,' Billy said.

" 'Now isn't that mean of you?' I asked." Jean lifted her chin and looked sidewise at Leigh as she had doubtless scanned Billy.

"He asked me where our club met and I said, 'Most anywhere yet, but headquarters is at our house.' Billy didn't say anything for a minute. Billy is terribly smart, you know, and it looked fishy to him,—naturally! Still, some of us have been meeting occasionally, you know.

"Then he said, 'Well, all I have to say is that it's awfully funny we never heard anything of it before this. Girls can't keep a secret!' "

" 'Oh, *can't* we?' I asked. Then Billy looked at me and laughed, and I laughed, and he broke a peanut chocolate bar into two pieces and gave me the biggest,—bigger, I mean; so he wasn't mad, of course. But by this time Danny Pierce was coming along on the other side of the street, and looked over with a grin,—and that finished Billy. You know how he feels about being seen with a girl! So he never said goodbye or anything but bolted across to Danny. I'm sure he'll tell Danny about our club, so you see what I've gotten us into. But there's one thing that will save you, if you don't want to come to my rescue,—Billy didn't ask me who belonged.

"I rushed home and asked Mother if I could have the finished room in the attic for a club room and that is all right. Now will any of you stand by me, or do I have to be a club all by myself?"

"You forget me, Jean," Nan reminded her. "I promised to be a S. P. S. P. forever!"

Molly jumped to her feet. "All in favor of being an S. P. stand up!"

Every girl responded and Leigh, of whom Jean had been most in doubt, laughingly announced that she wouldn't miss it for anything. "Let's have *sweet* pins," she added. "A snake would be dreadful,—Ugh!"

"No, really, Leigh, their pins are pretty," said Nan, "gold with a little black enamel, and Jim said that when they could afford it they might have rubies for the snakes' eyes. That was when I looked at his pin."

"The 'Black Wizards!' Wow!" exclaimed Bess. "Let's elect Jean president, and Nan secretary, and Leigh would make a good treasurer, as her father's president of the bank now. I'm a nominating committee!"

The girls agreed that Bess's suggestions were good. Bess, Fran and Phoebe were appointed a committee on what the club should do, and every one was to consider herself a committee to determine what S. P. should represent. "S. could stand for Sophomore," Molly suggested. Molly had begged off from any office, as she had so many church organizations to help.

"Sophomore is too common, Molly," said Phoebe. "There are exactly seven of us, too, and seven is a lucky number. But I think that we can tell better after we think up what would be fun to do. Could we see the attic, Jean?"

"Yes. I'll ask Mother, though, first. And don't you think that we are enough right now, or would you rather ask more girls at once?"

For several minutes the girls talked that matter over, finally concluding that for the present, though they had many other friends, it would be better to keep the number as it stood. The sophomore class was not large. If they wanted to mix the group, as the boys were doing, there would be time enough. As Jean well knew, these were the leading girls of her class.

She slipped out to consult her mother, who gave permission at once for the girls to visit the attic and "view the landscape o'er," as Molly said. Mrs. Gordon came into the living room to meet the girls and advised them to wear their coats into the cold regions and to look out for dust. "We do not dust the attic every day," she added, with a smile like Jean's.

The seven S. P.'s accordingly trooped up the two flights of stairs to the attic, or third floor. As they rounded the post at the top of an enclosed

stairway, they found themselves in a large space dimly lighted by one window at the head of the stairs. The whole attic, to the farthermost corners, stretched before them. Dusty, shrouded shapes stood here and there. A great chimney went up through the middle, showing some of the sooty dust that had also sprinkled down from somewhere upon draped furniture or old trunks. Jean warned the girls again about dust, but no one cared.

At the front of this third floor a gable and a room of good height had been finished, separated by partitions and a door from the rest of the "attic." The door was not far from the stairs and Jean explained that her father intended to make a hall there some day, shutting off the unfinished part by another partition and door. "But there's no use in doing it, Mother says, for we'll never need to use this room, and that's why it will be just the thing for us. I suppose we can use the whole attic if we want to. We could have a lovely party up here some day. And I never even thought of it before!"

"Before your necessity became the 'mother of invention,' Jean."

"That's so, and 'one thing leads to another'!"

Keen young eyes surveyed the proposed club room and found possibilities. A covered couch ran along one wall. Several good pieces of furniture stood about. The room was about fifteen feet in one direction, though it would have been hard to give its actual dimensions, so broken up was it into nooks and corners. Jean threw open the door of an immense closet and explained that the house had once been a big country house and that this room had been occupied by two maids.

"It is the very place, Jean!" cried cheery Fran. "How soon can we fix it up? I have a lot of ideas already!"

"Mother will have to see if the heat will turn on, though there is a place for a little stove, you see, if the furnace won't heat us. I'll let you know; but we ought to have another meeting soon."

"Come to our house Saturday, girls," Leigh invited. "We haven't a lovely attic like this, but we can meet in my big room all to ourselves."

This was a good suggestion. Leigh was warming up, the girls thought, and Phoebe knew that it was the opportunity Leigh wanted to do something for them without appearing to thrust herself into their affairs, a thing about which she was sensitive. A club would be just the thing for Leigh.

Nan suggested that it would be a good thing to make no reference to S. P. affairs, or appear to be concerned about anything private, to "show Billy

that girls could have something going on without their making a great fuss about it."

Fran took a little exception to this. "Don't you think that once or twice we ought to be saying something and then stop suddenly till we get past some of the boys?" she asked.

"Fran, if you will do that, I'll be—a—vindicated, and your friend forever! Thanks muchly, girls, for going into this! Now do rack your brains to think of a good S. P. name, even if we should want to change it after a while."

"Don't worry, Jean. S. P. can mean something, I'm sure. We'll put on our thinking caps till Saturday and longer if necessary. Still, Jean, if we can't think of anything, nobody will know the difference!" And this was Leigh Dudley, over inviting whom Jean had hesitated, not sure that Leigh would be at all interested!

CHAPTER III

SHAMROCKS

The party that night was given by one of the senior girls and was quite general. Nearly all of the girls in the small high school were there and many of the boys, with some who had been graduated or stopped to go to work in some store or business.

The town was small. Originally a community formed in a farming district not far from Lake Michigan, it was populated by people who were intelligent and of good standing. But a big railroad had diverted its main line from the town and a larger town, with manufacturing interests had absorbed such growth as this village might have had. The school was good, but small.

As Jean had said, there was no organization for girls outside of the school literary clubs and the church societies. These were excellent in their lines, but girls bubbling over with activity wanted something else. So did the boys and the "Black Wizards" were created.

The party proved to be an advance St. Patrick's Day celebration. The house was appropriately decorated and one of the senior girls stood at the foot of the stairs to pin on each girl and boy, as they came from leaving wraps in the respective rooms, a bright green shamrock. A March wind blustered outside, but it was bright and warm within.

"I'd forgotten that to-morrow is St. Patrick's Day," said Jean to Nan, with whom she had come. Jimmy had gotten to the stage when he escorted one of the girls to the party. Most of the younger ones let the girls come by themselves, yet took them home. But Jimmy Standish was more or less devoted now to a very pretty senior, Clare Miller, and permitted Nan to make any arrangements she liked about being escorted to this or any other party. Sisters were of secondary importance, as Nan told Jean.

"I'd have worn my green frock, if I'd known," replied Nan, "but this blue one is more becoming. I love your orchid, Jean."

Jean adjusted her bracelet and repinned her shamrock a little self-consciously, for Billy Baxter was making straight for her and some one of the girls drew Nan away at that moment. "Hello, S. P.," said Billy.

"Oh, Billy, please," said Jean, putting her finger to her lips. "I told you that in confidence. We're not a bit ready to have that get around!"

Billy grinned, and Jean was surprised to see that he was really pleased, probably over knowing something that the other boys had not been told. “I hope you didn’t tell Danny Pierce what I said,” Jean continued.

“No, I didn’t,” returned Billy, glad that an accident had saved him from imparting the news which he would have had no hesitation in passing on. Jean hadn’t told him not to tell. But Danny had had something to tell Billy; then they had met some other Black Wizards with great schemes afoot. “*I* told *you* things I oughtn’t to’ve,” said Billy, “so we’re even. But we’re all wearing our pins right out to-night, you see. And say, Jean, may I see you home to-night after it’s over?”

“Yes, Billy, of course. But please don’t say S. P. till I give you leave.”

“All right. But who belong, Jean?”

“Sh-sh! I’ll tell you to-morrow if I see you when no one’s around.”

“All right,” said Billy again. “Don’t you kind of like our pins, Jean?”

“They’re stunning, Billy—even if I am scared of snakes; and I think that ‘Black Wizards’ is an awfully cute name. I suppose you have some terrible initiation, don’t you?”

“Yes. We have *some doings* at our meetings, believe *me*, Jean.”

At that point Jean and Billy were summoned to take part in a game that was being started and Jean did not have any conversation with him for some time. Yet Nan told her that he “hovered” around, and one of the senior boys tried to tease her by remarking that Billy Baxter had gotten over his dislike for girls. “Is that so?” she answered without confusion, recalling that the senior had passed her and Billy as they had been walking along together that afternoon.

But Jean was wondering how, now that Billy was pledged to silence, some knowledge of the S. P.’s could “leak out”; for there would be no fun unless the boys did know. She had not thought of that when she was talking to Billy this time. But perhaps some of the other girls were managing better than she had done.

She threw herself into the games, however, enjoying everything, as Jean always did, and temporarily forgetting both Black Wizards and S. P.’s. The scene was gay with the decorations, the light dresses of the girls and the movement of the games. Once, when Jean was waiting with others for a charade to be begun, she stood by Fran and whispered the state of things to her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll fix it,” said Fran with a twinkle.

When the time came for the refreshments, which were more elaborate on this occasion than usual at the parties Jean had attended, she saw that Fran was next to one of the boys who wore the Black Wizard pin. She herself had found her pretty place card between Billy and Danny. Bess was on the other side of Danny, and once she heard him exclaim, “Is that so! What do you call it?” and she knew that Fran had passed the word on to Bess.

It was a shame, though, to have started it the way she had. What was it about “tangled webs” when first we “practice to deceive”? But there were to be no fibs. When they were looking at the attic room, it had been decided that if they were asked how long since their club had been started they would answer “Not very long.” More searching questions need not be answered at all, and presently the club would be taken as a matter of course. Such thoughts as these ran through Jean’s mind and she ate her green salad, nibbled the green frosting on her cake or took a spoonful of green and white brick ice-cream.

As a rule Jean acted on impulse first in ordinary affairs; but most of her impulses had been so far based on common sense she had thought. Anyhow, a club would be fun.

There were more games after the late refreshments, for the seniors were running this party. Jean was both tired and sleepy, though happy, when Billy took her through the sloppy streets to her home. “Say, Jean, I noticed that you had lost your shamrock in the games,” said Billy, as they stepped upon the porch. “I want you to take mine.” With this he threw open his overcoat and unpinned the precious snake pin, for the Black Wizards had put their badges upon the shamrocks to make them more prominent, a little while after arrival.

“You may as well pin it on with this, too,” he added. “You can give it to me in the morning. Goodnight, Jean.”

“Goodnight, Billy,” returned Jean, astonished to find both shamrock and pin in her hand. “Thanks.” But Billy was half way out of the yard by that time.

A sleepy mother was waiting up for her, but Jean shut her hand upon shamrock and pin. That was a crazy thing for Billy to do! “Yes, Mother, we had a lovely time. Billy Baxter brought me home, and Danny Pierce took Nan. Most everybody was there. It was a St. Patrick’s Day party and they had the best refreshments and everything, a regular supper. Jimmy took

Clare and the seniors ran things. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow. There were some of the older boys and girls not in school, too. Oh, there must have been forty or fifty there, I think,—maybe not so many. And Mother, that was an S. P. meeting here yesterday and I'm so delighted that we can have the attic. Please don't say anything about it."

"I usually know more about a matter before I talk about it, daughter," said Mrs. Gordon. "Get to bed as soon as possible, child. It is such a pity to have a party in the middle of the week. You will be too sleepy to study to-morrow."

Jean was almost too sleepy to get up the next morning, but she did not forget to pin on the shamrock which Billy had given her. She certainly owed him that little attention. The snake pin she had under her coat ready, and when she passed Billy's house on the way to school she found that he was waiting for her, as she shrewdly judged, to receive the pin before its absence should be noted by other Black Wizards.

"I didn't have sense enough to think that you couldn't wear the shamrock that late last night," Billy explained, rather sheepishly. "Some day we're going to give a party and badge the girls we invite with our pins for the evening. Jimmy Standish said that last night and I was thinking of it as we went home."

"Oh, that was all right, Billy. It was great fun to have it and I'm wearing the shamrock, you see, on my coat. I see Nan coming now and I'll just stroll back to meet her, I think. There goes Danny. Do ask him if Bess told him anything startling last night. I thought I heard her say 'S. P.' "

So Jean's handling of the situation saved her from walking to school with Billy and probably, as she thought, saved him from some embarrassment. It would also give Billy a chance to say to Danny that he "knew it already," if, as she thought, Bess had told. Jean had not exactly planned it, but instinctively she felt a situation when it occurred.

The seven S. P.'s felt a little undercurrent all day, but they avoided being together except as they would usually meet, in twos or threes. Once or twice conversation, not upon the S. P.'s at all, was suddenly stopped, as they had planned.

Jean had really forgotten about having promised to tell Billy about who belonged to the club, till after school that afternoon Billy caught up with her before she had left the school grounds and took her books as Jimmy had just

taken Clare's in front of them. He copied Jimmy's nonchalant air and said, "Excuse me, Nan,—I've got to see Jean about something."

Bess was just coming up behind them and caught Nan's arm, drawing her aside as Billy and Jean walked on. Well, thought Jean, maybe Billy hadn't liked it that she hadn't walked to school with him that morning.

But Billy made no reference to that. "Jean, it's all over school about your club. The other girls must have let it out." So Billy began in a low voice. "Before I said a word to Danny he said, 'So the girls have got a secret society, too; I heard last night.'

" 'What did you hear?' I asked. 'Oh,' he said, 'they've started something and all Bess would tell me was the initials of their name, the S. P.'s, and I suppose it stands for Sweet Pickles or Sour Grapes or something like that.'

"I told him, of course, that I had heard about it before, and that he'd better go slow on 'Sour Grapes,' because they were mighty nice girls all right. But do tell me who they are, so I'll not be so ignorant the next time."

Jean laughed heartily. "I don't mind a bit. That was cute of Danny. Why it's Fran and Bess and Molly, Phoebe and Leigh, and of course Nan and I are in it. There are exactly seven of us now, though it might be possible that we'd take in some more girls later on. I sort of think we ought to, when we carry out one of the things I've been thinking of. I'm president, Billy, and that's everything I can tell you."

"I thought you would be, Jean," said admiring Billy. "You are great at getting up things."

"Not half so good at it as Molly, or Nan either, for that matter."

"That will do for you to say, Jean. Come on, Jimmy's taking Clare into the delicatessen. Let's go, too."

Jean wondered what was getting into Billy, Billy the shy with girls. He was "certainly putting coals of fire on her head," though he did not know it. But she had known Billy Baxter all her life and it seemed very natural to sit at the little table and sip a chocolate soda. They left the subject of secret societies and talked about the school teams, the prospect for baseball, the plans for the new gym, how the old town might wake up after a while, and who had a new car. Jimmy Standish slapped Billy on the shoulder as he passed him, going out with Clare, and said, "Hello, Jean, how are the Seven Peaches to-day?"

"I can't imagine what you mean," grinned Jean, "but that's a nice name."

CHAPTER IV

STEALTHY PROWLERS

It happens sometimes that a sudden decision has far-reaching consequences for good or evil. On the other hand, an organization started upon an impulse and with no particular purpose might easily die an early death, with no special consequences. It was probably due to the character of these girls that their little club, so impulsively formed, should bring them some happy adventures, as well as some odd ones, with a mystery of which they could have no idea now.

There were two points about which the girls were thinking: what they should do, and what the S. P. should mean. Naturally it should have some connection with the purpose of the club, provided it was to have any. It was queer, Jean said, how many things S. P. could mean. Who would have thought of it? The boys missed no opportunity to tease them by concocting different combinations. Other girls asked Jean or Nan what was going on and they explained, "It is just a simple little club that we are beginning to work on a little, and we are not telling much about it yet. No, it isn't a sorority and won't be like one."

"I've made *more explanations*, Jean," said Molly, when they all met on Saturday at the Dudley place, "and when there isn't anything much to explain, what can a body do? I do hope nobody feels left out!"

"You couldn't help that, Molly, if any one wanted to feel that way, about any club. It seems all right to me to have one and we're not going to act any different from before. You're an old dear, Molly, and you are used to the church societies, where it's come one come all."

"They are the best, then."

"Of course they're the best. As Dad says sometimes, 'You can't start an argument with me on that, Jean.' The thing is—let's see—'self-evident'."

But Molly enjoyed the fun as much as any of the rest and it began at once. Saturday's meeting at the Dudley home was like another party, Fran said. Jean, who had felt so shy with Mrs. Dudley, was made to feel at home by her cordial way of meeting the girls.

"So you are the young lady who started this mysterious club, are you?" she asked. "Leigh will not confide the name, only the initials. If there is

anything that I can do to help the fun along, let me know, Madam President!"

The bit of formality about Mrs. Dudley made her only the more "fascinating," Jean confided to Nan later on; but the girls were taken at once to Leigh's own room, where they exclaimed in little oh's and ah's over her pretty arrangements. "Papa let me plan it," said Leigh, pleased that the girls liked her room. "When he built the house he told Mamma and me that we might as well have just exactly what we had always wanted. So as I had wanted certain things, I planned it out. Do you like my long window-seat?"

"It's like a real living room, Leigh," said Nan, "with your fireplace and mantel, and your built-in bookcases. I love the *chaise longue*! Here is the beautiful movie heroine, reclining in her boudoir!"—and Nan gracefully sank into the damask-covered arms of the article of furniture mentioned, arranging imaginary draperies over her feet.

"Don't, Nan," laughed Bess. "I'm growing hilarious now and Leigh's mother will be shocked at our laughing so much, especially when the secretary reads the names the S. P.'s have been called."

"Don't worry about Mamma," said Leigh. "She thinks that I have not had enough fun with the girls since I have been here; but you all were such old friends that I felt,—well, you know how a stranger would feel."

"Especially a nice stranger like you," warmly said Jean. "But you are one of us now."

No more time was lost. The president with quite an air called the meeting to order, asking at once for the report of the secretary. Nan, still occupying the admired piece of furniture, languidly read her report, which was so funny that her hearers were convulsed. Nan had quite a gift as scribe. No funny detail of how the S. P.'s started was omitted. Shaking with repressed laughter, they felt that they could not miss a word and Jean's voice shook as she said, "You have heard the report of the secretary,"—then she could not go on, and Molly moved that it be accepted.

"We have had some valuable suggestions from our friends, the Black Wizards," ran the report. "Some were complimentary, some quite otherwise. In planning the charades for the school party, Billy Baxter told Jean that he would get all those Sweet Patooties, Smart Prodigies, or Serpentine Pythons on his side, and Jean told him that she did not mind being called a sweet potato, but she drew the line on being either a prodigy or a python. Mr. French asked about the Serious Pedagogues and Judge Gordon wanted to

know more about the Seraphic Peris. He had to explain to Jean that a peri is a kind of fairy! But we feel that the judge appreciates us.

"We have seen the boys double up over some of their brilliant—interrogation point—thoughts on S. P. and heard ourselves called Some Pumpkins, Sweet Peas, Syrupy Pancakes, Serious Problems, Sleepy Possums, Sour Persimmons, Sappy Poets, Saucy Palmists, and by our principal, who deigned to listen one time, Soulful Psyches,—which wasn't so bad.

"So if the S. P.'s wanted what the secretary's editor father calls 'publicity,' they have had it. Father threatens, as it is, to write it up in the paper."

After the secretary's report had been duly accepted and Jean had remarked that she would not call for a treasurer's report, as there could not possibly be any money in the treasury, Phoebe, who sat on the floor near the fire, gave a bit of advice.

"The funny part of Nan's report, Jean, is her write-up of you and Billy and your 'reaction,' as she calls it, to the news of the Black Wizards. I'd advise you not to let Mr. Standish, or Jimmy, get hold of it."

"Jean needn't worry, Phoebe," said Nan. "Father thinks all the stuff I write is silly, and anyhow I destroyed all my notes. This new S. P. notebook is to be kept locked up in my desk."

Bess, Fran and Phoebe, the committee on what the S. P.'s should do, asked for a "general discussion" first. Molly, by this time having laid aside conscientious scruples about a secret club, said that as far as she was concerned she'd rather just have a good time. That was a popular suggestion and was applauded.

Jean, however, said that you had to have some program even for good times. "I can't think, for the life of me, any S. P. name that will mean anything much, and if the rest of you can't let's let it go right now. How would it do for the present to fix up our attic for all sorts of funny things, maybe witches' quarters if the boys have wizards. We could even give a party there to all the boys and girls. Then Mother suggested that when it gets too hot for meetings in the attic we could be an outdoor club and take hikes and do things that girls and boys do now. We've been doing them anyhow, a little, like our beach parties over on Michigan, and our breakfast hikes to our own little lake. But it would be lots more fun to do things as a club.

“I have a lot of nature books, girls,” said Leigh, brightening. “How would you like to start a little library in our club room and read up on what girls study in some of the camps?”

“Fine, Leigh!” exclaimed several girls. “We ought to be up to date!” said Fran.

“I have a tree book,” said Molly. “I never read it, though.”

“Molly’s turning frivolous,” said Phoebe. “All she wants to do is to make fudge and be a witch.”

Molly, surprised, looked at Phoebe to see if she were being critical, but Phoebe’s grin reassured her. “You have to be on too many programs as it is, Molly, to want to improve yourself outside of school,—isn’t that so?” Phoebe continued, and Molly nodded.

“But I like hikes, Phoebe, and I really ought to know what there is to see around town and the lakes.”

“Let *me* tell you something,” said Bess. “As I went down street on errands this morning I met Miss Haynes. You ought to have seen her. She had on old high shoes, an old hat and a heavy sweater. Some sort of a case was swung around her shoulders and her pockets were stuffed full of something. When she saw me she just grinned, nodded and went on, and she was headed out of town, toward the lake. Imagine, on a day as damp and chilly as this! Of course, *we* do it, whenever we feel like it, and we skate and all in the winter; but she was going all alone, and I just thought to myself, there must be something to see, or she’d never go just for her health or a walk. It’s muddy as anything out that road.”

“More ideas!” cried Nan. “How would it do for the committee to talk to Miss Haynes? She’s the science teacher since Mr. Peters left and maybe she’ll take us out on a hike. He did once in our freshman year, only I think that he didn’t know much about anything.”

“That was the reason they let him go, I think,” wisely remarked Molly. “I imagine Miss Haynes is getting ready for some field work with the class.”

“I never heard of field work,” said Bess, “but I’m for it! Hurrah for hikes and fires and food and we can at least prowl around and pretend to have an ‘object’.”

“Oh, Bess. That makes me think! You say ‘prowl around’,—why not Prowlers? S. Prowlers,—*what* are prowlers, that begin with S? Still—silent—searching—slinking—slippery.”

Jean paused for breath and Phoebe suggested “sprightly,” or “stalking.”

“Get the dictionary, somebody,” laughed Bess. “We’re going to ‘acquire a vocabulary,’ as our English teacher recommends, if we keep on.”

“Steady,” continued Jean, still thinking, and now clutching her hair in a pretense of great concentration. “Aha! How about Stealthy? The ‘Stealthy Prowlers’! That isn’t so bad, is it? If we want to see any of the wild things in the woods around the lake, or even on the beach of Lake Michigan, we’ll have to do some prowling.”

“I can’t say that I think it very pretty,” said Molly.

“It isn’t. I’m sorry that I got you girls into those initials.”

“It’s all the funnier, Jean,” said Frances.

“Why, I rather like it,” Leigh added. “ ‘Stealthy Prowlers’ has a touch of mystery, as my mother would say. Let’s be it, for a while anyhow, but we’ll never tell a soul, shall we?”

“After all the names that we’ve said yes or no to, just for the fun of it, nobody would believe that this was our real name anyhow. And aren’t witches a sort of prowlers? Why not prowlers with a good purpose as well as prowlers with bad ones?”

“Put down Stealthy Prowlers, Nan,” said Bess, “as our best suggestion yet, and let’s get to talking about our attic club room. But Jean, you and Nan have more opportunity to see Miss Haynes than the committee does. Please see her about the hikes. She might even know about Scout work and be willing to camp with us somewhere.”

“That’s a great suggestion, Bess!” Leigh exclaimed. “Mother never would let me go to a summer camp, but she might, near home, as it would be here.”

S. P. ideas were growing. Jean and Nan promised to see Miss Haynes on Monday; and then the planning was directed to immediate affairs with the arranging and furnishing of the club room, the time of meetings, whether they should have refreshments or not, and kindred matters to be decided. Jean was to be spared some things, for it would not be fair, the girls said, for her to be at all the trouble, or expense, if there were any, about the room. It was enough for her to offer the room. But Jean informed them that the furniture was there and the room doing no one any good. “Mother is having the attic all cleaned for us to-day,” she announced, “and this morning we decided that it was foolish to keep a lot of things that might do somebody

some good. So you ought to see the clearance! But all the furniture that can be fixed for us, and some trunks of things that will be lovely for us to dress up in will still be there."

"I adore an attic!" sighed Leigh. Then a neat maid came to the door to announce that tea was ready, and the girls of the S. P. Club had their first dainty meal together in their official relation.

CHAPTER V

THE WITCHING WITCHES

Phoebe was delighted when Jean told her how glad she was that Leigh was in the club. “Do you know,” said Jean, “if it had not been that you have liked her so much, I would not have called her that afternoon. They seemed like such reserved people and have so much money and travel so much, or I suppose they do, that I imagined Mrs. Dudley would not care for us girls, and Leigh never seemed to. But I understand now.”

“She didn’t want to show how lonesome she was,” said Phoebe, “and then, she hasn’t been around much with other girls anyway. She was sick and tutored, at home or wherever they were.”

The whole seven, Leigh included, were going to Jean’s after their good supper at Leigh’s. The purpose was to inspect the attic once more.

“You feel better, Jean, don’t you, to have some sort of a real name picked out, even if it may be only temporary?”

“Yes, Phoebe, after what I said to Billy. Some day perhaps I’ll tell him all about it.”

“None of the rest of us will, and it must be understood that if we take in other girls they are never to know how this started. We’ll probably forget it anyway. It isn’t important to the S. P.’s.”

The girls were delighted with the roomy attic that was floored over the entire house. Full of everything, it had not showed how large it was. “Oh, Jean,” cried Fran, stooping her tall height a little as she explored a corner near the eaves, “the room will be the regular Witches’ Retreat, and we can have all this to fix up for a Hallowe’en party or anything!”

“Yes,” eagerly seconded Leigh. “The *sanctum sanctorum* we needn’t let anybody see, if we want to be mysterious, but this would be wonderful, as Fran says.”

“I wouldn’t want to wait for Hallowe’en,” said Jean. “Let’s have an April Shower or a May Day, before, it gets too hot and ask the Black Wizards to have a stunt.” Then Jean gave a little squeal, for the one electric light at the head of the stairs and another shining from the room did not

disperse all the shadows and she had not noticed that someone else had come upstairs. It was Judge Gordon.

"Oh, Daddy how you scared me!" she cried.

"Sorry, Jean. I just came up to see what these witching witches need. I see that we must have more lights, unless you prefer darkness for your spells."

"We wouldn't need much more light until our party, but if you're having it wired it would be good to have it when we want it, any time. Of course we could use candles."

"And burn up the place. No, I'll have proper lights. What else?"

"The running water doesn't run and the chimney is choked or whatever flue that is. The stove smokes, at least, and couldn't we have a fireplace instead?"

"You don't want much, do you?" asked the judge, laughing. "But if you will investigate, you will find that a little fireplace has been boarded up. If you will be careful about fire, I'll have it opened up and a grate set in. The radiator was fixed to-day."

The girls found the room, or "Witches' Cavern," by Molly's suggestion, quite warm enough for a meeting. They closed the door upon themselves for private conference after Judge Gordon had left them.

"Do you think that your father heard all we said about witches?" asked Bess. "He called us witching witches, which was very nice of him."

"He probably heard what we said about Hallowe'en," Jean replied. "Anyhow, he suggested at noon that if the boys were Black Wizards, we girls ought to be some sort of witches. He had walked home with Jimmy Standish and Jimmy told him the latest school gossip, I guess. How about it, Nan?"

"Nobody knows how all these things get around," said Nan Standish. "But it's a good suggestion. Why not have Orders? The Order of the Witch or Wings, for the bird division, for instance."

" 'Swooping Pelicans' would be better," said Leigh quickly. "They look just like old witches riding the waves in Florida!"

"So do the kingfishers all scrooched up on a limb over the lake," suggested Fran.

“And how about a little green heron watching for that next fish?” queried Bess.

“This club’s getting altogether too smart,” laughed Jean. “Nan, take these things down quick before we forget ’em! Stormy Petrel is another bird name with S. P., and haven’t we a Phoebe bird and a Crane already?”

“Help, help!” cried Nan, sharpening her pencil. “Swooping Pelican—Stormy Petrel, anymore S. P.’s?”

Nan scribbled away, taking notes. Nor was she without some excellent ideas of her own. For the next hour or so the girls made their plans with many a laugh and chuckle. Leigh, who always had such pretty things, said that she could bring some cushions for the couch, which Mrs. Gordon had already covered with a gay couch-cover or robe. Fran had some curtains that she would offer.

“Maybe you won’t like them, though,” she added. “I bought them myself for my room when I was about ten years old, and Mother never would let me put them up, since my room is at the front of the house, like this, to be sure. Oh, I suppose they won’t do! They have all sort of crazy things in the pattern, peacocks and birds and I don’t know what.”

“Why, that would be fine for Stealthy Prowlers, Fran,” said Jean. “Bring them over and we can see. Mother has some plain draperies that she is fixing. Those will show behind the shades, but we can have our gay curtains inside of those. We’d have to have something to brighten things up. And I have a grand idea—that is, if you think it’s grand, of a witches caldron, right in the middle of the room, with a fire under it, you know, or things fixed to look like one, and maybe an electric bulb hidden in it.

“And let’s not have our witches all in black, since the wizards will be, I suppose. Let’s have yellow and black, or red and black, or—something!”

“Why not have each order of witches dressed differently?” asked Molly.

“In other words, each girl have a separate costume?” said Bess, in smiling reference to their limited numbers.

“I suppose so,” Molly replied, “but we’ll probably have more girls in outdoor things, won’t we?”

“That is to be decided,” spoke Jean quickly. It would not do to talk of this as yet. Molly would have everybody, dear girl that she was, but it would not always do. “By the way, girls, Dad said that we wanted to be careful not to make any of the boys mad about us or get mad ourselves—of course he

did not put it that way, but that was what he meant. He heard me gibbering to Mother about things, you know. I've had to tell her quite a lot, of course. But I told my father that we were being 'just wonderful' not to get provoked at the names the boys make up for us, and that we were planning to *entertain* the Black Wizards, provided they would *condescend* to an attic party. Dad just laughed and told me that if we advertised plenty of refreshments he thought that the Black Wizards would come. I said that we liked eats ourselves and that the attic party would be a real supper, moreover, he could come up and have supper with us!"

"I think that your father is just too nice for anything," cried Bess, warmly. "Just think of all the trouble and expense, too, in fixing this up for us!"

"Dad likes to do things to the house, Bess. Besides he said he hoped we'd wake this sleepy old town up and show the folks what boys and girls needed in this 'day and generation.' I don't imagine that he wants us to do anything startling, though."

Here there was an interruption from Nan. "Being secretary to this club is just awful. Do you want me to put down all your old suggestions, or wait till we really do something?" Nan was holding up her pencil with a comical expression of despair.

"No, Nan,—you might make a few jottings of anything you think is important, for fear the person that makes the suggestion might forget it. This is not a formal meeting, anyhow."

So spoke the president, and Nan replied with a twinkle, "When have we had a formal meeting? Tell me that!"

"Echo answers, 'When'?" laughed Jean.

And as informally this conference went on, among girls who were going to try something without a real leader. As yet their plans were unsettled, but they were evolving from chaos quite rapidly. The world was theirs in one sense, and girls in a small town have some advantages over others. It is easy for them to get together and it is only a step, figuratively speaking, into the country, where wonderful things happen all the time for those who have eyes to see them.

At present, fixing the "club room" stood first. Second, there was a decision to give the Attic Party as soon as possible, by way of opening the club room, or dedicating it. Then, meantime, how much should they tell of

what they were doing, and how could they keep it a secret club if they had the party?

The president had things to say about this.

"Considering the *way* this club was *formed*, I imagine that the less *we say* right now to the boys, about our plans, the *better*. I'd dearly love to know what they are doing, but suppose we let them be curious about *us*, instead of showing too much curiosity about *them*. We can get up enough funny things to do ourselves, even if their doings are funnier; don't you think so?" All this was in Jean's own emphatic manner.

"*And*," she added, "the Attic Party is going to do wonders to everybody's disposition. Remembering how Billy's crowing about the Black Wizards made me feel like getting even—in a way, let's remember how they'll feel if we act superior or anything like that. Dad is right, and this ought to be fun, pure and simple."

The other girls agreed, though Nan remarked that she agreed 'with reservations.' "If Jimmy starts anything at home in the crowing line, I may —," but Nan stopped and laughed, then asked what the girls wanted Jean and herself to say to Miss Haynes.

"Maybe you'd better not suggest anything about camping at first, girls," Phoebe suggested. "Just ask her if she knows what other girls do about outdoor work and where we could find out and what she sees on her trips, and if we're going to have any field trips with her, and—" Phoebe stopped, for they all were laughing at the long list she was making.

"I think that we'd better add Phoebe to the committee," giggled the president. "All those in favor of adding Phoebe Wood to the committee, say 'ay'!"

CHAPTER VI

A NEW SORT OF A PARTY

For some days after this meeting mysterious bundles were brought into the Gordon home. To pass Billy, or Danny, or some of the other boys, with a knobby package whose contents were well kept from view by thick paper and a well-knotted string, was such fun. Jimmy offered to carry one for Nan one afternoon when she was coming from Leigh's, but Nan said that it was "fragile" and that she could trust it to no one. "Of course, he wanted to feel of it and see if he could tell what it was."

Whether the boys had a real club room or not they did not know. Nor did they know how long the Black Wizards had been in existence. "Curiosity killed the cat," was all that Jimmy would say when Nan asked him where the Wizards met, after informing him first, that the S. P.'s were planning to have all their meetings at Jean's, their business meetings, at least. The girls carefully noted all the boys that wore the snake pin, and put their names down. This was to make the number of girls fairly even, when they gave their party of celebration.

Although there were no other children at Judge Gordon's beside the lively Jean herself, the club room was kept locked and it leaked out among the boys that the judge was having a number of keys made. "I'd like to get into their club room," said Danny Pierce to Billy, "and see what they have there. What can *girls* do? If any of those girls lose a key, O boy!"

Billy Baxter took great delight in repeating Danny's last sentence to Jean, who passed it on to the rest of the girls, creating quite a stir, as Billy had intended. "Would they *dare*?" asked Molly, in horror.

"No," said Jean, "but they might climb up and peep in. I'd better keep the curtains together, though, we'll have to have the windows on the balcony open part of the time."

"Unless they're human flies, they can't climb up," said Leigh, looking out of the front window.

"There's that oak tree," Jean reminded her. "Wouldn't it be funny if they planned to do it, and then we invited them?"

"Yes, but we are not sure that we'll let any into the inner sanctum."

Every possible moment of the week was spent either on the attic floor itself or in sewing draperies or annexing ornaments in the various homes of the S. P.'s. It was not until Friday afternoon that the committee visited Miss Haynes, screwing up their courage to do something that turned out very pleasantly, as things dreaded often do.

The girls found Miss Haynes at the pleasant occupation of grading test papers in her room after school. She nodded pleasantly as they came in, halting just inside the door, while Jean asked, "Could we see you just a minute, Miss Haynes?"

"Certainly," she replied, "but take seats for a few minutes. I'm just in the middle of averaging some grades."

The girls sat down at the front desks, while Miss Haynes apparently forgot their existence in her work. But they kept as still as mice, or the Stealthy Prowlers they had decided to be, though time went on and they hoped that she really had not forgotten them.

"There!" she said presently. "That's done. Why do we have to have tests and keep grades anyway?"

"Oh, that's what *we* think, Miss Haynes. Can't you do something about it?"

"I'm afraid not, Jean," but Miss Haynes' eyes danced. Why, it wasn't going to be hard at all to talk to her. Probably it was because she liked hiking and things that she was so human!

The girls explained. They had started a club. They wanted to do some things that girls did in some of the organizations they'd read about in Camp Fire and Girl Scout stories and yet they wanted their own fun, too. They knew that she took hikes and knew everything about nature work and maybe camping, and could she suggest anything that would be possible to do?

Miss Haynes listened thoughtfully. "Why, yes, girls do a great deal that is very wholesome for them these days, but if they take up anything seriously they usually have a leader. I am not familiar with any of the organization work. Isn't there any young woman in the town who does?"

"Nobody, Miss Haynes, and besides, the older girls don't want to bother with us."

"Will we have any field work in science, Miss Haynes?" This was Phoebe.

“Why, yes, a little. I’m sorry that I can’t start more, but there is a reason this year. The schedule will not permit it, the superintendent said, and there is some one who does not want the children to take their Saturdays.”

Jean looked at Nan. “That old school board!” she thought.

“But if you want something to work toward outdoors, I may be able to start you at something. Bird study is my particular hobby, but I also teach and study botany, and bugs and butterflies and anything else in that line. How would you like to begin on snails?” Miss Haynes was actually pretty when she laughed and talked like this. Nan “bet” that she wasn’t much older than the senior girls.

“My father has an old zoology text with lots of interesting pictures in it,” said Phoebe. “I’d like snails better than snakes, but I think I like birds best.”

“And you are a phoebe yourself, aren’t you? How many girls have you in the club?”

“Only seven now.”

“Hunting birds in a crowd is not very good, but if you will promise to be very still, and if you really want to make a start, you may all come out with me early to-morrow morning. I will show you some tree sparrows, a lot of juncos, possibly some fox sparrows, and there is never any knowing what we may find. I’m perfectly delighted to be in Wisconsin, for I’m sure that birds I’ve never seen will be nesting in this inland lake. Then I found some interesting specimens of other things in that swampy place along the little run. I suppose you girls know the common birds and you can help me, for I have never been around the Great Lakes much.”

“I wish that we could help you, Miss Haynes,” said Jean, delighted with the sincerity and kindness of the teacher. “We don’t know much, only some of the commonest birds. We know a heron from a gull and that’s about all, I guess.”

“We’ll study together, then. Now I like to stay out a good while, especially when we are finding things, so bundle up. Any girl that isn’t warmly enough dressed will have to go back!” Miss Haynes smiled, but her firm tone showed that she meant what she said, and it was not the first time that the teachers had mentioned the girls’ dressing too lightly.

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea to take a lunch, too, in case we want to stay?”

“That would be lovely!” exclaimed Phoebe.

“Oh, yes,” said Jean, “and couldn’t we build a fire and have something the way we do at a beach party?”

“A fire would be a good idea, if it is in a safe place, but if you are going to see birds, you don’t want to carry much. All I have will go into my pocket. Have any of you field glasses, or even opera glasses?”

Nobody had, so far as these girls knew. “And, Miss Haynes, don’t you bother about any lunch,” said Jean. “If you let us go with you, we’ll take enough sandwiches for all of us,—please.”

“Very well. That is very nice of you. I am glad that we are having this warmer spell, but bundle up just the same, for there will be some breeze, at least near the lake. Do you ever have any snow in April?”

“Sometimes, but it usually does not stay so long. You speak as if you didn’t want any. Don’t you like winter fun any more?”

“I’m not too old yet, Phoebe,” laughed Miss Haynes, “but I want to get out as easily as possible during the spring migration of birds,—so I want a pleasant April and May.”

“We’ll do our best to get it for you, Miss Haynes,” declared Nan, rising with Jean, to go. You didn’t want a teacher to get tired of you, of course, and Miss Haynes was busy. Funny, she didn’t like tests, either, because you had to grade papers. Still, how would she find out who knew anything?

The girls hurried home to call up the rest of the S. P.’s and notify them of the hike. Leigh said that her father had a field glass. She would bring that. Mrs. French hunted up an old opera glass for Molly. Kinds of sandwiches were distributed according to the variety each was in the habit of making most successfully. Chocolate bars were bought, to be stowed in pockets.

Without something hot it would be a funny sort of a beach party, they thought. Accordingly local shops sold a few tin cups or those equally light. The girls would have cocoa.

In the morning, Jean, who had no glass to carry, put her sandwiches in an aluminum kettle, carefully wrapped “not to rattle and scare the birds away.” Water could be found at springs familiar to all of them. Cream went farther than milk and was not so heavy. One bottle was tucked in the pocket of Phoebe’s oldest coat and Nan put another in hers. Pockets bulged and Bess swung from her arm a box of marshmallows, these for toasting.

Miss Haynes smiled broadly when the seven girls made their appearance at the door of her boarding house, just as she was starting out. “Good for

you," she cried, "all with sensible wraps on. I fancy, from the looks of your pockets, that we shall not go hungry."

Familiar as the girls thought they were with the country about their town, Miss Haynes, a comparative stranger, could show many new things; for some conveyance had usually taken them to the big lake, and to the smaller ones sometimes, for their beach parties, and many very interesting bypaths were unknown to the girls.

How wet it was. Water came up around their overshoes as they walked over the soft turf by the muddy road. Snow lay in the fence corners. But the sky was blue and the birds were already singing, some meadow larks in a field and a flock of red-winged blackbirds in a swampy place not far out of town. Miss Haynes called attention to a song sparrow in a little leafless tree, where twigs and bird were etched against the sky. For the first time the Stealthy Prowlers deserved their new name, as they crept near enough to get a good look at the brown splashes on the sparrow's breast, with the "breast-pin" where they coalesce. And while they watched, the little finch bill opened and the bubbling, merry song rang out.

Miss Haynes, pleased with their interest, watched the girls more than the sparrow, "When you learn to know voices and songs," said she, "you will not have to see some of them to find out what they are."

"I never thought of learning the voices of birds," exclaimed Phoebe, who was musically inclined. "Has it been here all winter, or has it just come?"

"It may have been here all winter, not singing much."

The sparrow had flown away before they began to discuss it, but Miss Haynes directed them toward some willows by the brook, which they were approaching. "I see a little flock of birds about those willows," said she. "Come quietly, and tell me what you see, after you have had a good look. I will pass the glass around."

This time they stood at some little distance and looked through Leigh's glass, Molly's opera glass and Miss Haynes' stronger glass. One little fellow settled in the top of a bush, giving the girls a fine view of his breast. No, it wasn't another song sparrow.

Another little chap turned his back upon them; but just as the other bird flew, this one shifted his position, and they saw that his breast was like that of the other. Then some movement in the bushes startled the flock. With a soft whirring of wings, together they all flew away and Miss Haynes turned smiling to ask, "What did you see, girls? How many had a good look?" she

added, in teacher fashion. “You scarcely know, I suppose, how lucky you are to start your bird study so early, before the foliage gets in your way and before some of the winter visitants leave us. I’m much mistaken if the tree sparrows will stay at this latitude, or fox sparrows, either.”

“Mercy, how many sparrows are there?” asked Jean. But not waiting to be answered she continued enthusiastically, “Oh, I had the *best* look, Miss Haynes! They are the cunnin’-est! I saw just a sparrowy back, something like the English sparrows, and the top of the head was a sort of reddish brown. Then right in the middle of the breast there was a cute little spot. It wasn’t streaked, like the song sparrow.”

“Very good, Jean. Remember particularly the one spot. Not all of the sparrows are so easily identified. You asked me how many there are,—probably you will identify a dozen species around here, during the migration, and there are more.”

“I’ll never get them,” declared Bess.

“One at a time,” suggested Miss Haynes, with a smile. “Nature lessons are much like other lessons, except that there is such a thrill to them that you are more likely to remember them.”

“I believe it!” cried Jean.

“Did you hear a sweet little song, different from that of the song sparrow, Jean?”

Jean and Molly had noticed it.

“It was from one of the tree sparrows,” explained Miss Haynes.

“Did you see him do it?” asked Leigh.

“No; I just know the song,” Miss Haynes returned.

“Imagine!”

Miss Haynes was already much at home in the country about the village, and the girls, on the other hand, were greatly surprised to find how little they knew about some phases of their native environment. They left the swampy region, crossed the brook, now considerably swollen, but having a bridge, and then left it behind to climb a high bank or bluff, from whose top they could see the larger stream, or river which drained the inland lake. A few robins were among the trees here. These the girls knew, as well as the bluebird warble, which called their attention to the singer.

A bluejay called harshly and two or three crows flew over. Miss Haynes motioned to the girls to stand still and listen. Dead leaves in wet, drifted heaps, patches of snow, and leafless trees were around them. Jean drew her coat more tightly around her and fastened her fur collar together. The March wind was noticeable here.

Now came a funny little call, like the far away honk of a car, Jean said afterward. Miss Haynes' pointing finger drew their attention to the trunk of a large tree. Some of the girls looked blank, but Jean had caught a glimpse of something. Some bird had moved around, upon the opposite side of the tree trunk.

There he was again! Ah, how pretty! What could it be? A little gray-blue, or blue-gray bird was searching the old trunk for food. He seemed to be getting some, too.

Jean strained her eyes to distinguish the markings, until Miss Haynes put her own glass in Jean's hands. Then, alas, she had trouble in focusing it for her eyes and the bird had gone out upon a little limb. "If birds would only stay put!" she thought. Now it was back upon the trunk. Now it was going up; now it was going down. Now it "walked out on the under side of a large limb," as Jean told her father that night. Finally she had a good look, for the little fellow stopped, raised his head and looked off for a moment, to see if there were any danger near, or, possibly, to find a better feeding ground.

"Quank-quank!" he said, or "honk-honk!" How shining a black were his crown and nape, and how white his breast. Never would Jean forget her first white-breasted nuthatch. Thank fortune, it wasn't like anything else, either. You wouldn't get it mixed up!

By this time Miss Haynes was becoming so interested in teaching the girls that she decided to give up her own cherished time for discoveries of her own in order to keep on showing them what were, so far, perfectly familiar to her. But her reward came a little later.

Again the girls became the Stealthy Prowlers in earnest as they tried very hard to make no noise in going down a little cleft in these high banks. There was snow instead of mud, which made it easier, if slippery. In a moment they stood upon a stony ledge that was only a short distance above a wider, sheltered spot, where a number of birds had gathered out of the wind. Miss Haynes' glass was directed toward some little birds upon the ground. Accordingly, the girls focussed attention and the two other glasses there.

Those using only eyes could see some little brown-streaked birds, scratching like chickens among the dead leaves. Molly grinned as she put her opera glass into Jean's hands and pointed out one little bird nearest them, whose active foot was making dirt and decaying leaves fly behind it. "Did you ever see anything cuter?" she whispered. "Must be some other kind of a sparrow."

By this time Jean was getting accustomed to seeing differences. So clear was the white, so heavy were the brown streaks of the under parts. There was a greenish tinge to the sparrowy crown, as the sun shone full upon it. The long tail was a reddish brown, but it was a sparrow tail. "It's bigger than the tree sparrows," she whispered to Molly, "and look at the little thing near him. It's different. I'd like to look again when you are through. If I'm not crazy, it has a pink bill!"

Molly looked at both birds, changing the focus of her glass as the birds moved a little farther away, still feeding. "Now take it, Jean, quick! What do you suppose that little dark thing is? It's got a black hood and cloak on!"

Jean's hand was trembling a little as she took again the glass offered by generous Molly. Nothing is more thrilling than discovery. It may not be a discovery which thrills a continent. It may even be something that others have discovered before. But something becomes yours. And just that combination of circumstances may be new. In these years many girls and boys are lending themselves to scientific gains.

Jean was not the only girl who was afraid that the birds would fly before they had seen all there was to be known about them. The glasses went from hand to hand. There was perfect quiet till Miss Haynes herself slipped a little on an icy stone. Another whir of wings, and the birds were off!

"I'm glad that it was you, Miss Haynes, and not us, we, I mean," said Bess, correcting her own error.

"Yes, I was the guilty one," laughed Miss Haynes, clutching Fran to regain her footing.

"Oh, Miss Haynes, what were those little dark things, and which birds had the white streaks in the tails when they flew? I was too confused to tell."

"You are very observant, Jean, I see. Those were the slate-colored juncos, or black snowbirds. They were feeding with the fox sparrows. They have white feathers at the sides of the tail and show them when they fly. Did you think them pretty?"

"I think *so*!" cried Leigh. "Those pretty pink bills! And they were all white underneath, so it looked as if they had dark hoods and cloaks, the way the dark gray went straight across the breast!"

"That's just what Molly thought," said Jean. "I must put down what I've seen for fear I'll get it mixed."

"I'm taking notes, Jean," said Nan. "We'll keep a record of what the S. P.'s see."

"Then put down that the tree sparrow is called the 'winter chippy' sometimes," Miss Haynes added. "The chipping sparrow is a little like it, though that has no spot on its breast."

"I saw a little streak of brown on the tree sparrow's cheek," meditatively remarked Jean, to the amusement of the crowd. But Miss Haynes told them that it was proper to speak of "cheeks" with birds.

Back to the top of the bank they climbed, to see bronzed grackles, which they knew as common blackbirds; more bluebirds, and a small flock of quail that scurried across an open space into underbrush.

But Miss Haynes said, "Listen. There is one more *very* common little bird that I'll wager half of the United States sees and does not know. That is the tufted titmouse. I thought I heard one. Here it comes."

Something flew into a tree above their heads and great were the twistings of necks and pointing of glasses in the effort to see. A second bird followed the first and there was what Jean called "conversation."

"Sounds like kissing," said Molly, listening, while Jean looked through her glass.

"More like chirruping to a horse," declared Phoebe.

In a moment a clear, sweet whistle came from above their heads. "Spring is here now," said Miss Haynes. "The tufted titmouse has given us his word."

"Was that it, that 'Peter, Peter, Peter'?" Fran asked.

"Yes. And you may have noticed that the whistle was a little like the quality of the chickadee's whistle."

"Why, doesn't the chickadee call 'Chickadee, dee, dee, dee, dee'?"

"Yes; and the titmouse talks in about the same 'tone of voice'; but I mean the clear whistle of both of them. That will be one thing for you to

find out, then. The chickadee is the black-capped titmouse, so you see they are related. Who saw what the titmouse looks like?"

Several hands were raised, much as in school, but no one could say much more than it was a little grayish bird with a tuft on its head. "Look it up in the bird book," said Miss Haynes.

"Oh, we haven't any bird books, Miss Haynes!"

"That's so, you haven't, and not a library in the whole town except the school library, and that is limited! Well, there is one encyclopedia, also a dictionary! I tell you what I'll do. I will bring my Chapman's Handbook and some field books I have to school; and if you will be careful of my books, I'll let you look up any bird you like. Take careful notes of every point when you are out. Then look it up. I will show you how different the bills are and how you should look for size and shape and flight and coloring and everything. Oh, what is that, girls?"

This time it was Miss Haynes who asked the question. They were approaching the inland lake that lay ahead of them, its quiet waters only ruffled a little by the wind now, and its whole expanse shining in the morning sun. Reeds at the end nearest them grew up in shallow sands, and there it was that Miss Haynes had caught a glint of yellow.

"Where, Miss Haynes?" asked Jean.

"I caught a gleam of yellow; but those were blackbirds, weren't they, that disappeared into that copse?"

"I did not notice, because blackbirds are so common; but we have yellow-headed blackbirds here and I imagine that is what you saw."

"Jean, that was it! Why, do you know I never saw one before, and to think I did not find them last week! Now find me a new waterbird, and the S. P.'s may study birds with me forever!"

At that the S. P.'s began to look about in earnest. "We have black terns that nest here," said Leigh. "Father knows them."

As if in response to their eager desire, that of pleasing their new friend, two birds flew out of the reeds and settled upon the narrow beach. "Oh," gasped Miss Haynes, forgetting girls and everything as she stood with her glass at her eyes. The girls stood stock still, not caring to look for themselves, for these were birds that circled about the lake all summer, birds in every variety of plumage, adult or immature.

But one of these two terns was the adult male bird, with its black head, neck, breast and underbody. The other bird was still in winter plumage, or was immature. “I don’t know whether that bird ought to be black at this time or not,” breathed Miss Haynes to herself, “but it is. Put down in your notes, Nan, that the S. P.’s have shown their teacher two new birds this day! Now let us have lunch.”

Enough, material was found that would burn, especially as Jean’s kettle contained some kindling and paper below her sandwiches. Let the Indians make fires without matches. The S. P.’s would do it in the quickest way possible. There was not much danger that they would set fire to anything so damp as the surrounding woods, but they were careful, for the wind had dried the leaves in some places. It was a mild breeze now and the sun was warm. They screened their fire from the wind by dragging a log around and putting some branches up against it, or behind it in the sand. “We’ve had a fire here before,” the girls said, by way of explaining how they could so easily find two posts, so to speak, that supported a third long piece from which Jean’s kettle could hang. It was a little insecure, but Jean watched it, ready to catch the kettle’s looping handle upon a long stick which she held.

“The boys usually drive down the supports for us,” said Bess, “but we have to learn to be independent now. We’ll take you to a beach party on Lake Michigan some time, Miss Haynes, if you will go. We’ll get some wild place where the gulls are likely to be, if you like.”

“I shall like very much, Bess, and I will go with pleasure.”

The fire was allowed to die down as soon as the cocoa had come to the proper stage. Water from the spring was poured upon it, for they wanted to leave as soon as the lunch was eaten. Along the old log they sat to eat their sandwiches and fruit and drink their warming cocoa, though the sun shone down upon their backs and kept them from being chilled.

Nan drew from her pocket the notes which she had scribbled on the way. “Tree sparrow, fox sparrow, junco, song sparrow, robin, bronzed grackle, white-breasted nuthatch, tufted titmouse, meadow lark, red-winged blackbird, chickadee, turtle dove,—I guess that’s all.” But on the way back they added more, though only recording those that the S. P.’s had actually identified, or had thoroughly noted themselves.

Where two sloppy roads met, on the way from the lake, several of the Black Wizards came along, just ahead of the girls, to enter the main road from the one at an angle to that taken by the S. P.’s. “I wonder where the boys have been,” said Jean to Nan.

“I wonder what those girls have been doing with Miss Haynes,” said Billy Baxter to his companion. “That’s all the S. P.’s are, a nature club! Seeking, searching, strolling, I’ve got it, the Strolling Pilgrims. Wait till I write that on the blackboard Monday morning!”

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACK WIZARDS' DILEMMA

How the girls worked that next week! Mere incidentals like lessons would come in to detain them, or hinder them from spending every minute on that precious new "club room," the Attic Marvel of the Ages, as Judge Gordon called it. "Grecian architecture has had a remarkable reputation, Jean," said he, and then it dawned upon Jean, who was having history, that Attic with a capital letter meant pertaining to Athens or Attica, or something Grecian. "Oh, you crazy Daddy!" she exclaimed. But to the girls she chuckled over their "Greek art," as they put up the curtains with the peacock and birds of paradise and twining vines with flowers.

One of the pieces of furniture "rescued from oblivion" was a small bookcase. That they set up in the *sanctum sanctorum* and began to fill. Molly brought the tree book and a big botany text of her father's. Jean put in the zoology text and an old copy of Hooker's Natural History. Fran's aunt, who was visiting for a few days, promised to send her a field book of wild flowers. Leigh brought over a book on butterflies and said that her father had promised to duplicate for her whatever Miss Haynes had for birds. "He's going to write to a big book firm in the East, too, and find out *everything there is*!" she announced. "My birthday comes in May, and if I want to, I can have books for the club."

The Witches' Caldron would not go so well in the middle of the room because of the electric bulb attachment. It was given a decorated corner, with draperies attached above in such a way that the caldron could be concealed when desired. It was an immense iron kettle, used in days far back for making soft soap, an article of manufacture of which none of these girls had ever heard. But the kettle had belonged to Mrs. Gordon's family heirlooms and had been brought by her from their former home to this one. Both Judge and Mrs. Gordon were of families in these regions.

There was an animated discussion about whether they should call themselves witches, or sibyls, when in the performance of initiations and the like. "Sibyl" was more classic. The name, moreover, began with S. But *did* Sibyls ever have kettles? The judge gave it as his opinion, based on a Latin classic, that they had caves, though he said that the kettle and its contents might be symbolic of the bubblings of the subterranean and volcanic lavas. S. P. might be the Sibyl's Portent, the Sibyl's Pit or the Sibyl's Potion.

“Thanks for the suggestions, Daddy,” said Jean demurely, “but we are not announcing our name as yet.”

The spinning wheel and a few other antiquated interesting relics were left as decorative to the wider expanse of attic outside of the room, but the room itself was made cozy. The old grate that belonged in the small fireplace was found among the rest of what the judge called “junk.” Several very good chairs were mended and placed in the sanctum, along with an old-fashioned kettle, which needed only a little soap and water first, then some gay paint, to make it suitable.

Fran had found in her attic an immense majolica jar in bright colors. This she had brought over in her brother’s Ford coupe, although she had been asked what she was going to do “with that hideous thing.”

“Never you mind,” Fran replied, as she did it up in thick paper, that the world might not “gaze thereon,” she said.

The girls, who were working busily, greeted it with shouts. “A prize, Fran,—where did you get it?”

“It was some present, girls, years ago, I believe. Mother gave it to me gladly; but won’t it be just the thing for the Sibyl to drop her wise sayings into? We might touch up the colors a little, or subdue them, just as you like, and with a little drapery it should stand near the kettle, perhaps.”

“These artistic ideas grow upon us,” laughed Bess. “Would your mother feel very bad if it were broken?”

“She’d scarcely shed tears of anguish, Bess.”

What with the different ideas, Orders of Witches, or Sibyls, and the restraint of various limiting circumstances, the girls were a little confused sometimes, but they kept steadily at one purpose, that of making a bright club room for the present and laying quiet plans for a summer of camping together. That idea grew from the first. They talked it over with Miss Haynes, who was pledged to secrecy. She thought that she would not be able to go with them, but the matter was left open. There was too much of school left before them to make final decisions or call the parents into conference.

Miss Haynes, however, gave the girls the benefit of her books as reference. They took the list of them. Each was going to persuade a parent to buy her one of those they needed at once. For the rest they would earn money in some way. It was not long, then, before upon a little cherry table, whose age and associations the girls scarcely appreciated, the Chapman *Handbook of Birds*, the Reed field books and the first magazines of *Bird*

Lore had a prominent place. Judge Gordon said that as soon as he recovered from the expenses of having a club room in his house, he might be induced to help out with the S. P. library, and Jean told him that he was a funny daddy but nice.

But science was not the only interest. The Orders of Sibyls were duly started, as soon as the girls decided between sibyls and witches. As Billy one day enlarged upon the fun the boys had in initiations, and Jean duly repeated all he said, S. P. initiations began. These, after the manner of initiations, were entirely secret, though Judge and Mrs. Gordon often smiled at the squeals of surprised victims, or giggles of the other girls. Not even the president was exempt from initiation, but the girls promised to do things that were "really smart," not silly tricks to hurt the girls. Nan and Jean were especially good at thinking up impressive ceremonies, with the Sibyls attired in mysterious robes, and Molly, as a minister's daughter, was acquainted with so many different ways to entertain that the girls said they had only to ask Molly when they wanted a new "stunt."

Mrs. Dudley sent over by Leigh a fine copy of Michael Angelo's Cumaean Sibyl, which they hung in a place of honor upon the club room wall, and Jean hoped that some day she, too, might see the strange Last Judgment and the wonderful figures of prophets and other conceptions of the great artist and sculptor. Leigh was very simple about her advantages and did not seem to feel any superiority, as a girl of less character might have done, because she had seen the original paintings upon wall and ceiling. They made Leigh head of the department of travel and art, though she said that she really didn't know anything about either. "I just saw what Mother and Father did," said she, "and some of it I remember, and lots of it I don't!"

Time went very rapidly until Jean said that they must get at their Attic Celebration if they were going to have any. Initiations took several lively meetings. Occasionally they had merely a fudge party in the club room, when ideas gave out, or they were tired of decorating and making posters to put up around the attic. As the migration of birds grew more interesting in April, they not only went with Miss Haynes, but had their own private hikes after school, or early in the mornings on Saturday, submitting their lists or their descriptions to her when she was not too busy. Sometimes she was able to take out her science classes, when they looked not only for birds but for everything else in Nature's great laboratory.

The earliest flowers had been found. Trees were being listed and their leaves, coming out, noted. Even the frogs were not altogether left in peace,

and the Wisconsin pools were investigated. The girls often met the Black Wizards upon their hikes, but that was to be expected, for boys always "tramp around and see things," as Jean Gordon said. "I don't believe there's going to be so much crocheting and embroidering or fussing with clothes in our crowd after this, Mother," said she.

"It is just as well," Mrs. Gordon replied, "though you must not forget to learn the gentle art of needlework, and I should think that with your beach parties and hikes you might want to learn cooking as well."

"I believe that's an idea, Mother!" cried Jean. "Suppose you teach me first of all the good things to stew, 'cause we can cook things in kettles already. Maybe there is some book on outdoor cooking, or something we can read up on c—well, I think it's a good idea anyway," Jean finished, rather lamely. She was not ready to broach the subject of camping as yet.

At last they were ready "to-start-to-commence-to-begin," Bess said, on the invitations. The S. P. with its interests and a few purposes was fully established. The attic was as complete as any place ever is that belongs to girls full of new ideas from time to time. Molly and Phoebe were the artists that made, or at least planned, the posters, as they called the decorative pictures that they made and placed in "strategic positions, whatever that was," Fran giggled, as she put up a large pasteboard supported picture which expressed Phoebe's idea of "A Black Wizard Calling Up The Spirit Of Magic."

The Black Wizard was a tall, lank figure dressed in flowing black robes and wearing a pointed black hat. He was waving a rather wobbly stick over a smoking fire, out of which rose a spectral shape with a hideous face. A snake coiled about the fire, and another lay at the feet of the wizard.

"That's supposed to be the smoke taking shape into the figure of magic, girls," Phoebe explained. "That's why you can see the tree through it."

"Oh, you're supposed to see through spirits, aren't you?" Nan suggested. "It's very good, Phoebe. You'll make an artist yet. I don't think that the Black Wizards will mind being put in a picture, but we can't help it if they do. They've made too much fun of us. Did you see Georgie Atkins writing 'Stuffed Pigs' on the board the other day?"

"That disagreeable little freshman?"

"Yes. But Danny Pierce saw him and made him rub it out and took the eraser and rubbed it over his head till I know his hair was just full of chalk dust."

“The Black Wizards aren’t so bad,” laughed Jean. “They tease us themselves, but some of the boys won’t stand for its going too far. Well, what do you think? Are there enough posters done and can we get out our invitations right off?”

The decision was that it could be done. Phoebe and Molly made the designs and the other girls drew and painted till their fingers ached, they declared. It was no ordinary affair. There were to be place cards, on which a mysterious Sibyl presided over a steaming kettle, while a large frog gaped widely at one side and a black cat arched a bristling back opposite.

Sometimes it is more fun to get ready for something than to take part in the actual performance. But the S. P.’s knew that the Attic Party would be a success. It was different from what there had been before. They knew that both boys and girls would be curious about their club room. With a few games and good things to eat, everybody would enjoy it, they felt pretty sure.

Whom to invite was a problem. The whole high school was not very large, but they had school and class parties sometimes. “Shall we just invite the Black Wizards and let them bring the girls they want?” asked Fran.

“Some of them might not want to bring any,” suggested Molly.

“We might not get all the girls we want here,” said Jean.

“I believe that it is better to invite the girls ourselves, and let the boys take them home if they like,” asserted Bess. “Let’s just have plain, written invitations, since we’re tired of drawing place cards and making pictures, and send them to each one, with a special letter to the Black Wizards asking them to have a stunt.”

Upon this suggestion the S. P.’s acted. The number and list of guests came next in order. There were only fifteen in the senior class. Of these, four were Black Wizards. It was easy enough to choose four of the senior girls who would be acceptable to these senior boys. “Will the seniors want to come?” asked Leigh, who did not know many of them very well.

“Oh, yes, I think so, since it is a different party and a compliment to the Black Wizards, in a way,” Jean answered. “If they will not come, it is all right.”

“Jimmy will want to bring Clare,” said Nan. “He’s in that state when he welcomes any chance to take her anywhere! And here is a place where he can sit by her at a good supper and not have to pay for the eats.”

"Nan! Well, we want Jimmy and Clare for any reason," declared Jean, "and Bob Metcalf will bring Lucille Arneson, I'm sure. She's a peach and sweet to us younger girls. I don't wonder Bob likes her. Now there are six junior Wizards. Whom shall we have for them?"

"Wait, Jean. I haven't got anybody down except those four seniors. We have to have four more."

The other four seniors were listed, two senior girls acceptable to the S. P.'s selected. The six junior Black Wizards were discussed and several junior girls added to the list. There was more discussion about the sophomores, their own class friends. Six sophomore boys completed the number of sixteen Black Wizards, but the whole class numbered twenty-five. What should be done?

"I suggest that we invite all these girls that we want, and if there are more girls than boys it won't make much difference, for Nan and I at least will have to wait on table, and Molly would help us, I thought. We can have a woman in the kitchen to help, Mother says, but we haven't any money to have waiters, you know."

"I think it will be just the thing to have all of us S. P.'s in our costumes, you know, and waiting on the table and managing everything; indeed, Jean, I don't see how it could go off well without it, though you ought to sit at the head of the table, starting it off as president."

But Jean shook her head. "I think we might have some place fixed for us, a little table, or something, because we want to enjoy the good supper, too. But if you girls are willing to be 'extras,' it will give us a chance to have more sophomore girls. The other boys might feel funny to be with so many Black Wizards,—don't you think, and couldn't we have a sophomore party up here soon, to make everybody feel all right?"

The girls thought that fitting, for there were boys outside of the Black Wizards whom they liked. They sighed with relief when their list was completed. Eight seniors, twelve juniors and twelve sophomores would be seated at a long table which should run the "length of the house, almost," where the third floor roof was highest in the center. "Sixteen on each side, girls, and two places on each end for Fran, Bess, Leigh and Phoebe,—to keep order," announced Jean. "You see, after the whole meal is ready to serve, it will only take Molly, Nan and me to do all the waiting necessary."

"All right," said Fran. "We'll all help prepare the tables beforehand, of course."

"I'll get Jimmy to help fix the long table, if there's no objection," said Jean.

"No objection whatever," said several of the girls. "Who cares?" asked Fran. "Pledge Billy to secrecy about anything he sees and get him to come over to help you, Jean, if you need him. He'd like the fun, and we'll not put up our posters anyway until afternoon."

No hint of the great celebration had been given, for the girls were pledged to silence. With the exception of Mrs. Gordon not even the parents knew that the girls were planning anything except, the completion of their "club room." In consequence, a number of girls were happily surprised by neat invitations to an Attic Party at the home of Jean Gordon.

Written by seven different girls, the invitations were not exactly alike, but if Leigh's was a model of composition and Phoebe's a wild scribble, as she claimed, they all presented the same facts. It was on Saturday at six o'clock at the home of Jean Gordon that the pleasure of Miss So-and-So's society was requested by the S. P. Club for an Attic Party. Costumes were also suggested, though that was not required.

With the one invitation to the Black Wizards they took great pains. A small copy of the Black Wizard poster was made into a cover for the invitation. The request that the Wizards offer a "stunt" for the occasion was put as attractively as possible. It was a large square envelope in which Jean handed this invitation to Billy Baxter, with the explanation that the other invitations were being sent through the mail, but that he was entrusted with the care of this one, to be put into the hands of their president or High Wizard or whatever they had.

"Here is the list of girls we have invited, Billy, and if there is any one that any of the Black Wizards want asked, it will not be too late, if you let me know to-morrow morning. We do want you to do something after dinner, as Leigh calls it. *We* have supper at our house. But we are going to have a real chicken dinner, though, and we hope that the boys will like it."

"*Sure* we'll like it," said Billy, turning over the invitation in his hands. "I don't know what they'll think about the stunt, though, especially the senior boys."

"Let them out of it, then, and you juniors and sophomores do it. Now, tell me sure, Billy, if I have the list of boys all right. I thought that there might be some that did not wear the pin and we haven't heard about. They're all invited, of course, but we have to fix places at the table."

Jean showed Billy the list, which was complete, to her relief. “Are you actually going to have a party in an attic, Jean? I thought you had only one big room up there.”

“We have one big room finished in front, but the whole attic is floored and runs all over the house, so we are going to have one big table and I wish that you would help Jimmy Standish fix it for us, the way they do at the church suppers. Molly said she thought we could borrow the tables they have at their church, if we were careful.”

“Sure we can. I’ll get the truck from the store and Jimmy and I can bring them over and fix them for you. How many will you need?”

“Oh, just two or three, maybe only one. Come over after school and I’ll take you up there. Molly and Nan and I are going to be there and Jimmy will probably be over, too. But be sure to tell the boys that we’re sending out the invitations early so they’ll have time to think up whatever stunt they want to. We hope that it will be a funny real Black Wizard one.”

“Our stuff is all secret, Jean.”

“Of course, but couldn’t you think up something on the same order, only not just what you do?”

“Perhaps.”

And this was what caused the dilemma of the Black Wizards. What in the world did those girls want a stunt for? Jimmy and Bob were disgusted. “We might know that if we helped those kids start up that old lodge of ours we’d get into a lot of nonsense!” said Bob.

“Yep,” said Jimmy, pushing his long legs under the table in his room. “But the girls are getting up a big supper. I guess we can stand it for once. The boys are dying to show off their new costumes. Let’s take the ban off that part of their secret stuff and let them do something.”

“But what?”

“Make them think up what,” said Jimmy, after the cruel manner of seniors. “Aren’t you the Grand Wizard? Can’t you eat chicken pie and mashed potatoes and gravy and about six different kinds of jelly or sauce and I don’t know what all? I heard Nan discussing the menu with Mother.”

“Yes,” grinned Bob, “I think I might stow away some of that along with any junior or sophomore. All right. I’ll put it up to the kids and tell them they can’t make it too silly.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE ATTIC PARTY

"Nan," said Jean, on Saturday morning, when she and Nan were the first arrivals in the attic with a load of articles for setting the tables. "Nan, don't you remember how Jimmy used to be very mysterious about some meeting of the boys? What if they had this society then,—the boys about his age? You and I weren't much interested in those days. How long ago was it?"

Nan laughed. "You must be a mind reader, Jean. Do you know I came across an old text of Jimmy's last night. I was hunting a book I wanted out of a lot put away in a closet, and off the shelf fell this book, half open on the floor. I picked it up and straightened out a few pages to put it back, and there was a funny picture on one of the blank pages, or supposed to be blank, and a list of boys' names. 'Grand Wizard, Jimmy Standish,' led the list and I shut up the book in a minute. It did not seem exactly honorable to look further, though why Jimmy left it all in his old book I don't know, if he cared anything about keeping it a secret. I was going to tell you about it but forgot it till you spoke just now. That was when he first went into high school, four years ago, and at the beginning of the year."

"Boys can keep a secret, then, if we can't," said Jean, with a wide grin. "But I think it's largely because we have different ideas about such things!"

"Oh, of course, Jean," assented Nan, matching Jean's grin. "Never acknowledge any superiority on their part; besides, we can keep still about something real important, like somebody else's secret, or keeping quiet as we have this time till we get ready to be public."

"Do you think that we'll get through with everything by six o'clock, Nan?" asked Jean, changing the subject suddenly. The urge of imminent events was upon Jean's shoulders as hostess and president.

"Of course we shall. Don't worry. Your mother said that she would direct the woman and see that everything to eat was all right and ready on time. That's off our hands. Our job of scrubbing was a good one. It looks as neat as a pin everywhere, though I think we'd better dust thoroughly before we set the tables."

"Yes, and not a bit of soot will come through since Dad had everything fixed, the chimney pointed up and the roof all mended."

In a few minutes, Leigh and Phoebe came with baskets of extra silver and china and napkins, for they were to use them rather than the usual paper napkins with which they were content at the ordinary party. Posters were now put up. Laughter and jokes went around. “You see, girls, we’ll have plenty of room for the fun afterward. Just as soon as the supper is over, we’ll clear everything away. Jimmy and Bob and Billy will help us get the dishes downstairs. I’ll have the baskets right under the eaves, all covered up and we’ll stack the soiled plates and everything in them. Jimmy said there wouldn’t be much food left. But we’re going to whisk everything in the candy line over on the little table and let them nibble through the evening.”

“What will you do with the long table?”

“Have it taken apart and carried down to the shed right away.”

The S. P.’s worked busily all morning and part of the afternoon, but by orders from mothers, they stopped before three o’clock to go home, rest, and dress later. By half-past five o’clock they were all back ready to receive their guests and wondering what those same guests would wear. Word had gone out that it would be a costume party, and they did hope that the Wizards would wear their own costumes, presumably of their “orders,” if they had any.

The “witching witches” looked charming, Judge Gordon told them, in their sibyl costumes, all yellow and brown and white, with different badges of their mysterious orders. They had made pointed hats of pasteboard covered with crepe paper and ribbon, and the narrow white and yellow ribbons that they tied in a bow under their young chins were very fetching, according to the judge. “If I wanted to have my fate revealed,” said he, “I certainly would have no one consult the oracle but one of these charming nymphs.”

“We are not nymphs at all, Daddy,” Jean objected. “We are sibyls, but not necessarily ugly or old, and if we want to adapt history, why not?”

“Why not, indeed? It is the fashion now to write up history or biography at the author’s pleasure and I doubt if some of the actors in the tales that are told would recognize themselves. I’m sure that you are a great improvement on the historic sibyl.”

The day had not been a very pleasant one, but the girls were thereby consoled for the fact that they were too busy to take the usual Saturday morning hike. A strong, cool wind blew making Miss Haynes say that she would not find many of the little birds flying. This was some consolation,

for the girls had been interested in the migration of the warblers, birds tiny and beautiful, of which they had scarcely heard before and never seen to recognize. But clouds cleared away in the afternoon and the wind ceased blowing. The furnace fire that the judge had made in the morning was allowed to go down as the day warmed, and the attic was made pleasant with very little heat, all its windows open, for it was past the middle of May.

There were two main reasons for serving the dinner first of all. First, it would have been difficult to manage carrying the food to the attic with the presence of guests there. Second, nothing ever started up very easily before refreshments, Jean declared, and it would be much easier to have the stunts and games after the meal.

The Wizards arrived masked, and were met by the whole seven sibyls, unmasked. Yellow draperies fluttered against the long black wizard draperies or robes, as the girls flew around, congratulating them on arriving in costume and together, and directing where the girls that were coming should put their light wraps and find mirrors. Jean's cheeks burned rosily with excitement. It was beginning all right, at least.

When the last guest had arrived, Jean, Molly and Nan slipped away, to help take up the baskets of last things, and direct their placing. Jimmy Standish slipped off his black robe long enough to carry up a large kettle of hot peas, the big, flat basket with three large pans of chicken pie, and pitchers of lemonade. Under Mrs. Gordon's capable management, nothing was omitted. A table in the corner was ready for the hot food.

Then Leigh gave the word that each Wizard was to take his lady and proceed to the attic. "You will meet your hostess at the top of the stairs," she said, "and you will find your place cards at the table."

Exclamations of pleasure were heard by the happy sibyls as the procession reached the attic and Jean waved them in the direction of the long table.

"Gee, Jean, this is some attic!" said a Wizard.

"Why, who ever heard of an attic like this?" cried a senior girl. "You have electric lights and rugs on the floor and—everything!"

It was a pretty scene. Judge Gordon had consented to having candles on the table. These were yellow and white, a little brown supplied here and there by a narrow crepe paper ribbon, among the table decorations. Yellow and white flowers were not hard to find, for syringa and white peonies

happened to be in blossom and Leigh's mother had some creamy roses in her greenhouse.

The rugs were a temporary loan, except those in the inner sanctum, and had been gathered up from the various S. P. homes. Interesting decorations in different corners and the large posters caught the young eyes at once, but they did not need much urging to find their place cards at once, as Jean said that the 'picture gallery would be on display after supper.' The electric bulbs were covered with yellow shades, but only two of them were turned on, as it was more "intriguing," Leigh said, to have the chief light come from the candles.

The long tables were covered with white linen. The fruit mixture known as fruit cocktail was already at the places, also the salad, and plates of rolls, jellies, honey, pickles and olives, were properly arranged, to avoid much serving. As soon as the fruit was eaten, the girls removed the glasses and plates and brought the savory plates of chicken pie, mashed potatoes and gravy, and peas in little crinkled patties. Mrs. Gordon served the chicken pie and Molly filled the patties with peas, either of them putting on the potato and gravy, while Jean and Nan hurried the plates to the table in record time. Then Mrs. Gordon escaped to the regions below, where a genial judge would be more genial when he had his supper. The waitresses, too, sat down to enjoy themselves, for Jean would need only to replenish the fresh rolls from the covered pans on the side table, or hop up to serve a second platter of chicken pie, ready to be filled and passed. This was a supper where everything was to be eaten up, and the Black Wizards did justice to it. By the time they were ready for the ice-cream, they would have done anything the S. P.'s wanted, so far as willing spirit was concerned, but Jimmy told Jean that he hoped they wouldn't be called on to perform right after a "supper like that."

"We shall dawdle over our ice-cream," Jean assured him, "and no guest of the S. P.'s is going to do anything he doesn't feel like doing."

"Hurrah," said one sophomore Wizard, but he was silenced by a look from the Grand Wizard which warned him that he must mind his p's and q's.

Mrs. Gordon, through with her own and the judge's dinner, came up to help with the change of courses, to put into the baskets the plates brought from the tables by the girls and to serve the ice-cream.

"Did you S. P.'s bake this cake?" asked Danny Pierce, with a fork neatly separating a bit from a piece of the cake known as devil's food.

“No, we didn’t,” Jean replied, “but we’re going to learn. That is in one of the S. P. departments, as you might say.”

“Cooking?” asked Danny.

“Yes. But we haven’t gotten to cakes yet.”

“Want any orders?”

“Why, yes. I hadn’t thought of it, but we’re going to make some money, or try to. How about an order of fudge for your next meeting?”

“Fine—unless it’s too expensive.”

“The S. P.’s will be *very* fair in their charges, especially if our parents give us the materials. It won’t cost any more than buying stuff down town.”

“You will depress trade, Jean,” said Bob Metcalf.

“Not enough to hurt, Bob.” Jean assured him with a dimple in her hot cheek. Thank fortune, so far the party was a success.

After the meal, the guests were invited to inspect the picture gallery while the tables were cleared and removed. Jimmy, Billy, and even the judge coming up from below, carried baskets of dishes down to the kitchen. “If this is going to be a permanent cafeteria,” said the judge, “I’ll put in a lift for the girls. Who knows? Perhaps Jean will support me in my old age with her sky parlor.”

“Great scheme, Judge,” said Jimmy. “You certainly would have customers with meals like this.”

The picture gallery was examined with interest by the Wizards and by the girls who had been invited. There was the Wizard picture, well labeled. Several funny incidents at school had been recorded in art by Phoebe. The seven sibyls had the faces of the real girls cut from old snapshots and pasted on the figures. They were in their yellow robes, which were carried out in long draperies that joined yellow streamers and whirled around their heads. “The S. P.’s in a tornado,” suggested John Taylor, a jolly sophomore and a friend of Billy’s.

But perhaps most of all they laughed at a series of drawings in crayon by Phoebe that illustrated the different names the S. P.’s had been called. She had been making them along for the fun of it without telling the girls; and when she brought them that last afternoon of their preparations for the Attic Party all proceedings were stopped for a little while the girls laughed over them until they were breathless. These were in outline and of cartoon style.

Here were the Strolling Pilgrims with field glasses and bulging pockets, bending forward to look at a long-legged bird that was wildly speeding away. Here were the Silly Peacocks before a mirror. The Stormy Petrels hovered above a huge wave and had human faces. The Swooping Pelicans were witches in that they wore peaked hats and had brooms tucked under their wings. The Snooping Puffins, a particularly opprobrious name, was illustrated by the outlines of a row of puffins sitting on a rock and looking fiercely at an angular Black Wizard whom a wave was about to engulf. Danny Pierce, whose brilliant mind had evolved that name for the S. P.'s had the grace to blush when his eye fell upon that picture. "Oh say, Phoebe, I didn't mean anything by that! You know S. P. can mean almost anything."

"So it can, Danny. We've discovered that by this time," replied Phoebe with a mischievous look. "But we don't mind. It's been such fun. I did a dozen of these to surprise the girls, and when we decided to give a party I kept them till now."

"You ought to study art, Phoebe, and do a lot with it, though how you can in this little town, I don't know."

Phoebe looked sober for a minute. "I'm aching to study, Danny, but I'll just do what I can now. My father says it's not where you live but what you do with it,—any little talent that you think you have, he meant. And lots of big people come from little towns, he says, because we get some things here, —well, things they study about in big books, we can just go out and see, easy as pie."

"I wish I dared tell you what the Wizards are going to do this summer, Phoebe."

"I wish I dared tell you what we girls *want* to do. Whether we're going to be allowed to do it or not is another question."

But Danny went on around the sides of the attic walls, seeing the Sour Persimmons hanging from a tree, mere faces with a round persimmon body and a collar of the persimmon type; the Sobbing Poetesses that wept into large bandannas; the Starchy Pedagogues that wore wide, stiff robes and carried diplomas under their arms, and the Sad Prunes, seven wrinkled faces, darkened and lying in a scoop such as is used in groceries.

Flattering names like Sugar Plums, Seraphic Peaches or Peris, and Sweet Partners, suggested by their elders, Phoebe had omitted, keeping only to the more ridiculous combinations possible.

"Yes," said Jean, "we are going to open up the *sanctum sanctorum*, where we have our initiations and everything. To be sure, our secrets are locked away, but you may see the caldron where with incantations the sibyl, —but you will see that I can't explain any more, of course. And as soon as you've seen the room you may have your fortunes told by the High Sibyl."

Chatting, laughing boys and girls in costumes of all sorts, for the girls came as fairies, Martha Washington, other historic ladies or even gay rovers of a feminine type, all crowded into the room when Jean threw open the door. If some of the girls were a little envious and wished that they, too, belonged to the S. P.'s, they did not express those feelings and admired the gay appointments as generously as they could. The Wizards laughed at the peacocks in the curtains, and tried the locked door of the closet as if they would break it open to discover the secrets of the S. P.'s. One of the boys gave the knob such a pull that it came off. The girls nearest squealed, and the Grand Wizard said, "Look out there, no rough house!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Jean, as the boy looked rather dismayed and stood with the white knob in his hand. "It was loose anyhow. It can be fixed."

"I'll f-fix it myself," stammered the boy, one of the sophomores, "if you think I can do it without seeing what is in the closet."

"We'll see about that," laughed Jean. "Honestly, Carter, I don't care one bit! Now who wants her fortune told first?"

Jean had been standing before some draperies in one corner, for she really would have felt rather put out if any one had tried to see behind them. Yet they concealed only a corner fronted by a sort of mortar board partition which the girls had fixed themselves, and a little swinging door, cut out and held in place by strips of muslin.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the sibyl's cave. Even now she is consulting Apollo—I guess it's Apollo—about your future. You will find on that table some little slips. Write on them your favorite flower, your favorite study, your greatest ambition and the girl or boy you like best. Your name is not necessary. Then, when you are ready, I will hand them to the guardian of the cave and presently you will hear the oracle speak. Oh, yes, number your slips, please, and remember your number, for your own convenience, because they will be handed in order to the Guardian, who will impart their information to the sibyl. It wouldn't do you any good to hear the first fortune, you know, if you had forgotten that you were number one. The sibyl is very peculiar. She's something like that mad prophetess Jimmy was telling

us about that wrote her prophecies on leaves and let the wind blow them every-which-way."

It took a little while for the girls and boys to think up their favorite flower, study, ambition and friend of the other sex, and some of the more easily embarrassed omitted the last requirement, though Jean told them that it was "very dangerous" to do so. There was much chuckling and joking while all this was being done, but Number One was ready before long. Then Jean drew aside the two curtains that were directly in front and disclosed a low chair, behind which stood the "Guardian" of the cave, her face concealed by a long veil of yellow cheese-cloth, the same material as that in the girls' costumes.

The swinging door, cut irregularly, and the mortar board around it had been painted in gray and black to represent rocks over quite a surface not hidden by gray draperies. These were fastened to the board, and also covered what was really an old stovepipe, whose end protruded, but was carefully pasted over outside, and inside for a short distance, with more "gray rocks," in heavy paper.

"After the Guardian has retired into the cave to carry your message to the sibyl, you will take your turn in sitting in this chair, to listen to your fates. Through this long tube of natural rock the oracle will be declared!"

Jean did not try to keep her face straight as she made this dignified speech, and the boys and girls had all sorts of funny comments to make while she handed the slips to the priestess of the yellow veil, or motioned to them to do so. Then she drew the curtains together again, while the Guardian entered the cave, as she explained.

"These slips will be all mixed up, of course, and the great sibyl will not know *who is Number One or Number Two* when she receives these slips. I do not myself know in what order you will be summoned."

Again Jean drew aside the long curtains. A hoarse whisper issued from the stovepipe. "The oracle is ready. Let Number Thirty enter."

This happened to be Jimmy, who sat in the little chair none too comfortably, and had trouble to draw up his knees sufficiently for them to be concealed behind the curtains when Jean drew them in front of him. "Say, Jean, can't a fellow have any air to breathe?" he asked.

"Plenty coming from the cave," she replied. "The S. P. string quartette will now render a number while the oracle speaks these secret fates."

Attention was diverted from the oracle while the "string" quartette was found to consist of Bess with her ukelele, Fran with her guitar, Phoebe with an old banjo, on which she only pretended to play, and Nan with a comb! But ukelele, guitar and Nan's comb, together with the laughter of the guests, made so much noise that Jimmy stuck his head out from behind the curtains. "Say, the oracle says she can't make me hear with all that noise." Jimmy was evidently enjoying himself, if he had been a little hesitant about being the first victim.

The music grew softer immediately, but it was impossible to curb the chatter, and, indeed, if there were any privacy to the fortunes, some distraction outside was necessary.

After the first the fortunes were rapidly told, but in spite of the whispered messages, the boys guessed pretty well who was the chief sibyl, Leigh. It had to be either Leigh or Molly, for there were Jean and the "string" quartette right before them.

"She's right in that cabinet," said Danny, coming out with a grin.

"No, she isn't," said Jean. "Don't you know that sibyls only speak from a great distance in some shrine or other?"

"But you wouldn't say that this is one, would you, to be honest?"

"Well, I'm not saying; only she isn't in this room."

Leigh was enjoying herself. She had learned to tell clever fortunes and with the concealment her shyness disappeared. It was not necessary for her to have the slips, prepared with such care, for her "fortunes" had been prepared beforehand with a good knowledge of each girl's and boy's history, likes and dislikes. She was stationed just outside the double windows, upon the tiny balcony there. The movable front of the "cabinet" or "cave" extended sufficiently to allow the other end of the stovepipe to connect with Leigh and the balcony. Had any of the boys gone out through the windows, they would have seen how it was managed. But the couch on which the players sat had been placed in front of the windows for the occasion, and until the time to admit the guests the door of the *sanctum sanctorum* had been locked. Molly, who could see each occupant of the little chair, through a cleverly arranged peep-hole, scribbled the name on a bit of paper and passed it to Leigh, who read it by a flashlight. But it was a long time before any of the boys knew how it had been managed.

After all the fortunes had been told, except those of the seven sibyls, the company was invited out into the real attic stretches for games. While Jean

was starting these, Molly came from the cave, locked the door on the inside and then admitted Leigh, who had been afraid someone would see her if she climbed through the lighted windows. In darkness Molly received her, and when they left the room they locked the door behind them lest any investigator should discover their secret.

There was plenty of room for the usual games played at their parties and after two or three, Jean, who had not forgotten the request of the S. P.'s to the Wizards, clapped her hands together for quiet and said with a deep bow to Jimmy, "We have with us to-night the secret society known as the Black Wizards and we have hoped that they would give us something far better than anything the S. P.'s can think up. The Black Wizards, ladies and gentlemen!"

Great clapping of hands came from the ladies of the company, but Jimmy, Grand Wizard of Wizards, had always thought that what the younger boys had prepared to do was "too dumb." He wasn't going to have them show themselves less smart than those cute S. P.'s.

"Madame president, or leader of the *Sibyl Priestesses*," and Jimmy emphasized that, "we greatly regret that after all this fine entertainment the Black Wizards cannot now respond. In other words, kids, we haven't our stuff with us and can't handle it in a strange attic! But we hope to have a celebration some day, in our own quarters, where we may show you what Black Magic can do!"

"Wow!" said Billy, who knew that Jimmy had made up the expression Black Magic on the spot. But the boys were much relieved at being let off from the stunt which they had prepared without any inspiration except that of dire warnings from the seniors.

And all this time that boys and girls in the little town were manufacturing mystery, less than fifty miles away, a young girl was living it.

CHAPTER IX

MORE IDEAS AND A WIZARD MYSTERY

The S. P. Attic Party was voted a success. The girls were tired but happy over it, for their guests had so obviously enjoyed themselves. There were so many echoes of it that it was hard to settle down to lessons on Monday. Phoebe was sitting with Leigh on an iron bench in the school grounds that afternoon, soon after they had been dismissed, when Danny, or Dan, as he preferred to be called, came by with Raleigh Warner and stopped to talk.

"I have an idea, Phoebe, if you will believe such a thing possible," said Dan. "Could you let me borrow some of the cartoons you and Molly drew for your show Saturday?"

"Our show!"

"Well, your art gallery, then. I mean the ones about school, that good one of the principal, and the funny one Molly called 'What May Happen Soon'."

"Mercy, which one was that? I've forgotten."

"The one where Miss James is driving the *ponies* out of the Cicero class and they're kicking up their heels, and some of the boys, the riders, I suppose, are flat on the floor."

"Yes, Dan, and that is a good one where Billy is pulling his father's Ford out of the mudhole where he got stuck, and the one where the bob-sled is and Fran looking at her ruined hat." Raleigh was adding this.

"I see," said Phoebe. "You just want to borrow them?"

"That is all,—now. How soon could we find out whether the girls will let us have them or not?"

"Oh, pretty soon. I'll call up Jean as soon as I get home. Suppose you call me up about supper time. I'll know by then. Of course, you will be careful of our masterpieces?"

"I'll treat them like glass, honest. I just want to show them to somebody now."

"All right. I'm willing, if Molly is and if Jean has no objection."

As no one objected to lending pictures to the boys, the following day saw Dan and "Rall" conferring with Jimmy Standish, and later with no less a

person than the editor himself, in the editorial sanctum, a very ordinary but busy office.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Standish, "we could print it for you at a very moderate price, but who will pay for the job? We are not running on exactly a missionary basis."

"No, sir. We will pay for it out of our own pockets, unless it is more than we can handle, and soon the subscribers will pay for it."

"You are more sure of your subscribers than we are," said the editor, with a smile. "Let's see the pictures."

Dan unwrapped Molly's and Phoebe's drawings.

"Clever stuff," said the editor, with another smile. "Yes, for a school paper such outlines will do very well. Send the girls in to see me some time. I can give them a hint or two. My advice is to make your paper snappy and short. Begin with two rather small pages or even one sheet. If you want to enlarge it you can. Get your stuff together and hand it to Jimmy to make ready for you. I'm making an editor out of Jimmy as soon as he learns a few more things——"

"About printing, and the composing room, and reporting, and everything else," added Jimmy, who came in at this moment. "But Dan has a good idea about a school paper, Dad, and I think it will go with the kids. We'll try 'em out on the first numbers. I'm to write the first editorials, Dad, so if there is anything you want to get across on school matters, let me know."

"All right, Jimmy. There are a whole lot of things I'd like to 'get across' in this town, boys, but you don't dare wake 'em up too soon when they're walking in their sleep."

"Gee, isn't Jimmy's dad smart?" asked Dan, as the boys left the office. "That was a hot one about this town's walking in its sleep."

"We'd better keep it under out hats, too, boy. He said more than he meant to. Did you see Jimmy making eyes at him?"

The girls, meantime, were in the dark in regard to why the two boys wanted the drawings. They were more concerned, however, about having missed a day's hiking, when they heard what Miss Haynes had seen, in spite of the bad, windy morning. Wednesday morning they were to meet at four o'clock, with their breakfasts in their pockets, and hike till schooltime. May was going and with it the spring migration of birds; Miss Haynes would be

going away after school closed, the first week in June, and there would be no one to make them sure about what they saw.

"Oh, but you must learn to make yourselves sure," she told them, when Jean said as much to her. "You will miss some things; everybody does; but you'll learn twice as much on your own initiative!"

This hike was to be "on their own," then, for even Miss Haynes could not manage a hike before school. And curiously enough, it was because of their early rising that the S. P's surprised a venture of the Black Wizards, which it was quite plainly to be seen that they had hoped to keep a secret.

It was great fun to be starting off together in the early morning. They would not even make a fire for wieners or bacon. This was strictly a cold breakfast. As they went they munched sandwiches and tossed crumbs and cold banana skins "to the birds," they said. Judge Gordon had bought Jean some glasses as good as those of Miss Haynes and these she shared with the rest, for who could see the markings on a warbler or a vireo up in the high treetops without a strong pair of lenses?

The bushes and trees along the river road seemed best for finding warblers. Accordingly they were tramping along that road, still as mice, behind this bush or that, moving quietly, singly or by twos or threes, when they heard a shout and a big truck shot by. It was loaded with lumber and the shouting came from several boys of the Black Wizard combination who were either perched on the boards or sitting in the driver's seat in front.

Whether they had seen the girls or not was a doubtful matter. Jean came out from behind a tree against which she had been braced in trying to look almost over her head. "Say, every warbler will take to cover after that noise! Who was it!"

"Oh, Jean! Didn't you see them? They were the Black Wizards on a load of lumber, and why should they get up so early if they didn't want to get out of town before we should see them?"

"You flatter the S. P.'s, Fran. But I shouldn't wonder if they are doing something."

"It does look that way, Jean," said Molly, laughing at Jean's blank look. "But maybe that wasn't their lumber."

"And again, maybe it was," remarked Bess.

"Jimmy was in bed when I left," thoughtfully Nan added. "And I hadn't happened to say anything about our trip. I forgot it at supper, just told

Mother when we were doing the dishes and I fixed something ready to take for my breakfast. I'll warn Mother not to say anything, unless she has already. I don't believe they saw us, and it is surely not for us to make any comments on where they were going." Nan's face wore a comically sober look.

"Far be it," said Leigh. "But where could they be taking it?"

"All of us have a suspicion, of course. Girls, they could even reach Lake Michigan, unload and be back for school!"

"Nonsense. Danny Pierce's father has a farm on our little lake. Probably Mr. Pierce wanted Danny to bring out some lumber this morning while he could." So concluded Jean.

"Yes, but what were all those Black Wizards doing with Danny? Danny *was* driving, but you couldn't get Rall out of bed with anything short of an earthquake for any helping Danny with a job like that!"

"Yes, Rall is always a late riser, I've heard the boys say, poking fun at him. Maybe you're right, Nan. Of course we want to go camping so much ourselves that our first thought is—what it is. Oh, wouldn't it be great fun if our folks would let us go somewhere? A tent would be good enough for me! But it's hopeless unless we can get some one to chaperon us. Mother won't hear of anything else."

"We might camp in our back yards."

"Yes, we could," said Molly, and meant it. "But when Grace gets home, I'm going to begin talking S. P. to her. She will be dead tired, and perhaps the woods will look good to her. We'll do all the work."

"Oh, Molly! They'd let us go with Grace!"

"I think so, Jean."

"Father has a piece of woods on Lake Michigan, or very near it," offered Leigh. "I heard him say that he had sold a piece of it off not long ago. I never saw it, but it's quite wild, Mother said. He always meant to build two or three cottages there, one for us, but he never has."

"I feel my brain expanding, girls," soberly said Jean. "Find out, if it is permissible, to whom your father sold that land. Also please ask him if it has water and is free from wild animals!"

Leigh laughingly said that she would make every inquiry suggested except the last. "There isn't a bear left in the state except 'way in the north."

“Who knows, girls?”

“Nevertheless, Jean and Leigh,” said Nan, “I don’t believe that the boys would build on Michigan. More likely, if they are not close, they’ve gone on to what we call Lake Baldy because of all the eagles around there. The boys like that lake because there is such grand fishing there and more room to row and get around. I’ve heard Jimmy say so.”

“Time will tell who is right,” said Bess. “Come on; the scare is over. Let’s go on to where all those trees are with such tiny foliage. They are just likely to be full of warblers.”

CHAPTER X

A LONELY GIRL

The forlorn, tumble-down place of the Kleins was on what had once been its own private road, the road that led into a large, well-kept farm of thrifty German immigrants. But this was long ago. A worthless son and a still more worthless grandson had scattered the holdings. The woodland and nearly all of the farm besides had been sold off for debts and living. All that was left numbered a few acres and those badly kept in the intervals of Jacob Klein's drinking.

Mrs. Klein, Jacob's wife, was almost as far from German thrift and ideas of cleanliness as her husband, though, if some one else did the work, she was capable of having things done. And it was the girl known as Greta Klein that did them, for Greta did not even go to school. The district was thinly populated, or had been until people began to build cottages on the farther end of the lake. No one took an interest in these unattractive people and though it was quite probable that a school census had been taken and a visitor had called, possibly more than once, so far as Greta might have known, no one summoned her to school, no one passed that way to go to school, and Greta had never seen the quite distant spot where learning was the central idea.

As the speech of the family was German, Greta spoke their poor dialect of that language, though she had recently found an old German Bible, of her great-grandmother's, she supposed, in an ancient trunk which was in the queer little attic. But aside from this and a few papers, the trunk was empty, for everything which could possibly be used in the way of clothing had long since been put into use. But after the Bible was found, Greta's German improved.

The house consisted of a one-story cottage, the first building of the original immigrant, and built solidly by the farmer himself. To this two-roomed cottage an addition had once been made, with one room on the first floor, a low room above and a tiny attic. The addition had never been painted. The paint upon the first cottage had worn off with the years and the storms until the shabby, dilapidated house looked all of one piece with its dark, dingy exterior.

Birthdays were never celebrated in the Klein family, but when Greta once asked her mother when she was born she was told that so far as her mother remembered it was the fifteenth of June. This Greta did not forget, though she never mentioned it again. For some reason her parents did not like her, she was sure. There was a little boy of five and a little girl of three, for whom her mother seemed to have some affection, but Jacob Klein paid scant attention to any of them except to threaten and be as abusive as a man who drinks can be. For Greta there was only hard work with an effort to avoid her father as far as possible. In this her mother helped her. More than once she had sent Greta into the woods with the younger children and taken a severe beating herself from the quarrelsome Jacob.

"I'm going to go off by myself on my birthday," Greta promised herself. She had never done it before, and she was not sure just what would happen if she did; but she would. Probably the campers would have come by this time at the cottages and Mrs. Klein would get some washing to do, or, rather, for Greta to do. But that would not matter. She would take one day. If she only dared walk into town! But that was a long way off, and then her clothes were so queer that she was ashamed to be seen. Once in a great while Jacob Klein would take his wife and the two younger children in the old wagon, behind the bony horse, and drive to the village. But since some one had asked why he did not send Greta to school she had never been taken, and that was as much as three years before.

Unloved and unloving except for a sort of affection for the two ill-natured children, Greta was an unhappy child, often puzzled over many things, odd things that had happened. For the woods and the river and most of all the lake that shimmered its blue in these early summer days, Greta had a great love. There clothes did not matter, nor whether she had enough to eat, and with a feeling that she must be personally clean, a feeling not shared by the other Kleins, she had gotten into the habit of slipping out of the house in the summer days, before the rest had wakened, and of taking a plunge into the often cold water of the lake. Then, refreshed, she would return, ready for the hard work of the day, or for the tiresome task of looking after the children.

It was about four o'clock one morning when Greta flew through the woods on the opposite side of the road past the Klein house. Mrs. Klein had told her that she must catch some fish before there would be anything to eat for breakfast. They were out of flour and there would be no more killing of the few hens they had, whatever Jacob had to say about it. He could work a little.

Through the trees Greta darted while the birds sang and the life of the woods stirred about her. She carried a little bundle beside her fishing pole and when she came to a large willow that hung over the water, she stopped, stepped among some screening bushes and threw off the dingy clothes she was wearing, to put on a queer patchwork of a bathing suit which she had sewed together from pieces. She did not dare to wear any of the clothes her mother knew about, and as there was an occasional early fisherman on the lake she must have something in the way of a water garment.

But it was fun to dive from the long, heavy limb that extended into the water. It was deep enough for a good dive at this point, and Greta enjoyed a short swim before she landed a little further down, ran to the bushes and dressed again. Then she hung her shapeless bathing suit on a high limb, to dry, and hurried to where an old boat was moored. In a few minutes she was far from the shore, sending her boat to the fishing ground where she thought she would have the best and quickest success.

This took her near a point that ran out into the lake, a low point, wooded and beautiful with its tall trees and thick bushes. A clatter of some sort drew her attention from her line after a while. Looking along the shore, she saw, in a comparatively open space a team of horses, apparently attached to a wagon, and a large truck backing around. The clatter, she now saw, had been made by a pile of lumber, thrown from the truck. More was being put in a different spot.

Greta's clear eyes needed no field glass to determine that a number of boys were running about, directing, calling, looking up and down the shore, and while she looked two of them hugged each other and performed an impromptu dance of exultation in an open spot. Greta laughed in spite of her small acquaintance with laughter. Boys, building a shack, of course for a summer camp! Well, she would have to keep out of sight more carefully than ever. Greta sighed as she drew in her line and took from it a fat lake trout. She rowed farther away and cast again, waiting patiently and thinking of many things. At present her ambition was to help, either with housework or with children at some of the summer cottages. But when she had asked her mother, if she might, she had met with a sharp refusal, though the money from such work would have helped at home.

If she only could earn a little money with all the hard work she had learned to do! She could have some decent shoes, perhaps and one whole, respectable dress!

One other fish, and there was enough for a good breakfast. It was six o'clock when she reached home, to be scolded for being so late. Jacob Klein was still in a drunken sleep. Mrs. Klein was just getting up and the children were clamoring for attention. Roughly their mother spoke to them, telling Greta to do the milking and the feeding outside first, then to clean the fish and get breakfast.

Greta had friends in the lean cow, whose chief feed was the grass by the roadside, the hens, a straggling lot, a few baby chicks, and a couple of gaunt pigs in an ill-smelling sty at the rear of the yard. Two dogs, shut in the old barn for the night, came leaping out upon Greta as she opened the door. She was the only one who never kicked or abused them.

So Greta Klein's day began, much better than the winter days when there was a hunt for fuel, chiefly taken from the woods which did not now belong to them and where good trees would be missed. Fishing could be done by cutting the ice in the lake, but flour was often low and they lived on the cheapest of food.

The children had milk for their breakfast. Not until the ill-tempered man who actually ruled this family stirred and demanded something to eat did Greta cook the fish, dodging a slap from the great hand, so ready with a blow, and not daring to take a taste of the fish which she had caught. A glass of warm milk, taken from the pail before she brought it in, since objection might be made later, was a satisfying breakfast to Greta. She welcomed the order to go down the lake to the cottages, get the clothes from the one family who had the courage to give their washing to Mrs. Klein, and see what other cottages were occupied. Greta was to ask for more work.

As the patched clothes Greta wore were neither whole nor clean, Mrs. Klein brought out Greta's best dress, a hideous plaid gingham with a tight waist and a full skirt, poorly gathered on. The only reason for this was that people would be more likely to send the washing if the girl asking the work looked fairly clean herself. "This ought to be washed, Mother," said Greta, though in German.

"And wear it out!" replied her mother. "Talk your best English to them and get me two washings if you can. It is a lucky thing that you learned the English before you were sick."

That was always a funny thing to Greta, that in some way she had learned English before she was sick, that sickness that was brain fever, she was told and made her forget all about when her little brother had been born and made her speak German so poorly, and yet she could speak English! She

must have gone to school some time, though her mother would give her no satisfaction about when or where. “You have had enough schooling,” was all that she would say.

Nothing in the way of English papers or books were ever brought into the house, yet Greta saw both sometimes at the cottages where she took back or gathered the clothes. Her eyes devoured them while she waited, and if she edged near some table she could read a few lines. Once a woman asked her if she liked to read, and on the girl’s reply that she did, she handed her one of the newspapers. “We’ve read that. It’s several days old, for we have to get our papers by mail, but the news is fairly late.”

Greta was glad to get anything to read, whether the news was late or old. In the shelter of the willow, before she took out the clothes for which her mother was waiting, she read almost every word and put the paper in her hiding place, a hollow tree near by. But a storm came up that very night. Her hollow tree was felled, the paper blown out and destroyed! That was a calamity of the preceding summer.

But Greta was beginning to feel that she must rouse herself a little from the conditions at home. Her father’s drunkenness was growing unbearable. Always of a cruel disposition, with a feeling that he had a right to beat his wife or children as freely as he beat his horse, he was often dangerous, Greta thought. How long her mother would stand it was a question, yet she seemed to take it as a matter of course, though doing her share of the quarreling. The German Bible was a help in the worst of Greta’s troubles. Her great-grandmother must have been a good woman. But some time she would go away and then try to earn money to help her mother and the children.

Now Greta Klein was a pretty girl. Had she been dressed as well as Jean Gordon she might have looked not unlike the impulsive Jean. But her large, dark brown eyes had a sad look in them and her face was worn; for while the hard work she had been forced to do had given her a certain strength, there had been enough of it to amount to over-work, which is not good for growing girls. Her mother said that she would be sixteen on her next birthday and that would be on the fifteenth, for which Greta was having plans.

Again the rowboat made its way out into the lake. Again Greta took a look at the pile of lumber on the peninsula. Perhaps the boys would want their clothes washed, but she would not tell her mother about it. It would be terrible to go there for them.

Greta made her way to the cottage, where an energetic, keen-eyed woman answered her knocking. “After this please come to the back door, Greta. I always have the clothes there for you. And I see that I shall have to have them done every week for the children get so dirty. Please be careful with the colored clothes. Last week that red handkerchief ran into Buddy’s blouse and that will never do.”

“I will try to be careful, Mrs. Smith.”

Greta took the large bundle which Mrs. Smith gave her. It was too large to carry around. Why hadn’t she thought to go to the other houses first? “Are there any other families where you think Mother could get washing to do, Mrs. Smith?” she asked.

“Yes. Mrs. Bliss next door wants some one. They came day before yesterday. If you like you may leave the clothes on the back porch while you go to see her. I’ll keep an eye on them, of course.”

“Oh, thank you, I’ll hurry.”

“Poor child,” thought Mrs. Smith, “she looks half tired to death all the time. But I couldn’t have her coming to the front door, and I must have my clothes done properly!”

Fortunately, the cottages were closely set and along the shore. Two big bundles Greta lugged along, knowing that her mother would be satisfied to add another washing, and thinking to herself that it was all she could do herself, especially if she spent her birthday as she intended. From her window Mrs. Smith was watching her, again wishing that she had not spoken so sharply. Then she had a thought.

“Greta! Greta Klein!” she called, just as Greta was arranging the bundles in the boat. Greta looked up and saw Mrs. Smith waving at her. “Wait a minute, Greta.”

It was several minutes, while Greta stood at the home-made, funny little dock that ran out narrowly into the lake. Then Mrs. Smith came running down to her with a bundle in her hand. “I thought that you might like some sugar cookies to eat on the way home. I want you to eat them yourself, remember, and I’m going to ask you if you did!”

Greta smiled and looked surprised.

“And here is a book that I found in the cottage. A young cousin of mine left it here last summer. If you can’t read it,—though you speak such good

English that I suppose you can,—you will find some pretty pictures through it. It's a story of girls about your age."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Smith, very, very much. I can read it and I haven't any books of my own! You are so kind!" Greta's eyes were full of tears at the unexpected warmth in Mrs. Smith's tones. She had not minded much being told to go to the back door. She ought to have thought of it herself.

A happier girl rowed the boat back. She had a book of her own. She would read it on her birthday. The only thing that troubled her was how to keep it from being found and destroyed. She would hide it in the barn this time, or perhaps she could get it into the attic, where the Bible was. They let that alone.

The sugar cookies were good and with them was an apple. The fruit on the Klein place was very limited now. Greta thought of saving it for her brother, but questions would be asked. She would do what Mrs. Smith told her to do. The book she could scarcely wait to open. Suppose something should happen to it before she read it! She was almost tempted to stop before taking home the clothes; but concealing the volume as well as she could, she lugged home the bundles from a rude dock nearer than the one by the willow.

Fortune favored her. Her mother and the children were out in the pasture. Something was the matter with the horse. It lay on the ground, she saw, but she flew to the attic with her treasure and tucked it under the ragged quilt and old comforter that covered the cot where she slept now. Even in the cold winter she often came here, for she was afraid of her father when he came home so intoxicated; and sometimes her mother would bring the smaller children to her there.

She supposed that her father had gone to see if a veterinary surgeon, the "horse-doctor," would come, and with such opportunity she hesitated about leaving the book. But no, her mother would be angry if she did not start the washing, late as it was. She ran down the stairs and out into the shed for the tubs, unfortunately colliding slightly with Jacob Klein when she opened the shed door quickly and stepped out.

Out of sorts about the horse and irritated by the sight of Greta and her little bump against him, he roared out loudly in German, asking her what she was doing and why she wasn't doing her work, enforcing his words with a blow that sent her stumbling to the other side of the shed, where she hit her head against the metal tub hanging there and fell unconscious. The man hesitated, with all his brutality, this was the first time that Greta had not been

able to dodge a blow. He recalled his wife's threat, a potent one, but the girl would be up in a minute. What was he going to do about that horse?

When Greta regained consciousness, she was lying on the old cot in the front room and some one was leaning over her. It was the horse-doctor! "There; she's coming around all right, Mrs. Klein. Tell her to keep her head tied up if she doesn't want a scar, and give her some more of that medicine. I'm glad Jake told me about her before I started with nothing but medicine for his horse. To tell the truth, Mrs. Klein, I thought he was more anxious about the nag than about the girl. He said that his oldest girl ran into a tub and cut her head and fell down in a faint. How did it happen?"

"I didn't see it. She slipped and fell, Jake said. He was in the house. I was watching the horse." This was all that Mrs. Klein would tell, in her broken English, and Greta had no desire to tell more, though she asked, "Will I have to wash to-day?"

"I should say not," said the old doctor. "Get her to bed." With this, the doctor picked up a German paper that had come, as one did every week to Jacob Klein, and prepared to remain until that child was put to bed. Such unfeeling parents he never saw.

Greta, meanwhile, thought of the book. She did not want her mother in the attic. She sat on the edge of the cot, dizzy and sick. But she had often worked when she felt as much so. "I can get upstairs alone," she said, "I feel better now." And upstairs she went, though slowly, taking the bottle of medicine and a spoon, with a glass of water which her mother handed her. To think of it! It was almost worth the blow to be alone in her attic. She would feel better after a while, and read!

That night there was an unusually loud quarrel in the room below Greta's attic. "What did I tell you? You leave Greta alone unless you want to go to jail. I will tell what I know!" This was the substance of the German words that Greta Klein heard. What had her father done? Her mother must care a little for her or she would not want her husband to leave her alone. No, it was just that Greta could work! So the woman went on to say. While he was drinking himself to death whenever he could get anything to drink, Greta could do the work and earn the money by washing and ironing. Jacob was to let Greta alone. She would manage her. "She isn't your child,—you are not her father!" Greta heard, and sat up in bed to listen.

But after that the voices were lowered, and Greta heard the door of their bedroom closed tightly. Her own door was ajar. That she rose to close and latch as the old-fashioned fastening would permit.

If what Mrs. Klein said was true, it explained a good deal. Probably her mother had been married before. And possibly, possibly, she was only a step-daughter to Mrs. Klein herself. Greta felt ashamed that she would be glad if that were true. And oh, how good it was,—not Jacob Klein's daughter! Then her name would not be Klein, even. Would she dare ask her mother about it? Mrs. Klein was quite capable of telling her that she had misunderstood what was said. Where had Greta gotten these different ideas of what was square and right to do? All at once she knew that she was different. But her head ached so. She had not been able to read the story. She could think better to-morrow.

CHAPTER XI

THOSE "UNINTERESTED" PARENTS

"Girls," said the president of the seven sibyls impressively, "do you realize that it is too late for us to make any money to amount to anything this year? I mean the school year, of course. The Black Wizards have to make some; Billy told me, and you and I know what for, or we haven't had much trouble in making a pretty good guess. One of the church societies is selling that candy we thought we could get hold of. Our fudge goes off like hot cakes when we make any, but school is nearly out and I'm proud to think that every one of the S. P's gets out of finals, and that in spite of our new club and all our doings!"

"We had our scholarship up all the year before," remarked Phoebe.

"Phoebe is nothing, if not frank," laughed Bess.

"Traitoress!" hissed Fran, in such good imitation of a reading which they had recently heard at school that they all applauded but Phoebe, who declared that she thought the truth might just as well be acknowledged. "I couldn't have brought up any low grades while we were doing all the extra things and taking the early hikes and all."

"No, neither could I, Phoebe, you're right," said Jean. "All of which goes to prove——"

" 'That music is both elevating and refining'."

"Stop your nonsense, Phoebe! I'm trying to get something across."

"Oh. Sorry, Madame President. The subject was making money, I remember."

"Exactly. The time has come to call on our worthy parents with the request that they will advance the money for a tent and let us go camping as soon as school is out. We have enough money in the treasury for the books we positively have to have or think we have to have, as my father says, so that's all right, and we can have a real campaign in the fall. Nan's father says that we ought to start one for a real good school library, since we are interested in books. He thinks that we could get some good gifts from the people around town and that perhaps we could stir the school board up to do

something, maybe get the people to vote them more money for it, though taxes are bad enough as it is, he says."

"My father says that he will take it up in the paper, too, girls," Nan added, "and the few copies of the school paper that we've been getting out with the boys have gone all over town. I've heard all sorts of things about the S. P.'s and Molly's and Phoebe's drawings. They think we're 'real cute' so far! But let's show everybody we can be more than funny."

"Hear, hear!"

The girls were not in their club room, for this called meeting. In spite of windows and cross draughts, the fact remained that the attic was directly under the roof. June suns often made it quite warm. It was time to think of camping. Just now they were all in Jean's big swing, three on a seat, Jean standing between them.

"Molly, tell the girls what Grace wrote."

Molly drew a folded paper from her notebook. "This is a sheet from Grace's letter," said she. "She wrote to all of us, and this is what she said to me: 'Molly, I just can't write you a separate letter, have scarcely a minute free with all the last doings. I shall be a wreck, but if you promise that you really will keep things going at first yourselves, I'll only be too glad to spend a few weeks in the woods or on the water. I told Mother that last week and I'm surprised that you wrote me about it. Perhaps she forgot to tell you.' That's all about that."

"Why, how funny!" cried Phoebe. "It's wonderful that Grace will do it, but why did your mother ask her? Did you tell her how much we wanted to go camping?"

"Only what we agreed, that we would talk about girls' camps and how much fun it must be, and send for catalogues about tents, and talk about raising money." Molly laughed herself at the array of hints which almost any discerning parent might take.

"Bless you, Molly, you're the most transparent little dear in the world. You probably talked in your sleep, too."

"I do sometimes," Molly acknowledged. But for once the S. P.'s were not right. Parents sometimes make plans for their children and wiser ones than those same children often make. Seven fathers were having a glorious time in planning a little surprise, to say nothing of as many mothers, who were using the telephone or calling on each other occasionally while the

girls were in school. It was a generous little plot against the S. P.'s, and for their benefit.

"I asked Mother about it and she said that she *had* written to Grace about it, since we all were talking about what fun it would be to camp. She thought it could be managed, if not right away, probably soon after Grace's Commencement is over. She and Father are going on to it, you know."

"Then all we'll have to do is to get everybody else's permission, and I'm pretty sure if Grace is with us, and we don't go too far away, they'll let us." Jean's voice had a happy lilt.

"Wait, Jean," said Molly. "Mother told me that Grace had already written to her about it, but that she thought it too soon to make it definite and there were other reasons why she had not said anything. Grace said that one of the senior girls had been a junior councilor at an eastern camp for girls, that another had a troop of girl scouts in her home town and still another knew all about the camp fire girls. So Grace will know a lot of things for us to do. I wish Grace was going to be at home next year!"

"Is she going to teach or something?"

"Worse. She's going to be married."

The Black Wizards were behaving in a most mysterious fashion in these days. The girls were quite sure that they had not seen them that day upon the river road, or they would have suspected that their secret was known or surmised.

After school they would disappear with great suddenness. On street corners or in the school grounds they held secret confabs when they met. Sometimes a machine would be waiting for them after school. As boys do, they would pile into it and drive off with more than the usual air of a good time. Indeed, they made an effort to repress their usual high spirits and noise, a thing which in itself would have called attention to them. The girls saw no more lumber going out of town, but that was because the early and late hikes had stopped, or possibly because the lumber had all been delivered. It would have been fun to find out where they were building, but the girls were too busy with other things. It was not directly on any of the main roads, at least, where they drove with their parents at odd times. Miss Haynes had announced her plans early enough for them not to count upon her, but they were quite content to rest their hopes on Grace French, who was so attractive, and engaged!

With much glee the girls made fudge that evening of the called meeting, one batch after another, more than one kettle on at a time, each in charge of a separate S. P., since too many cooks do often "spoil the broth."

"After saying that we'll have to give up making money, here Jean puts us at making candy to sell to-morrow!" whimsically Phoebe complained.

"We need just a little more for that set of nature books," said Jean. "Besides, what cruelty not to supply those Black Wizard carpenters with something to eat while they work! Do you realize that to-morrow is the last day for us, except when we go to get our grades? Now, Molly, you can start the hard molasses taffy. We've got enough fudge, after we get that last beaten. Leigh, did you bring that oiled paper? And oh, Nan, did you put down how much we paid for the sugar? Mother gave us the cream. While the last cools, we've got to make the little S. P. cornucopias, if we stay up half the night to do it! Don't you think that we could charge ten cents for them instead of five?"

"Poor Wizards!" cried Molly.

"It's not just the Wizards we sell to. Well, all right, but don't fill them as full as you did last time. Our candy is just as good as what you buy in a box, and we give more for the money now than they do at the church sales. Billy said so."

"Jean's getting stingy," giggled Bess. "But if 'Billy said so,' it must be all right."

Jean, already flushed with the cooking and the warm evening grew a little rosier. Billy had managed to see a good deal of her lately, whenever Wizard affairs permitted it. But there wasn't anything "silly" about it. Probably she'd better not quote Billy any more.

After the noon meal the next day, the girls took their candy to school. Half of it they sold at once. The rest they had for sale after school, outside of the school grounds. Six of the Wizards were climbing into a Ford sedan when Molly and Jean ran with a school bag full of the little packages. "Don't you want something to eat on your ride?" asked Molly of Jimmy Standish.

"I believe I do," grinned Jimmy, feeling in his pocket. "I just bought some at noon, but I need nourishment already."

"I need all my nickels," said Billy Baxter, "but as you said at noon, Jean, that this is the last chance, I'll indulge, too. Give me two, if you please, one fudge, the other that good hard stuff that lasts longer."

“Molly’s going to find out how to make the kind you eat off of sticks, Billy,” said Jean, as she picked out two of the fattest looking cornucopias she could find and handed them to him.

“That cornucopia shape is the most deceiving thing, Jean,” said Jimmy. “It’s on the same style of having the best on top. You think you still have a lot, and there’s only one measley piece left.”

“Measley, Jimmy?” asked Jean, as Jimmy put a piece of fudge in his mouth.

“I’ll take that back, Jean. It’s good, and you’re the little girls that can get money out of a customer! So long.”

It was great to have the freedom instead of taking the examinations. Their parents congratulated them and expressed pride that they had made high grades, but the girls were surprised at the lack of interest they showed when the subject of camping was definitely put before them.

“Why, I can’t get Father and Mother interested at all,” Jean complained. “I don’t know what’s gotten into them! They haven’t any great objections, as I thought they might have, but I can’t get them to do anything.”

“Same thing at our house,” said Leigh Dudley. “I thought that Mother, at least, would be interested, but she asked if I thought Grace were old enough to take care of us, and where we thought we’d like to camp, and said that she would think about it; but when I asked her if we could pick out the sort of tent we wanted, she said, ‘Well, it wouldn’t do any harm,’ even if we didn’t go!”

“We ought to have begun to talk it up earlier,” Fran declared. “But all is not lost. We’ll just have to keep it before them, in a very nice way, of course. Teasing is N. G. at our house.”

“Also at ours,” said Nan.

“Especially tell them how safe it will be near home and how much better off we are than girls who have to go a long way off from home, pay a big railroad fare and aren’t familiar with the country as we are here, to know about snakes and things.”

“Better not mention snakes!”

“This sounds awful, girls, as if we were in the habit of ‘working’ our folks!” Thus Jean.

“It isn’t ‘working’ them, Jean,” said Fran, “but you do have to use some *tact* to get the grown-ups interested. And we do want to go, and we think it will be all right. Now if we can only get them to thinking so, too!”

“All right, Fran.”

It may be imagined, however, how embarrassing all this was to parents who were planning not only to let the girls go, but to have supplies ready by a certain time and break the news in the way of a surprise.

A few ideas of the girls, however, were able to fit in nicely toward the common goal, as when no objection was made to “hiking suits.” Middies and bloomers became popular for the summer outfit. The mothers had wondered how the matter of clothes was to be handled, if the girls were to be ready. Fathers soberly commented on how sensible girls were getting in their choice of clothes, and the girls, accustomed to teasing remarks, thought nothing of it.

Meanwhile preparations went merrily on. “It is scarcely more expensive than sending our girls on some trip,” said Mr. Standish one early June evening, as he drove with Mr. French, coming into town along the river road. “I think that they will be enthusiastic over it, though you can not always tell about young folks.”

“I can not imagine their not being happy over it, Standish.”

CHAPTER XII

THE "GRAND" SURPRISE

No one felt like working while waiting for the final day of receiving grade cards. Senior affairs and Jimmy's graduation concerned Nan and the Standish household, though Jimmy seemed to have little concern about it. But then, Jimmy wasn't a girl, with gowns and slippers and other things to think about.

S. P. affairs had a lull the first of the last week of school, till Judge Gordon asked Jean at breakfast Wednesday morning if the club really had a name, and Jean told him that it had too many already, but the Stealthy Prowlers was the only one that was appropriate to their outdoor purposes. "The trouble is that we decided on the initials first."

The judge gave Jean a comical look. "No doubt you had a good reason," he said. "Perhaps if you had a respectable motto it would help. I can't say that I admire your name."

"I don't either, Daddy. What could we have for a motto?"

The judge went into the other room and got out his Latin lexicon from the bookcases there. Jean did not disturb him while he turned the pages and scribbled a little on the back of an envelope.

"Here is one that you might have," he said at last, turning over the envelope and writing the words in a large hand.

"If you must 'prowl,' you might say, '*Pro bono, non malo, circumcursamus*.' It means 'we prowl, or run around for good and not for evil.'

"Or here is another Latin sentence that might do. Of course, I'm making them up. It isn't from the classics. '*Bonum non malum itisequimur*' sounds still better, but only means 'we follow good, not evil.' How do you like these?"

"Fine. We need some mottos for our club room anyhow."

"Why not '*Sans peur*'?" suggested Mrs. Gordon, who had followed her husband and daughter into the living room.

"Oh, Mother!" cried Jean. "Why didn't I think of that before? Here we've been studying French and everything! It begins with S. P., you know."

"Sure enough," smiled Judge Gordon, who did not mind in the least that Jean showed more enthusiasm over her mother's suggestion than his own. "Why don't you make that the name of your club as well?"

"The girls will like it," said Jean, sitting down in a chair with a beatific expression. "And the boys will be surprised. Since the party they've been calling us the Sibyl Prophetesses or Priestesses." and Billy said, "Come now Jean, isn't 'sibyl' a part of it?"

"*Sans peur* will be a fine motto for you wild hikers," concluded Judge Gordon, rising and patting the young shoulder as he passed Jean to leave the room for the hall. "I must go to the office. Better call a meeting, Jean, and change Stealthy Prowlers to something better."

"The boys said that the 'Seven Sibyls' would be better, with S. S. for our initials, but I told them that we expected to be more than seven members after a while."

"I'd suggest '*sans souci*,' 'without a care,' then, for those initials," said Mrs. Gordon. The judge was out of the house by this time.

"We have to stay S. P., Mother, for a very good reason," said Jean, thinking of Billy and her first committing of the girls to a club, "but the sibyl part is only for initiations and things like that. Each sibyl has charge of a department, and it is a very good scheme. But you mustn't tell anything I tell you."

"Never," promised Mrs. Gordon.

Some of the girls were not so much in favor of making the motto the name of the club, but they were agreed that even if *sans peur* remained only the motto, it gave the excuse for calling themselves the S. P. Club. "I move," said Phoebe, "that we decide on our pin and have it an American eagle, because we have so many around our lakes, and then have a little pennant or banner or some little place in the pin with '*Sans Peur*' on it."

"The eagle will stand for our bird hunting, too," said Bess.

"It is a good motto, too," said Molly, "if we are off camping. We can add it all if we want to, '*Sans peur et sans reproche*.' Not to be afraid and not to do anything to bring reproach isn't so bad for us to remember. Girls, Mother said to-day that she thought it pretty sure, maybe she said sure, that everybody will let us go!"

Thursday came, with its graduation exercises. Friday saw the girls going after their reports. There seemed to be some repressed excitement among the

Black Wizards, though everything was so irregular anyway that it was not particularly noticeable.

"I hope you girls have a good time to-morrow," said Billy with a grin at Jean, as he left the schoolgrounds with Danny Pierce.

"We're not going on a hike or anything, Billy," replied Jean, but Billy just nodded and went on.

"Billy looked so funny when he said that," said Jean to Molly. "Do you suppose he meant anything was going to happen? What could the boys do?"

"I'm sure I don't know. The boys are going to entertain us when they get their camp finished, I'm sure. But they would send us invitations, I should think."

"Of course they would," said Nan, "though, knowing Jimmy, I will say that they can do some very unexpected things."

"And Jimmy would say the same thing about girls, Nan."

"Yes, he would. Oh, Jean, I wish we could afford to get our pins now, don't you? But the books come first, and we'll need all we can raise for the camping equipment, though we can count on help for that."

"Never mind, Nan; we might lose our pins camping, and we may change our minds again, and there wouldn't be any chance to show them to anybody till school begins!"

The girls laughed over Jean's conclusions and agreed that they had some point. The groups of boys and girls separated for the most part. The next move was taking home the reports, some to praise, some to disappointment, as it always happens. But the Black Wizards and the S. P.'s had some pride of scholarship.

Saturday morning dawned as a beautiful June day can, clear, bright, fragrant with flowers, musical with bird songs and fairly cool with a fresh breeze from the lakes. "I wish we had planned to do something to-day," said Jean to her father. "We were so lazy yesterday, after Commencement."

"Drive out into the country with me," said the judge. "I'm leaving about nine o'clock. Your mother's going with me. Like to take any of the girls along?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But we can only get five in the back part, three on the back seat."

The judge laughed. “You are a great girl. You want the whole seven, I suppose. Why don’t you call up Leigh and ask her if her folks can’t come along? We might make a picnic of it. I’m going to look at a piece of land and I wouldn’t mind having Dudley along.”

“But doesn’t he have to be at the bank?”

“Don’t I have to be at my office? Presidents of banks, my dear, aren’t really as necessary to the daily job as cashiers and a few others.”

“How lucky for them. Why, do I dare suggest anything like a picnic to the Dudleys? And is Mother willing?”

“Ask her.”

“I will put up a lunch if Mrs. Dudley will,” said Mrs. Gordon with an expression of amusement that Jean did not understand at the time. In a moment Jean was at the telephone.

“Why, isn’t that luck for you, Leigh!” Jean was heard exclaiming. “Has just asked you if you wouldn’t like a ride into the country? Well, anybody would on a day like this. Whom do you want to take? Phoebe, I suppose? All right. I’ll get Nan and Molly, then, if you want to take the rest.” Jean flew out of the open front door without stopping to explain, for she knew that her parents could overhear what she said to Leigh.

Mrs. Gordon was at the telephone herself as soon as Jean had gone. She sent several messages rapidly, but was in the kitchen packing a large basket when Jean returned. “My, you’re taking a lot of things!” Jean exclaimed.

“With the Dudleys, my dear, I want to have something to offer, you see. It is a good thing I did my baking yesterday.”

“Why, so you did. When did you ever do that before? I’m glad now that you wouldn’t cut that cake for supper. And I don’t suppose the girls will have a chance to bring much. I told Nan and Molly that I’d take enough for them. Was that all right?”

“Perfectly. Make a few more cheese sandwiches, Jean, and we’ll soon be ready. I think I’ll put in those cookies, too. We can buy something for Sunday if we’re all eaten out of baked things.” Mrs. Gordon said nothing about the fat meat loaf in the bottom of the basket or the chicken which she had fried while Jean was at Nan’s Friday afternoon. She looked like a little older edition of Jean as she hurried around with flushed cheeks.

Presently they were all out upon the pretty river road, the Dudley car overtaking them. The girls leaned out to call to each other, as the machines

drew abreast for a short distance. “I think we’ll go on to what the youngsters call Baldy for our lunch, Dudley. What do you think?” asked Judge Gordon.

“You could not find a better place,” Mr. Dudley replied. “Take the lead. I’ll follow.”

So the two gentlemen were not looking up the “piece of land” at once. The girls were quite satisfied, but wished that they had thought to bring their bathing suits. They crossed the river by the big bridge, took a roundabout route by fairly good roads through the beautiful, undulating country with its frequent pools and tiny lakes. Stretches of woodland or pastures and fields were equally attractive, but at length they came to the thick woods where a road ran in for a little way, then changed from lane to footpath.

“Isn’t this the grandest woods?” asked Jean, whose favorite adjective was “grand.” The other girls agreed that it was and that it was a shame they could not come more often to this lake. Yet it was too far for an ordinary hike and the machines of the parents were not available, as a rule. These facts were mentioned, and the girls did not notice a lad who viewed the party from a woodsy distance and then noiselessly slipped away to give the word.

The two fathers carried the two large baskets, while the two mothers and girls brought the light blankets used in the cars in cool weather. These would do to spread upon the ground. Various small articles which had not found room in the basket were distributed. “My, but we’re going to have a big lunch!” cried Nan. “It’s a regular S. P. picnic. I wish my mother and father could ever get away for one. Poor Dad! Always at the office!”

The girls ran on ahead, as girls do. The mothers and fathers exchanged glances. “It worked out better than I was afraid it would,” said Mrs. Gordon. “Jean doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“I’m relieved that the secrecy is over, though,” said Mrs. Dudley with a smile. “Now we’ll see how they like it. I hope everybody is here. You took us for a fine ride around, Judge Gordon.”

“I tried to give everybody time enough, Mrs. Dudley.” The judge looked at his watch. “Just eleven. They’ll be here. I suppose that the boys have been having their scouts out to watch us and report. Jimmy Standish was the only one who had to wait, on Nan’s account, and drive his father and mother.”

It took probably ten minutes of walking through the woods by the pretty trail before they came to the sloping shores of the lake that stretched its shining ripples so invitingly before them. “Why, Mother!” exclaimed Jean,

looking to the left toward a cleared space, “Someone has been building a summer cottage! Oh, it must be the Black Wizards!” For Judge Gordon gave a little whistle and from behind the house the boys came running, Jimmy and Billy in the lead.

“How do you like the house, Jean?” asked Billy, all grins.

“Grand! What a beautiful surprise! It will beat our Attic Party to smithereens! Why, this is wonderful of you, to get up a surprise picnic like this. Oh, it’s a cute little cottage. I hope you will take us inside of it.”

“We certainly will.”

The other boys were in similar conversation with the other S. P.’s—but here came other folks around the house. The various fathers and mothers! The S. P.’s gasped. The boys had not left them out in celebrating the finishing of their summer camp! All the S. P. parents, all the Black Wizard parents, so far as they could tell in a hasty glance at the group, were there.

But Judge Gordon was coming to the front and raising his hand. “I think that some explanation is due these surprised girls of ours. They ought to know that their energy and that of our boys has made some of us parents realize what should be done to help them. Among other things we have seen that the outdoor movements are a good thing, properly managed, and we decided to help a little there.

“Then it happens that both boys and girls have been talking about books, and it made us see that there was not even a proper school library of reference books to say nothing of a library in the town where they could gather for reading. Your little nature library, girls, and the boys’ few books on adventure and history have started more than you knew. Some of us fathers got together the other day. We are all of us, boys and girls and older boys and girls, going to start raising money together next fall, or even before, for a public library; and probably we shall not stop there, with our progressive town paper to back us.” The judge waved his hand at Mr. Standish as he said this.

“And whether S. P. refers to sugar plums, sweet peas, seraphic peris or a sane purpose and secure partnership, we give them the credit for calling our attention to the needs of our little city. They have shown us *Stirring Possibilities* and have already assured us some *Social Progress*! I understand that they are intending to enlarge their club with that purpose. Jean, can you tell us what your club stands for?”

Jean, absolutely surprised, thought for a moment that she could not say a word. It was dreadful of her father to ask her to make a speech. But while she hesitated, led out from the midst of the girls by Nan, her father said, "No speech, Jean; but you are the president, I believe."

"Yes, sir. Why,—some of us a good while ago had been wishing that we knew more about what other girls were doing and something suddenly decided us to have a club. That was all. Then, of course, having started it, we kept on and Miss Haynes helped us find out about a great many things, and we decided to raise money for a library. First it was just our own and then we wondered if we couldn't do something about a school library. But it is wonderful that all of you are thinking about a town library and all I can say for us girls is that we will help all we can, and make fudge by the—quart, and everything! And thank you for the surprise of this picnic." Jean's usually quick mind could think of nothing more to say and she stepped back in some confusion.

"Just a moment, girls, now that you are getting used to surprises," said the judge. "I believe that I will ask the editor to tell you whose summer cottage this is,—Mr. Standish."

Jean gasped again. Now she knew. This was not the Black Wizard shack. The tall judge stepped back and the wiry, slight, editor, Nan's father, stepped forward from a group. "This should all be very informal," said he, "as it is a picnic occasion. It seems to fall to me to announce to our girls that the S. P. Club owns this little cottage and that it is a gift from the S. P. fathers and mothers, who have fitted it up very simply. The boys helped build it and I assure you that we all had a time of it to keep it a secret, but I believe that it was done. We hope that it will be a happy surprise to you and that you may have a very good time of it this summer. The boys want me to announce to you that they, too, have a camp about a mile around the lake from here and that after you have looked at your new house, the picnic will be held there."

As Mr. Standish closed, Jean looked at her father, who nodded encouragingly. She felt stunned as well as happy to know that this summer camp was theirs, but her mind had been working this time. "Oh," she began impulsively, "you know how we must feel, Mr. Standish, more like crying for joy! I couldn't say anything if I weren't the president and have to. We'll all be thanking our fathers and mothers separately, and every one of the boys for helping do this. So all I'm saying now is just thank you, everybody!"

Jean turned to her mother and put her head on that comfortable shoulder for a minute, but a sudden thought made her swallow the lump in her throat

and she turned to Nan and the rest of the astonished, ecstatic girls. “Oh, say, girls, let me whisper something to you,” and she whispered to Nan, who nodded and passed the word on to the nearest girl, while Jean told someone else. That message no one but the S. P.’s were ever to know. “Let’s never tell the boys that we knew they were building,” said Jean. It was not much, to be sure, but no unpleasant note of rivalry could ever be struck between the S. P.’s and the Black Wizards!

The commotion now began. The girls were beckoned into the little house that was theirs by the parents, who wanted to see how they liked it. The boys scattered, some of them taking the baskets and wraps brought by the Dudleys and Gordons. These were carried to the other camp by boat, for a little fleet of rowboats, canoes and one small motor boat was waiting to take the picnickers to where the other “opening” was to be celebrated.

“Daddy, I forgot to tell them about our motto. And you thought up the best name yet for us, a Social Progress Club.”

“That daughter, was on the spur of the moment. Was it too much to give you such a big surprise with no warning?”

“Oh, it is just too wonderful. I can’t tell you how happy I am, and I know the other girls feel the same way. Just look at them!”

The summer cottage stood facing the path and lane in a measure, but with its back to the lake. It was explained that the road was to be widened, to permit of driving to the house with supplies and that it seemed better to have the front face in that direction. “But your screened sleeping porch is toward the lake,” one of the fathers showed them, “and your main room out upon the water.”

Neat, trim, painted white, with golden-brown storm shutters, and made of boards closely set, the little house justified the girls’ exclamations. It was not plastered inside, but it was tight and snug against ordinary winds. One immense room with a pantry and a large closet opening at one side, and the long sleeping porch across the back, constituted the interior. “That big closet, girls, could be made into a bathroom,” said Mrs. Dudley, “if a water system could be arranged some time. But you will be glad of all the hooks in there, now, and a place for your luggage. Be careful of that coal-oil stove, and the big range will keep you warm in a cold spell. There is money for a little set of dishes and some kitchenware, and we thought that it would be more fun for you to buy it yourselves and fix up the place. Do you like the color the boys painted the floor?”

The girls liked everything; what fun it was going to be, to buy things for their summer cottage.

"Notice," said one mother, "that there are keys and also bolts on all the doors. We feel much safer to have you in a house like this. With Grace here and the boys only a mile away, you ought to be safe. Jimmy said something about rigging up a telephone, and I hope they do it."

"To think that our fathers, as well as the boys, drove some of the nails in this!" rather sentimentally said Leigh. "I'd like to stay right out here to-night!"

"You would find it rather inconvenient, Leigh," laughed her mother. "We did not like to buy blankets and things and leave them here. There is time enough."

So there was. After lingering looks all around, the girls were willing to leave in the boats for the other camp, where they were shown all over the little peninsula which the boys had chosen as a site. The boys' "Shack," as they called it was not as smooth as the girls' and as yet unpainted, but it was well built, for they had had the assistance of carpenters on this as on the other. The main room was more open and the boys would sleep in bunks. "Got lots of windows, you see, and if it rains in, it can't hurt our floor."

"Lookout for what you call your port holes, Billy," said Nan, to Billy, who had made this remark. "You want to keep the rain from your bunks at least."

The picnic was held outdoors, on a slope which overlooked the lake. There were not so many Black Wizard parents as the girls had at first supposed, but most of the sisters had come, and the S. P.'s decided to invite some of them to visit their camp during the weeks there, if Grace were willing. It would be such a shame to keep all that fun to themselves. "We could have them all, in relays, couldn't we, Jean?" asked Nan.

"We certainly could, and several are the right age to join the S. P.'s. Daddy just told me that he and Mr. Standish and Mr. Dudley and Mr. Baxter have bought up a lot of the land around this end of the lake, to make it safe and keep it wild for us, and to put up a few more little shacks if we want any more campers. I'm so stunned over it that I don't know who I am!"

The girls, in spite of their dazed condition which they claimed, threw themselves into the boys' celebration heartily and raved as girls are supposed to do over the location and plans. Nor did they forget to be sincere in their thanks for the Wizards' part in the great surprise. "It was perfectly

grand!” cried Jean, with a sandwich in one hand and a chicken wing in the other.

CHAPTER XIII

THE S. P.'S DISCOVER GRETA

Greta wakened to the sound of rain, beating upon the old roof and leaking into her attic. The first drops beat a tattoo within the old tin pan that she kept under the worst leak. What had happened! Oh, yes. She remembered, though her head had stopped aching. It was sore, though, under the bandage. She heard the children downstairs only faintly. Why, they must be up and about, all of the family,—and no one had called her. What Greta did not know was that the "horse-doctor" had warned Mrs. Klein in no uncertain words that Greta had had a dangerous fall and must be allowed to rest for fear of serious consequences. "And you know that it might be looked into, how she got it," he had said, for he thought that he noted suspicious anxiety on her part. Jacob Klein's character was not unknown in these parts.

With her foot Greta felt that her precious book was safely there. She wondered if she could think of a better place. How soon would she be called? It was so cloudy that she had no way of knowing what time it was. The old clock downstairs did not strike and half the time it did not even go.

After a little she heard her mother telling the children to go back and coming, lumbering, up the attic stairs. Greta's big eyes were fixed on her as she came into the low room, complaining in voluble German that it had to be a rainy day and that the doctor had said Greta could not work. She would have the washings to start herself. A cup of coffee and a piece of bread, broken from a loaf, were put down on a chair by the bed.

Greta expected to be ordered up then, but no, her mother turned to go, telling her to do what the doctor said about the medicine. "He hit you?" she asked, and Greta answered that "he" had.

Greta could scarcely believe her good fortune. She was not even to take care of the children, poor little things, kept in by the rain. As soon as her mother had gone downstairs, Greta sat up and unpinned the bandage on her head. She was a little dizzy, but she poured some water from her old pitcher into the tin basin which was her lavatory and bathed the cut. She anointed it and tied up her head again, as the doctor had directed, taking a tablet, too, to swallow down with the black coffee. A whole day to herself! A book to read.

Something was queer. Oh, yes, what they had said. She was not Jacob Klein's daughter. How had she learned to speak English as well as the summer cottagers did, and better than some of them? Why had her German been "forgotten," as they had said, when she was so sick with brain fever? She tried to remember those first days, four years before, when she found herself getting strong enough to sit up and then to walk. Mrs. Klein had been kinder then. "Why, I can, too, remember," she said to herself, as a scene rose before her of herself in a dark woods, frightened and running. Then someone picked her up. Oh, it was coming back! But she grew dizzy again as she sat up in her desire to remember and the excitement of it. She would not think till she was better.

Of course it had always seemed funny that she knew English; but Mrs. Klein had always told her that she went to school with English children. "Maybe you would ferget one t'ing, maybe another," Jacob Klein had said to a frightened little girl. "Dis time it vas German dot you fergot, und don't ferget vat ve tells you some more!" Greta could remember the threatening look and the ugly tone with which he had bent over her bed and said this.

For another half hour Greta rested and tried not to think at all. Then she drank the rest of the cold coffee and ate the bread, at last reaching down under the old quilt for her precious book, in which she was absorbed immediately.

The book wore a bright cover with pictures of girls about her own age, but how different they appeared! There were pretty, stylish dresses, happy faces, and yet some of the pictures found them in a woods like hers. At first they were in a boarding school and what good times they had in between lessons. There was one that she liked especially, but she loved them all. And she had seen things like that. Why, of *course* she had been to school.

Greta read the book through and began to read it again, though she had hastily thrust it under the covers when she heard her mother coming upstairs again. A glass of milk and a hard-boiled egg with a spoonful of mush made a marvelous meal, for Greta was hungry by the middle of the afternoon; and her mother explained that as the doctor had said she was not to eat much, two meals were enough and this was the last. Karl had almost scalded himself from a kettle on the stove and Minna had bluing all over her. Greta was to get up early the next morning to do another washing and to iron. With this cross ultimatum, Mrs. Klein left the room.

Before night Greta rose, bathed a little to refresh her tired body and lit a short candle which she kept on her small stand. She read by this light until

she heard the family coming up to bed. Then she blew out her candle and crept into her bed with her book, happier than she had been for many a long day. And a little prayer in English came to her that night.

"Was it being frightened by a storm in the woods that made me sick that time?" she asked her mother the next day, interested to see Mrs. Klein look up quickly, as if a little startled.

"Nein, Nein!" she exclaimed, but she told Greta to stop thinking about that time. She might get sick again. Greta said nothing more, but she noticed that her mother looked at her from time to time with a frown. There was *something* about that time and about those earlier years of Greta's that she must know, Greta thought, and she *would* know! Another thing. She would not stay in the same room with the man that she had always thought her father when he was in those ugly moods. No more waiting on him and dodging his ready hand. Still, if she stayed in his house,—and it had belonged to his father and grandfather,—how could she manage it? It did look like a hopeless future until she could in some way free herself of the family life, and work away from home. Her mind was busy as she worked.

Life went on as usual, except that Jacob Klein was drinking less and was working on his little farm, all that was left of his larger inheritance. They sold eggs and some vegetables from the garden and even the milk from the one cow to the few families in the cottages. But when Greta was out in the boat, fishing occasionally, she noticed that there was more building in different places around the lake. That any of those cottages would mean anything to her, she had no idea other than that they might make more work for her to do. There were two more along the lake where she docked her rowboat to collect and deliver the clothes. The Wizard shack she could see from the lake; but that of the girls she had not noticed at all, for her fishing ground was not in that direction as a rule and a turn in the shore concealed with the foliage of many trees the little bay on which the new cottage stood.

The fifteenth of June came. Greta had kept her promise firm in regard to that date. She was doing the larger part of the work as she had since she was at all able to do it. It would do no harm to run away from it all for one day. She was sorry for her mother, but it was becoming a question in her mind whether a real mother could put such heavy work on a young girl that was her own child. If her leaving for a day made trouble, she would walk to the village and ask for work. That was settled.

As she was supposed to get up earlier than the rest, it made little difference whether the attic boards creaked under her light footsteps or not.

She went quietly down the stairs and heated coffee for her breakfast. The feeding she did first, though she did not let the dogs out to follow her. They would go with Jacob Klein, who had said that he was going to the village. She hesitated about milking the cow, but finally did so, for fear that the family would sleep too late or it would not be done at all.

Then away she sped, fleet-footed, feeling that if anyone called her back it would be a calamity that she could not bear. Her book was under her arm. The sagging pockets of her old black sweater carried bread and cheese. But she did not take her usual dive and swim. It was too near home. Someone might waken and come to find her. On and on she went, into a part of the woods that she scarcely ever had visited. Sometimes she went down to the shore, but not till she was far enough away to prevent her being seen from the shore near home. Squirrels scolded a little. Nesting birds fluttered past, or sang. She found the nest of a wood thrush, with its usual bit of cloth interwoven. It was in plain sight, in the crotch of a tree, with the mother bird upon it. Her mate sat on the branch of a neighboring tree and sang his "Come to me," with variations. Over the lake a great bald eagle flew with a fish. Swallows skimmed the water. Greta felt as free as the birds, and since that blow of Jacob Klein's she had no sense of neglected duty.

Rounding the curve of the east shore, she caught her first glimpse of the cottage built for the S. P.'s. At first she stepped back behind the trees and bushes for fear of being seen. Then she saw that there was no one about. Gradually she drew nearer. She climbed the gentle ascent, cautiously approached, looked into the windows and went all around the house. What a pretty, new cottage it was, with its brown and yellowish trimmings, its golden-brown floor inside and neat, light cots. No one was living there yet, that was certain, for there was nothing on the table and the cots were bare. How clean it all was!

Greta sat down on the front step to rest and look about, but she had been there only a few minutes when she heard voices. Some one was coming! She flew across the cleared space, where a few evidences of sawdust and chips remained. To conceal herself from view was easy enough in the clump of trees and young growths near at hand. Girls, laughing and talking! And a few boys with them!

"Go easy on that suitcase, Billy. That's got our ducky breakfast set in it. Dishes, Billy, the sweetest set, yellow and white, with daisies. That's our company set. Our common dishes are in those other baskets. Here, Jimmy, let me help you with that one."

She was pretty, that first one with the sparkling brown eyes. Then here came an older girl, tall, fair and rather pale. “Don’t worry about me, Fran,” she was saying to a girl as tall behind her, “I’m only tired with too much going on. I’m perfectly able to carry these blankets.”

Greta counted. There were eight girls, and three boys, all with blankets across their shoulders and their hands full of packages or baskets or pails or something in the housekeeping line. It was interesting. She would stay and watch them a little while. Somewhere she had learned that it was not nice to be curious. That might be one of those vivid dreams or memories that came to her now, by night or day. Nevertheless, she could do no harm, and oh, how full of fun those girls were. They were like the girls in the book. They were like,—girls that she had either dreamed of or known.

All of them made several trips back and forth. They had wagons or a truck in the woods, she supposed. She had noticed the lane, but had never been to its other end. The younger two boys marched gaily with a broom and a new mop over their shoulders, a dish pan inverted over each head, and more blankets under each arm. The one called Billy tried a dance step, but a blanket became unrolled and all but tripped him.

“Don’t spoil the new mop, Billy!”

“That’s all the sympathy I get, is it Nan?”

“I was just trying to be clever, Billy. I’ll trust you with my camp trousseau in my suitcase the next trip.”

More boxes and bundles were carried inside. Then came the supplies. Greta had never seen so much to eat together as this except in stores, and, to be sure, growing in fields and orchards. But these baskets bore selected foods for home use, or camp use. There were two large sacks of flour and large boxes containing cans of all sorts. But Greta tired of looking at what they were bringing. It was far more interesting to see the girls themselves and to listen to the gay chatter.

“Please put those cans of coal-oil out on the kitchenette stoop, Billy. Mother was so afraid that we’d set them near the flour or some of the other food. Everything else goes in the pantry, everything else to eat, I mean. We girls will arrange them. Why, yes, if you have to take the baskets and boxes back, put the stuff anywhere. Leave us the box with the potatoes, though. Oh, yes, just dump those things into the dishpan or the washbasin or anything. And thanks so much. You three get our first invitation to a meal from our new dishes. I don’t know whether this is camping or going to

housekeeping, but we'll have a mixture of both, it is likely. Are you all set at your camp?"

"Yes. We can use a few more things, but we can bring back what we want after we take the truck back to town and come back in our Ford. Now shan't we bring up your machine? It's going to be hard to get it through till we get the lane widened a little more. You can make it, of course, but we'll be over as soon as possible to cut away some of the stuff. The carpenters zigzagged through and nearly spoiled some of the young trees."

"All right, boys. Bring our limousine into its shed, if you please. Did you say that we could get our supplies nearer the camp than at home? Oh, yes. I remember that village. We've driven through it."

From her fancied security behind some spruces, Greta looked and wished that she were a part of the pleasure she saw. Then Jean, whisking back from the truck and machines by a shorter cut, almost ran into Greta, who rose, wide-eyed and startled.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jean. "Excuse me! I didn't know any one was here. Did you want to see us?"

"I—I happened to come around the lake and I saw your cottage. I didn't know any one was building here. Then,—then you all came—and you were having such a good time—and I just, waited to go."

"Do you live near here?"

"Not very near. It must be two miles around the shore."

"This bay runs in so that it isn't any wonder you've not seen the house. Come to see us some time. We're just getting settled now and we're going to be here most of the summer."

Just then Grace French from the house called, "Jean, Jean!"

"I have to run," said Jean, smiling at Greta. "Goodbye."

Greta at once went farther back among the trees, making a wide circle to avoid the truck and machines; but she found a quiet, grassy spot in the woods at no great distance from the lane and there she sat down to read her book, eat her bread and cheese and listen sometimes to distant laughter.

CHAPTER XIV

LITTLE ADVENTURES OF CAMP LIFE

"Yes, dear Mother, you were right when you supposed that we are having a good time. It is not only good, but gorgeous." So Jean Gordon's letter began.

"The committee on supplies and communications, as we call Billy and Jimmy, whom Billy so adores, brought me your note and will take this, to mail it Saturday. I'm glad that you and Dad are to have that fine trip. No, I'm not disappointed not to go along and thanks for the invitation, if I would really prefer to go. I couldn't leave the girls and I'll probably get East some day.

"Billy told me a lot of things about the boys' camp, and said that Jimmy put in a lot of money that he has made along, at the office, reporting, doing some press work, whatever that is, and everything. His father pays him. But the boys are only borrowing of him and I think that they are having as great a time as we are. They are in the lake about half the time. At least we always see them when we go out. Billy offered to take me in his canoe, but Grace won't let me go until I learn to swim better, for canoes are 'not so safe,' she says. I can float, though, and swim a little. I'm so mad at myself to think that I never wanted to swim,—and all my life near the lakes! Disgusting! Fran and Bess are like fish in the water, and even Molly can do better than I can. Just wait, though, till this summer is over. Tell my father, by the way, that we all appreciate this little bay that the fathers chose for us. We can wade out and swim in the shallower water without worrying Grace, and the boys have rigged up a diving place, whatever you call it, just like what they have.

"Grace is catching up in sleep and feels fine. She makes us all take an early dip and have setting up exercises, for every camp that amounts to anything does that, she says. Then we can plan our day ourselves, and you ought to see the fish we catch *and cook*, if you please. It was so cold that we made a big fire in the range yesterday and used a little of that coal, too, though mostly we burn wood, and we baked biscuit that turned out all right and had maple molasses with them. Yes, the coal-oil stove works all right and we are careful. Grace usually oversees our efforts to cook. We have had fires outdoors, too, right on what beach we have, and we do everything that careful woodsmen—and woodswomen—do. So don't have a worry while you are gone. We lock up every night and everything.

"You ought to see our pantry! The cans look fine, all in a row on one shelf. The sack of flour stands in a box with white paper in it to catch what we spill. We tacked up a little curtain of what was left of our peacock stuff over the shelf that has our precious dishes. But we have been tearing around outdoors so much that we haven't used them but once. Then we're still painting our chairs off and on. The yellow paint we got turned out all right. Molly and Phoebe are chief artists, but I always knew that I was artistic even if I couldn't draw, you know! House-painting and furniture will be my specialty, and we think it safer to put on the bright pictures by—let's see, decalcomania, they call it, I think. Some kind of mania, anyhow, I think. But Phoebe has drawn a line that we make that golden-brown, which gives a nice contrast with the yellow, after we get that on. The only trouble is that we need the chairs to use, so progress is slow, doing about two at a time.

"Mr. Lockhart sent the most wonderful binoculars out for Fran. She was so surprised and pleased! Some of us get out pretty early to see what is singing over our heads and we have enough glasses now to get our identifications of even the little birds pretty sure. We are glad that we brought all our nature books along. And we have found a girl who lives near the lake and knows where different birds nest. She took me to see a wood thrush's nest, such a pretty, or odd one, only yesterday. I'll have to tell you about her. She's a sort of mystery.

"I nearly ran into her the day we brought everything out and went to housekeeping. Oh, it was the greatest fun, Mother, to move into our own playhouse, so to speak! But you have listened to me rave about that before.

"I was scampering through the trees with something from the truck when lo and behold, here, in the midst of some spruces, was this girl. Just imagine a thin face with big brown eyes and a scared look when she saw me, an old fuzzy black sweater that was whole but looked awful, a patched old purple skirt, faded, and dipping up here and down there, no stockings at all and some old shoes that were tied on. I suppose she wore them to save her feet going through the woods. Her hair was short and just the curly kind that I've always wished mine was, but it was brushed straight back from her face, as if she'd tried to get the curl out.

"I asked her if she wanted to see us and she seemed to be more scared than ever and sort of apologized. She said that she just happened on the house and when we came we seemed to be having so much fun that she just waited a minute,—something like that. Grace called me and I didn't see her any more, though I told Grace and she said that we would lock up well. Nobody knew who might be around.

“Next thing, Fran made a remark that she has hated herself for ever since. We were exploring real early one morning, led on by a bird we couldn’t locate, and we came to the prettiest spot where there is a big willow tree, the kind that you want right away to climb into. Well, we climbed, and there, high up, the funniest bathing suit you ever saw was hanging. It looked like a sack and was made of pieces of different colored cloth.

“ ‘Well, look at this!’ Fran exclaimed. ‘Here’s the last word in bathing suits. It reminds me of Joseph’s coat of many colors; and notice the combination, will you? Whoever put such a thing as that together? It’s all wet, so somebody has actually worn it!’

“Fran had no idea that anybody would hear her, for we had been all over the place, we thought, but she had hardly gotten the words out of her mouth when we saw a girl hurrying away from a clump of bushes. It was the same girl that I’d seen near our camp. She turned and looked back, and I saw that she was crying a little, but she whisked her head around and got some trees between us in a jiffy. ‘Oh!’ said Fran, ‘wasn’t that awful? Was that the girl you saw, Jean? And I’ve broken her heart by laughing at her bathing suit. I never thought!’

“None of us said a word to make Fran feel any worse about it, but I got to thinking. Of course she had to have something to wear in the lake, and that was all she could put together. They must be awfully poor or something. But she couldn’t have been really mad about it, for she came to camp with a basket of vegetables from their garden, she said, and asked if we wanted to buy any. Fran was there and saw her. She rushed out and said at once that we’d take all she would let us have. Fran was real cordial; and sober as she is, I saw a funny twinkle come into the girl’s eyes when she looked at Fran, who was digging into her big purse. She thanked us very politely and went away at once. She had on a real respectable gingham dress this time, though it was a funny plaid and made in a terribly old-fashioned way.

“I asked her if her folks had any eggs to sell and she said they did sometimes. So she brought us eggs and the next time we had an early bird hunt we saw her in the woods and I went with her to see the wood thrush’s nest. Her name is Greta Klein. Nan is going to ask Jimmy if he ever heard of the Kleins. The name is German, you see, but her English is as good as ours, —oh, I hear you laugh at that. It isn’t saying very much for it, I know. Still, there is a difference when you really can talk correctly, even if you do not always do it.

"We are taking turns at the cooking, as we said we should. So far we have not let Grace do one thing except superintend. The cooks submit the menus to her to see if they have a 'balanced meal.' But sometimes if we have a long hike and everybody is tired, we just all pitch in and get up what there is double quick. It is so beautiful here, Mother, and we all love it!"

With a little more Jean ended the long letter to her mother. Greta could have verified what was said about her. She had, indeed, been hurt at Fran's remark, though the tears had been from a rare breakdown and discouragement, when she had found a place in the bushes to cry it out after her morning swim. A great scolding she had had after the day in the woods. Her mother had asked her if she had gone crazy and Greta had replied that she would have to have a rest once in a while if she had so much to do. "Either that, Mother, or I shall go away to work," she had said firmly.

Mrs. Klein grew very angry and kept after her constantly with more to do than ever, telling her that she would teach her if she could go off for a whole day with washings to do and cooking and feeding and children under foot. She threatened to beat Greta, but Greta said, "Why can't you work more with me and not put most of the hard work on me? I'll work gladly to help earn some money for us; but if Jacob Klein amounted to anything as a farmer we wouldn't be so poor."

This enraged Mrs. Klein more than ever. She advanced threateningly toward the girl, till Greta ran out of the house and her mother called to her to come back and iron the clothes for Mrs. Smith. Greta returned, warily, but Mrs. Klein told her to sprinkle the clothes and then mix the bread while she went to see where the children were.

Such was the state of things, with Greta thinking more and more that there was something strange about her relations with the man and woman who had called themselves her parents. Flashes of memory returned, or what she hoped was memory, though dim. She had always recalled some clothing that she had thought was hers as she came back to life after the fever, but she saw the dress being made over for the little boy, then in dresses. How could she ever find out about anything?

The presence of the girls at their camp was one source of pleasure, if somewhat tantalizing. She told her mother about a camp at that end of the lake and asked if she might not sell their eggs and vegetables to them. To this Mrs. Klein agreed, more readily than ever after the sale to Fran and the good price that she paid. Long evenings in the garden Greta spent, plying a busy hoe against the weeds. That the campers were girls she did not

mention, but their bright faces were often before her. They led a different life, a life that had something ahead of it, for she saw them with their books and field glasses, or taking their early dip and rowing about the lake. Sometimes she swam nearly to the little bay when she thought that she had time.

Then she met them on the unfortunate occasion of Fran's remark and again when she fell in with Jean on a very early stroll toward their camp. By that time Jean had heard from Jimmy that the Klein house was across the lake from the Wizard's shack and that Jacob Klein was a lazy ne'er-do-well, who drank and abused his family. "Poor Greta!" thought Jean.

It happened next that Jean, Molly and Nan took a longer hike than they had intended and found themselves coming out of the woods upon a narrow road that led to the lake, as they could see. At a little distance they saw a house and decided to stop and ask for a drink of water.

CHAPTER XV

MOLLY'S ADVENTURE

It was late in the afternoon. As it happened, Greta had taken the children with her to deliver clothes. They could at least sit in the boat to watch one basket while she delivered the other. In consequence, no dingy children were at the Klein gate when Jean and the other two girls entered. Even the dogs were away with their master, who was as a rule more kind to them than to his children.

The gate of a rickety fence stood open. A few hens ran about the yard with some long-legged young chickens. The girls entered the yard, hesitating a little as they walked up to the door, which stood open revealing anything but a well-kept room inside. They rapped, intending to ask if they might find the well, for Jean had her collapsible cup with her. There was no response.

"Out in the field, I suppose," said Molly. "Let's see if we can find the well. It can't do any harm, and I'm perishing for a drink. That woods was fearfully hot, I thought."

Turning from the door, the girls started around the house. There were two old pumps, and while the girls were guessing which was the well and which was the cistern, they heard the sound of crying, a faint moaning, further back in the yard, it seemed. Toward the left there stood an old barn and sheds, with the sty, odorous and muddy. But toward the right there was a tangle of bushes and fruit trees, to all appearances from where they stood.

They listened, Molly with her fingers to her lips. "Perhaps we'd better go on," whispered Nan.

"No," returned Molly, "some one might be hurt. Wait. I'll see."

Molly tiptoed in the direction of the sound, but as she went loud sobbing broke out. Jean and Nan were for getting away. That did not sound like any one who was injured. Perhaps they would intrude. But Molly was obviously seeing something or some one. She was looking soberly ahead, then put her head on one side to listen. Molly was as careful as they would be not to be intrusive. They would leave it to her.

"Sakes, Jean, listen!" whispered Nan. "It's German."

"*Meine Greta, meine Greta, meine Greta!*" they heard repeated.

"Why, this must be where Greta lives," said Jean. "What's *happened* to her?" Jean started toward Molly, but Molly, her face alert, was listening and waved Jean back. They heard a sobbing outburst of German words that were unintelligible to them.

"Molly knows German," Nan reminded Jean, and Jean nodded assent. Both girls were puzzled and uneasy. There must be some reason why Molly was listening where anybody would think she had no right to be. There was a pause and then another outburst of speech, as if the person, a woman, were talking to some one, even explaining. It was very curious. Then the first expression, "*Meine Greta, meine kleine Greta*," was moaned, with "*liebchen*" and a few other words that the girls knew.

"From the looks of Greta, I wouldn't say that she looked like anybody's *liebchen*," whispered Jean. "She looks more like some poor step-child to me."

But Molly was picking a silent way back to them. Her face was very sober now. She waved them toward the gate, her finger on her lips; and when she reached them she hurried them out.

"I've heard something dreadful, girls, and we must get out of sight as soon as possible, before that poor woman has any idea that there was any one there to hear her. Let's get right down to shore. Maybe some of the girls are out in the boat and will see us and come for us. I want to get away as quickly as I can. I'll tell you all about it as soon as I get over being shocked. Isn't Greta the name of that girl who brings us things once in a while?"

"Why, of course, Molly. You know that."

"Do I? I don't know what I do know. There she is now! And her boat is coming to this landing! So I suppose that is where the Kleins live."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that, Molly. Yes, it's just about the location, I suppose, that Jimmy said. You can see the peninsula from here, of course."

The girls had reached the tree-sheltered shore just as Greta sent her boat flying toward them. "Wait," said Molly, "I want to speak to her."

"You want to tell her what happened?"

"Yes, some of it."

The girls approached the rude dock. Greta smiled a real welcome, for to see the girls was worth a day's hard work. She lifted the children out and

told them to go on home; then Molly laid a hand on her arm. “We stopped to get a drink at a house up there. Is that where you live?”

“Yes. That is what is left of the Klein farm.”

“Well, we have just been there. We walked all the way back to the door, which was open, but no one answered our knock. I was terribly thirsty, so we went around the house and were just going to get a drink when we heard some one crying. I thought that somebody might be hurt, so I stepped back to see. It was a large, stoutly built woman, but she was not hurt, and I think you ought to know what she said. Could you meet us very early to-morrow morning? Jean said that you were out early sometimes.”

Greta was impressed with Molly’s manner.

“Yes,” she answered. “Where shall I meet you? Shall I come all the way?”

“If you can, and I will have breakfast for you, too.”

“Oh, how kind you are! But I can’t be dressed well enough. This is the best I have.”

“Some wouldn’t think that our middies and bloomers were much in the way of clothes,” laughed Jean. “Please come.”

Molly did not laugh, but she said, “I must talk to you, Greta, and if you can come to us it will be a favor, much easier than for us to come out here, or near by. How soon can you come?”

“The earlier the better for me. I have to get back to work before my mother gets around. I take an early swim and bath in the lake. Then I go back to do the feeding and milking, to get breakfast and start the washing when we have any.”

Molly seemed to know instinctively that Greta could not get permission to come. “While we talk, you can drink a cup of hot cocoa with us and eat a plate of bacon and eggs with toast. Then if you have to hurry back it is all right. Come about five o’clock. We are planning an early hike anyway. And it will be much better if your mother does not know that we were there. Need you notice her tears?”

“I’ve seen her that way before, though not very often, and I never speak of it. I did once,—and I—was sorry.”

“All right. We’ll be looking for you. Nobody but Jean and Nan will know why we want to see you specially.”

Greta promised to come at five o'clock and stay long enough for breakfast. The girls hurried away, though Greta offered to take them across in the boat. "Perhaps I will come by boat to-morrow morning," she said.

What could Molly have to tell her? Did she mean that her mother talked to her? No, for she said that it would be best for her mother not to know that they had been there. It was a mystery. But that it was important she was sure. Her imagination was busy, but she could not guess what it might be.

CHAPTER XVI

SANS PEUR

Almost before the birds Greta was up the next morning. She had not slept well, for the attic was hot. Not a breeze was stirring when she loosed the boat from its moorings and pushed out upon a lake that wore scarcely a ripple. “We are due for a big storm if this keeps up,” thought Greta. The air was oppressive and clouds were gathering. Even the effort of rowing brought the perspiration to Greta’s brow, still tender from its hurt. She lost no time, for there was a low rumble of distant thunder and she did not want to be caught out upon the water.

On the peninsula across from her the boys’ flag flew. Their cabin was partly concealed by the trees between it and the lake. No one there seemed to be stirring. Presently a breeze developed and Greta bent, indeed, to her oars. She must reach the little bay and the girls’ camp as soon as possible. But the clouds did not seem to be heavier.

“There she comes, Molly!”

Three sober girls watched Greta make her way around the curve in the lake shore and steadily row toward them, stopping for one little wave when she saw them.

“She is awfully strong, isn’t she—for all she looks so pale and worn when she comes?”

“All that hard work would give anybody muscles. Have you noticed her poor hands?”

“Yes, Jean; but they are not out of shape at least.”

“No, just rough and her finger-nails are all broken. I suppose the washing does it and I don’t know what else she does, but she happened to speak of doing that. She had a big bundle of clothes in the boat last evening. How are we going to manage this, Molly?”

“What do you mean, Jean?”

“Why, if you tell her before us, won’t she feel worse? Suppose Nan and I make some excuse and leave you with her?”

“Oh, no, Jean—please! I need support; and besides, she admires you most of all. I can tell. You just slip an arm around her if she needs one!”

“We’d better give her her breakfast first, for fear she’ll be too stirred up to eat,” Nan suggested.

“Good idea, Nan. Your head is always level.”

“Then if that’s so, I’d better see about the breakfast. You go down to meet her, Jean.”

Nan and Molly hurried in, while Jean went down to the little dock to welcome their guest.

“I was a little afraid you might not come, Greta, for it looks so much like a storm,” said Jean, while Greta was fastening her boat securely.

“I think that I would have come *in* a storm, if there had been no other way. But it is a good thing that I was to come early, I suppose.”

“Molly and Nan went in to hurry up the breakfast. We had the milk heated and the bacon cooked. There will be just us four to have breakfast together. Grace took the rest on a breakfast hike, but I’m afraid that they’re going to get caught in a storm if they don’t hurry back. We have two girls from our town visiting us and that is the reason for the trip. They are crazy to do everything and we are crazy to show them everything we do. Nobody slept much last night.”

“I’m afraid that you wanted to go with the other girls,” thoughtfully said Greta.

“Oh, no. Especially after Molly told us what she wants to tell you,—and we did not mention it to the rest. But we’ll forget that now and have a jolly good breakfast if we can. I’m not sure but ice-cold lemonade would be better than hot cocoa in this kind of weather,—funny to have a hot night on our lake.”

If the cocoa was hot, it was bracing to Greta. She sat at the yellow and brown and white table, on a yellow, brown and white chair and had her bacon and eggs served on the yellow dishes decorated with daisies. “We are sibyls in our club,” Molly explained, “and our colors are yellow and white, but we aren’t what the boys call ‘yellow,’ for our motto is ‘*sans peur*,’ that means ‘without fear,’ and we’ve already discovered that to have courage is one of the most necessary things anywhere. Mine was at a low ebb last night, I can tell you, but this morning I’m all braced up.”

Jean looked at Molly with amused affection. She understood how Molly dreaded to tell Greta what she must.

Greta was bright enough to have an inkling of what Molly meant. Her own courage was sinking, and had been all night. What had Molly heard? What new and dreadful thing might she have to meet at home? Jacob Klein had not come home the night before. Perhaps it was something about him.

But the breakfast was good and the girls were kind and interesting. She did not seem to feel awkward with managing to eat before them. Her mother had always made fun of her "fussy ways," as her German expressions meant. A good breeze was blowing through the big room and making them all more comfortable. After the meal the girls left the table as it was and took Greta outdoors to a nook among the trees where they had fixed a rope swing and some seats out of logs. On one of these they sat down, though Nan presently jumped up, saying that she'd better clear the table, for the whole lot of girls would be back soon, she thought. They all looked at the gathering clouds. The storm seemed to be a long time coming. Perhaps it would pass around them. In any event, Molly was thinking how she would tell Greta and Greta was more interested in what she was to hear than in the storm.

"Greta," began Molly, "does *Mrs. Klein* treat you kindly?"

Greta's dark eyes looked soberly into Molly's. "I'd rather not say," she replied. "Yes, I will, too. It is a chance to tell some one. My mother was good to me for a long time after I had a bad sickness, and forgot things, they said. Then she changed and although she would never let Jacob Klein abuse me, she can't care much for me or she would never put the heaviest work on me, even when she is well enough to help more. I want to go away from home to work, and I thought that perhaps you girls could help me find a way, to help some one with any kind of work; and then I could send the money home to my mother and the children. I heard her say when they were quarreling, after Jacob Klein threw me against the tubs and hurt my head, that he must leave me alone and that I was not his child."

All this came tumbling out rapidly, as if Greta had planned it, which was not the case. It was only that she was so full of her unhappiness and puzzles.

"Did you ever think that perhaps you were not her child either!"

Greta looked startled. Then she said, slowly, "I thought that she might have been married before and that my father might have had dark eyes like mine. All the rest have blue eyes and light hair, if you noticed, and the horse-doctor that came to look after me as well as the horse asked my mother where she found a little girl with brown eyes. He was joking, but my mother didn't like it and said that families were not always of one complexion, or something like that. She talks mostly German."

"I know," answered Molly, who had heard her. "I understand German, for we had a good woman that helped us for a long time when one of the children was little and Mother was not strong. She started me because she loved to talk her own language with some one, and I've kept it up. But you haven't a bit of a German accent and talk English as well as we do. How does it happen?"

"That is what I have been wondering about for a long time. After this sickness I had to be taught German, but could talk English. My mother said that I had been bewitched,—that is what it would mean in English. She taught me to read the German newspapers that Jacob Klein has,—I haven't called him Father since I found he wasn't my father. Then I found an old German Bible that I supposed was my great-grandmother's, from the date in it; but it was Jacob's grandmother's, of course. There is better German in that, and it has been a help,—to stand things, I mean." Greta's eyes filled with tears, but she dashed them away, saying, "I'm sorry to complain this way to you. Please do *not* tell any one."

"I can't promise that," smiled Molly, "but if you feel the same way after I tell you a few things,—all right. But don't you remember anything that happened before this time that you were sick?"

"I know that I have been at school somewhere, and that I have seen people like you somewhere and of course I am feeling pretty sure that there is something queer about all this. Why should I know these things if I had always been with these people? Yet it has been pretty well told me all about my mother's people and how my aunt Gretchen always thought so much of me before she died and how my grandmother said I would make a good little worker and would help my mother." Greta stopped with a whimsical smile. "I have, all right," she added, "but I have had a chance to talk English every summer with the people that come to the cottages at the other end of the lake, and this summer a lady gave me a lovely book, all about girls like you."

"Thank you for telling us about yourself, Greta. Now let me tell you what I heard this woman that you have been living with say."

" 'This woman that you have been living with'?" thought Greta. "What does this girl mean?"

"She did not say much, and in the simplest German, but she said enough to make me listen to the rest," continued Molly, going on to describe the scene, telling how the girls happened to stop at the place.

“Yes, that was Mother,” said Greta in reply to Molly’s question, after a detailed description of the woman whom she had seen.

“Well,” said Molly, “I saw a large stone by some bushes. There was a sort of tangle in that corner of the yard, near a pasture fence.” Greta nodded. She knew. “There was an old lilac bush and a syringa bush in my way, but I peeped around them to see who was crying and if anybody needed help. But here this woman was lying, almost on her face, her hands clutching the grass between some little bushes that were planted in a row, Greta. Then it was that I noticed the big stone in the corner and a row of small stones that started from it as if someone had been going to make a flower bed, you know. These all must be to mark the place, Greta.

“She was sort of moaning, in German, ‘my Greta, my Greta, my little Greta,’ and then she began to talk to her, just as I was going to slip away, not to intrude; and she wasn’t hurt, I could see. But she went on, ‘Your father never meant to kill you when he hit you that time, and I couldn’t see him hung, could I? So here you are without a stone with your name on it and not a prayer said over you when we hid you here!’ She burst out sobbing loudly then, but by that time I thought I ought to hear if she said anything more, and presently she was asking, ‘Wasn’t it better for no one to know, when the little girl came and could take your place, and her people were all dead in the storm?’ ”

Here Jean slipped an arm around Greta, who was leaning toward Molly, listening tensely. “Oh,—then the real Greta is buried there, and I am the little girl!”

“Yes,—the ‘*kleines Mädchen*.’ When I got home last night, Greta, I wrote down every German expression that I could remember, so I could swear to it if necessary. And I lay awake thinking it out nearly half the night. There wasn’t anything else, except that she kept sobbing and repeating the little expressions she had used, Greta’s name, and asking if she blamed her mother. Did you ever think that you might have been kidnapped?”

“Yes. I made a wonderful story about myself and then I saw how silly it was. I even belonged to the German or English nobility, though as I couldn’t speak good German the first wasn’t likely. But it must be true that my people are dead in a storm, for anything that my mother said in that way would have to be true. Oh, to think of it! I knew I was different and didn’t belong! I’d rather be all alone than to be the daughter of that man—and poor Mother! She isn’t very bright, girls, just stupid about some things, and loves that dreadful man! What can I do? Oh, thank you, Miss Molly, for caring to

tell me about it. It is a wonderful thing for me that you girls came here this summer!"

But Greta put her head in her hands, and Jean patted her shoulder. "We'll have to think it out," said Jean. "I told Molly that if it happened in an accident, maybe the poor woman wasn't so bad to want to save her husband. But what was worst was about you, especially since you looked unhappy and tired out. Oh, yes, Molly, you forgot to tell Greta one thing, how she said she wasn't making the girl that took the real Greta's place have a happy time and was making her work for Greta's little brother and sister. She has some crazy idea like that!"

"As long as that grave is there, it could be proved that I am not Greta, I suppose. At least, they'd have to explain it."

"But perhaps they could take,—take it all away, if they had any hint that you knew," said Molly.

"That is so. I will have to go back and wait. I always wondered why Mother had started a flower bed and those rose-bushes there, but I never dared ask. I have a memory of a storm in the woods, or it seemed like that."

As Greta spoke, a blinding flash of lightning was followed by a terrific crash of thunder. "My sakes!" exclaimed Jean. "Let's get inside. Oh, I hope that the girls are almost back!"

The three of them had been too much interested in the story which Molly was relating to notice how black the sky had become. Nan rushed to the door to call them, but saw that it was unnecessary. The bolt of lightning so near had been sufficient warning. Greta went to work with them to close all the windows and door and drag the cots in from the sleeping porch. The room presented a disheveled appearance by the time they were through, but they were concerned only with the storm. Jean jumped with the next crash, but Greta, used to taking care of frightened little children in storms, smiled at her and took her hand, "What did you say your motto is?" she asked.

"Thanks, Greta. I'll remember, but I'm terribly uneasy about the girls. If they had taken the boat, they could get away from the trees."

"But look at the lake, Miss Jean."

"Just Jean and Molly and Nan, Greta," said Jean, as she looked out at an angry lake, whipped by a wind. The trees were bending now before a great wind. Whirls of leaves and broken branches began to fly. Then Nan cried, "Here they come," and ran to open the door for the fleeing girls, who ran through a blinding downpour and against a strong wind.

“It’s a regular whirlwind, and I hear a terrible roaring, girls,” said Grace, out of breath. “Is everything closed tight?”

Nan, Jean and Molly were using their combined strength to shut the door after the dripping girls had come in, but Greta answered. “We shut up everything, Miss French.”

There was nothing to do but to wait results. By this time they all knew that a storm of more than usual intensity was upon them. “ ‘*Sans peur*,’ girls,” Grace reminded them, her chin raised and her eyes looking out upon the whirling scene outside. “I’m glad that we reached shelter and are together.”

“I’m scared,” said Phoebe, “and I don’t care who knows it!” She was standing by Leigh Dudley, who had drawn a chair into the middle of the room and had sunk into it as quite exhausted after their mad rush through the woods. Leigh reached up with a smile and drew Phoebe down into her lap. “Sit down Phoebe-bird. It doesn’t do any good to be scared, but I’m not feeling any too safe myself.”

The two girls cuddled together and shut their eyes, but Jean and Greta stood together, looking out, and Greta whispered, “The good God can save us if it is best.” Not in vain had Greta read that German Bible.

Crash went a tree, just hitting the sleeping porch, and the little house shook. But the worst of the storm had passed them by in a few minutes from the time they heard the roaring sound, so rapidly was the work of destruction done. It was wind rather than lightning which had been the greatest menace. Pouring rain continued for some time,—and then the sun came out!

“Now is the time to be thankful, girls,” said Grace, “but I hope that the boys are all right. If I’m not mistaken, some cyclone went by us and we’ll hear of damage done by it.”

Uneasily, the girls went about opening windows, looking out to see what damage had been done to the sleeping porch, or going out into their cleared dooryard to see if their prettiest trees had suffered. Branches lay on the ground, whipped from the trees. It was a small elm that had hit the porch. “Girls, if that tree hadn’t been actually *lifted* by the wind, I don’t believe it could have reached us,” said Jean. “My father said that they particularly tried to see that no tree could hit us if a storm felled it, no big one, I mean. We have shade enough as it is.”

The girls stood looking about. “I’m glad that the boys built their shack in a pretty well cleared place, too,” said Nan, who could scarcely help

worrying about Jimmy. Greta was thinking of home and the children. They were often rude to her, in the atmosphere of scolding and criticism which made Greta's life wretched. But they also depended upon her for a great deal and occasionally, when away from their mother's disapproval, showed her a little affection, especially the youngest child.

Still excited by the character of the storm, the girls ran around in the wet woods near by. They found the tree which had been struck by lightning before Nan, Jean and Greta had gone into the house and they were startled to find how near it had been. But when they looked across the lake, beyond the camp's small bay and where the woods stretched toward Greta's home, they saw the most damage. Trees lay prostrate near the shore. Branches and drift tossed upon the still active waves. "I must hurry home at once," said Greta. "The storm has gone that way."

"I'll go with you," declared Jean, thinking of the motto, for the thought of going frightened her and she would have preferred to know what had happened to Jimmy Standish, her friend, Billy Baxter and the rest of the boys. But she and Molly and Nan had gotten Greta into coming for breakfast. If the family were unharmed by the storm and Greta had a scolding or worse, she would stand by her.

"I'll go, too," said Molly; but Grace heard them.

"Wait, girls," said Grace. "I think that I hear the boys calling."

The girls listened.

"Wah-hoo-oo-oo-oo-oo!" came the long-drawn call.

"Oo-ey, oo-ey, oo-ey," answered Grace, all smiles, for that was Jimmy.

In a few minutes several boys came crashing through the bushes and brush, not caring how the wet drops sprinkled them right and left. "Everybody all right?" asked Jimmy, who was in the lead, Billy Baxter right behind him. His quick eyes took in Grace and Nan first and traveled over the rest with some relief.

"Yes," answered Grace. "No one was out in the storm and the little cabin stood; but some of us got inside just in time. I should have had more sense than to go off for a hike and breakfast when it felt like a storm, even if we did not notice any signs when we left so early. I've been wondering about you."

"All of us have," Jean added, "and Greta is worrying about her folks across the lake. This is Greta Klein. Greta, this is Nan's brother, Jimmy. He's

in charge at the boys' camp, just as Grace French is here."

"I was certainly thankful to hear you call, Jimmy," said Grace, while Greta and Jimmy acknowledged the introduction after a fashion, for matters were on an informal footing. Jean had merely announced facts.

"We would have been around when it first began to look like a bad storm, but we were off, too, out of sight, on the other shore of the peninsula to begin with, then 'way around in the woods. Like you, we started early and there is a little fisherman's shack there. We made it to our camp, though, but we had to stay till she blew over then. As soon as we could, we ran out where we could see your roof and it was still on. So we hoped that you were all right. Gee-whilikins, didn't it get dark?"

"Jimmy brought 'first aid' and everything," said Dan Pierce. "Would Greta like to have us go around with her?"

"That is a fine idea, Dan," said Grace, and Billy wished that he had thought of it. "I thought of going around with Greta, as soon as we knew about your camp. I was sure that you would get some sort of a message through pretty soon, unless you were all blown away. Suppose you three boys come with Greta and me, and maybe Molly, and Jean. They spoke of going. Do you think that you could stand it, girls, if anything has happened there?" This question was spoken in a lower tone, for the benefit of Jean and Molly only.

" '*Sans peur*,' Grace," said Jean stoutly. "Get Molly to tell you all about everything while we go."

"Couldn't we go in the boats now?" asked Molly, but caught herself short. "Oh, girls, we never thought to look and see if the boats are there yet!"

They were not, as the assembled company soon found out when they ran around to the lake side of the cottage. There was no sign either of Greta's boat or theirs. "Our canoes were high and dry and under shelter," said Jimmy, "but the rowboats and the little motor are goners as far as we know."

"Some of them may turn up," hopefully inserted Billy. "Let's go, Jimmy."

"All right, kid, when the girls are ready. By the way, Grace, tell them all to look out for trees or branches that might be ready to fall. We'll have to go on the edge of the woods and through it in some places, isn't that so, Greta?"

"Yes, sir."

Senior Jimmy smiled at the "sir," then happened to think. Yes, he was out of school, and he'd be in the office with his father till he earned enough money, in a year or so, to start to college. Say, he was grown up, after all.

"Greta," asked Molly, soon after they started through the woods, "how old were you when you were 'sick'?"

"It was four years ago, and Mother says that I am sixteen."

"You don't look any older than I do, and I'm fifteen. Well, yes, you do look older in one way, but then you've done so much hard work, I guess."

The going was difficult. They scarcely stopped to examine the curious freaks of the storm in the woods. Afterward they learned that there was a comparatively small area damaged by the "twister," though the storm was general. Jimmy said that he thought the twister must have stooped and risen again, in an erratic fashion, to fell some trees, take off the tops of others and cut almost a path before it in places.

It was some time before they came into sight of the Klein house. There it stood, as ramshackle as ever and with the additional loss of the roof over Greta's attic. As they reached the road which ran between the woods and the place, Greta ran, the rest following as rapidly as they could.

The yard was strewn with rubbish and a few excited chickens ran about as Greta appeared; but she dashed into the house, calling to see where her mother and the children were. There was no response. Greta looked anxious, as she came from the rear of the house to say that no one was downstairs.

Jimmy insisted on accompanying Greta upstairs to see if they could be there, hurt, perhaps, when the roof went off. They found the attic pretty well demolished and the ceiling had fallen in the bedroom below; but there were no signs of any one having been there when it happened. "We'll look to see if the horse and the old wagon are here," said Greta, running down the stairs and outdoors. "Maybe they started away before the storm began. Mother was very anxious last night and seemed to think that—her husband—was in trouble."

There lay the explanation of the absence. Neither horse nor wagon were to be found. The dogs were gone. The lone cow in the pasture was unhurt. "She probably wakened up early," said Greta, "and just went to the village to see what had become of him. Thank you all for coming with me. I'll just wait here and straighten up the best I can till they come. It was a good thing they went, unless they might have gotten caught in the storm."

“I don’t think we should leave you here alone, Greta, to find out later what did happen. Billy and I can walk across to the village and find out if they are in any trouble. Where would she be likely to go?”

“There is one woman there that Mother stops to see when she goes to town. If there were any trouble about—him—she would ask Mrs.—well, let me write the name for you. It’s a long German name. I hate to have you take all that trouble, and the long walk after all your hiking, too. I just don’t know what *to* do this time.”

“We’re going, Greta. It is the only thing to do.”

“I’ll make some coffee for you first.”

“No, we had breakfast and we’ll get something in town. Honest, we’ll do it.”

The discussion came to an end suddenly, for the attention of everyone was diverted by the appearance of a light buggy and a toiling horse that was splashing through mud and water on the dirt road. The man who was driving was leaning out to look at the damage of the storm and viewing with surprise the number of people in the front yard. “Hello,” he called, “is Greta Klein there?”

Greta came running forward to meet the man who drove up, turned his wheel and clambered heavily out of the buggy. Jean happened to stand nearest and heard the most of the low conversation that took place, though she stepped back a little:

“I’m sorry to tell you, Greta, that your pa was took sudden last night and your ma was sent fur. She got up an’ took the little ones an’ why she didn’t wake you up I don’t know. Mebbe she isn’t quite right, fur she says that you ain’t her child an’ she’s terrible upset becuz he wuz gone when she got there. The children wuzn’t half dressed an’ she wants their clothes.”

“Does she want me to come?”

“No, but I would. That woman she stays with says to bring you.”

Greta turned to Jean. Her face was white, but her lips were set firmly. “I’ll have to go. Did you hear what happened to Jacob Klein, Jean?”

“Yes. Go and get ready and I’ll tell the rest.”

Grace, however, stepped up to the messenger and asked what his news was about Mrs. Klein. “We are friends of Greta’s from a couple of camps on

the lake. She took breakfast with us this morning and was kept by the storm."

"Oh, she did. Well, all I have to say is that it's a good thing she has friends. If you know anything about Klein you'll know that what happened was likely to happen to a man with his habits. There was a terrible quarrel where he was drinking and Klein was hurt. That's all I know except his wife's ravings. She's got the hysterics, I think."

"Is she likely to hurt Greta?"

"Oh, no. But she seems to have took a dislike to Greta, they say."

"I see." Grace went into the house to see if she could help Greta in any way. Greta was trying to find the children's clothes in the midst of the destruction wrought by the fallen ceiling, and hearing Grace's footsteps, she looked out of the door.

"Don't try to come up, Miss French. I'm finding their clothes and we can clean them up when I get into town."

"Well, I just want to tell you, Greta, to come right to us at the camp if you need a place to go. I don't quite understand what the man told me but it is clear that things are strange."

"Yes, they are. Ask Molly and Jean and Nan to tell you what they know. And after I help Mother through this, I'll be glad to come. I want to find a place to work and the girls thought they could help me."

"We all can, Greta. Don't worry."

It was not long before Greta had been driven away. She had locked the door and taken a bundle of clothing with her. Cheerful waves from the girls saw her off and Jean told her not to forget to come to the camp as soon as she could.

There was another long tramp back to camp, for there was no boat to take them over, but Grace invited the boys to stay for as big a meal as they could get up on short notice. "Open some cans of beans, Grace," suggested Jimmy, "and heat 'em up."

"Beans it shall be," laughed Grace, "but we'll have some other things, too. Think it up, girls, on the way."

Camp, however, afforded a pleasant surprise. There stood Mr. Standish and Mr. Lockhart in front of the house, drawn there by the sounds of arrival, and while Nan and Fran rushed "madly on," as Jean said, Mr. Standish came

from the house. “Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed in relief. “We just got here and while we saw that the cottage is all right, we were worried to death for fear something had happened to you. Your father and Mr. Lockhart were just starting to the boys’ camp to see if they were all right.”

“Here are Jimmy and Billy and Dan to tell you all about the time they had,” said Nan, hugging her mother. “We weren’t very scared, Mother, —‘*sans peur*,’ you know, but we have a lot to tell you about Greta Klein, a girl that lives near here.”

“Got a big description of the storm for the paper, Dad,” Jimmy informed Mr. Standish.

“All right. Write it up for me. I heard about the storm up here and we had the edge of it at home. Wires were down, so I thought we’d better drive up. Such roads. We came over the shaky bridge and may have to swim back.”

“In that case, I’ll stay with the girls,” suggested Mrs. Standish, laughing. “It was an awful ride, but I was thinking of you and the girls and could not get here fast enough, Jimmy. Where are the rest of the boys?”

“Back at camp, I suppose. We came up here to see if the girls had escaped.”

Further explanations followed. Mrs. Lockhart was found inside, where she had been setting forth fruit and baked things of all sorts, gathered up hastily when they decided to come. Part of it was saved for the Wizards who were at their camp, but the rest, with what the girls had, made a great dinner that was eaten merrily, though Mr. Standish offered a fervent grace of gratitude at its beginning.

Jean and Molly gave a partial account of the mystery about Greta. “She isn’t their child at all,” said Jean. “It’s dreadfully sad, of course, but not so bad for Greta as if they were her parents and had been good to her. Greta is a fine girl all right. She’s going to do everything she can for them, I know.”

“Perhaps Mother could train her to help us and she could go to school,” said Leigh. “I’m glad that my father and mother are away, not to be worried about the storm.”

“Me, too,” said Jean, “but the folks will be back next week, I think.”

“We shall take good word to every one at home,” said Mrs. Standish, “and if we can help that poor child get a start, we will. *There* is something for the S. P.’s to do.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERIES DISCLOSED

That Jean Gordon would have any personal interest in the mystery connected with Greta was the last thing she would have guessed until Greta came back two weeks later and appeared at the door of "Sans Souci," as the name over the cottage door now announced.

Gently Greta knocked. Hesitantly she came in, when several girls, who were doing the morning work after what was a late breakfast, called a happy, "Come in Greta! Glad you're back." Molly ran up and took from Greta's hand a suitbox which she was carrying, probably her substitute for a grip, Molly thought. Impulsive Jean did more, running up and throwing her arms around Greta. "Why, you look like a twin sister to the S. P.'s now," she exclaimed. "Who fixed your hair that pretty way? My, I wish I had curly hair!"

Greta laughed at this. "I fixed it, as much like yours as I could," she replied.

Grace, who had frowned at Jean's too frank comments, now joined in the general smiles and added her greeting. "Of course you have come to stay a while with us, Greta?"

"Just a few days, Miss French, if you haven't already found some place for me to start working."

"There will be no hurry, Greta. You need a little vacation. The boys say that some one else is moving into your house."

"And we have seen from the lake that the house is being repaired," Nan added.

It took some time for all the explanations. The Klein place had been taken over by the man who had bought the rest of the farm land originally attached to the few acres left. It was rented now. Mrs. Klein and the two children were starting for Idaho, where a sister lived. "I am free," said Greta, "though, it was a hard way for it to happen."

To Molly and Jean alone Greta told the details of her mother's revelations. "She was hysterical, as I was told, but by the time I got there she was glad to have me take care of the children. I think that she told them I

wasn't her child so that I would have no share in the little bit of property. She was that way. She did *not* realize that all I wanted was to get away!

"Of course, she did not say a word about how her Greta died and I didn't tell her what Molly heard. There was no use in making her feel worse than she did. She said that the night Greta died there was a dreadful lake storm and more than one boat went down on Lake Michigan. Jacob Klein felt so terrible about losing Greta that he walked and walked and walked through the woods and clear across to Lake Michigan before he knew it. I suppose he did, for it's only thirty miles or so, and he may have had the horse or a boat at that. He never told her the truth about anything. He wanted to get away, and he could have taken one of the boats and gone out by the river."

"I think that it's farther than you think, Greta," said Molly. "Were you ever there?"

"No. I wasn't anywhere! But however that was, he found me out in Lake Michigan, lashed to something and unconscious. Isn't it queer that none of my dreams or flashes of remembering had a boat in them? But I was afraid of the water at first, till Jacob Klein made me fish and told me to learn to swim. I found that I did already know how to swim, when I made up my mind to go into the water.

"We must have come part way through the woods, for I partly remember being made to walk and it seemed dark, though it must have been just before daylight, from what Mother said. I shall call her Mother till I get away from here, Jean.

"Then Jacob told his wife that they would take me in the place of Greta and that no one would know the difference, even if I did not look like Greta, for scarcely any one ever came by; and if I didn't go to school and they kept me at home to work, nobody would know.

"I think that Mother expected me to ask some questions there, for she hurried along and made up a lot of things that couldn't be so, only that I was sick and they had a doctor come from Milwaukee, instead of one from the town. Jacob must have been good and scared to do that; but even then I don't see how it was managed. If they had had any friends it couldn't have been. But it was no wonder people kept away!

"She said that I might be able to find out who my folks were, but she didn't know and Jacob tore up the paper that had the names of the boats lost in the storm. She made over my clothes for the children and I could wear Greta's then, but there were some coral beads that she found inside of my

clothes. The string must have broken, she said, but a few beads were down my neck, and there was a handkerchief in my coat pocket that she kept. She told me where to find it and I went right back home to get it. There is E. G. in indelible ink on the handkerchief. It is a man's handkerchief, though."

"G stands for Gordon," said Jean, who had been looking sober ever since the story of Greta's being found in Lake Michigan had been mentioned. "I'm going to see if my father can not find out something for you, Greta. It surely will not be hard to find out what boats went down in that storm. If you were lashed to something it would mean that you were in some wreck, you see."

"I wish you had lost a sister, Jean," smiled Greta, "but I do hope that there will be somebody. Still a whole family could be lost on a pleasure boat, you know, and if I can work and learn something along as I can, I shall be happy. Can't you learn without going to school, Molly?"

"Of course you can, Greta. Oh, we ought to give you a new name!"

"An S. P. name," laughed Jean. "Say, Greta, would you mind? Wouldn't it be fun to make up a name for you?"

"I'm sure I don't mind."

"Sally, Stella, Serena, Sophia, Sophy, Sophronia, Sara, Sidney," began Jean. "Oh, for a dictionary! We forgot to bring one out."

"Think up a good one, Jean," said Molly. "It's funny that she does look a little like you with her hair parted on the side, the way you have yours now."

"But I'll never have those natural curls, Molly. It isn't fair!"

"I'll give you my hair any time you want it," asserted Greta, and although she smiled as she said this, the girls knew that she would gladly exchange any of her advantages for Jean's.

"I have it," said Jean, suddenly, "Sybil, of course. She will be our S. P. sibyl. It was stupendous stupidity in me not to think of that at once." Nan and Phoebe, who had just joined the group of three, agreed at once with the fact of Jean's stupidity and Jean pretended to be deeply offended. But they were interested at once when Jean said that this sibyl would find her own fates instead of telling other people theirs.

The story of Greta's substitution for the real Greta was soon told to them all, disagreeable facts like those Molly had overheard all omitted. "He probably worked over me when he found me half drowned in Lake Michigan, girls," said Greta, anxious to do justice to poor Jacob Klein. "So I

do owe my life to him, and it was probably the liquor that made him—the way he was."

Greta was a happy girl to sleep on an extra cot kept for guests and to have her sharing in the gay doings taken as a matter of course. She so insisted upon doing more than her share of little tasks that Jean dubbed her the "Relief Corps" and told Grace that she might just as well let Greta help whoever had charge of meals for the week. But they began to call her Sybil until she said that she knew that magic had been worked and that she was a different person altogether. "Well," said Nan, "since you are really not Greta at all, Sybil is as much your name as that. You are probably a sort of nice pixy. And that makes me think, Jean, the boys are now calling us the Sibyl Pixies!"

With the rest Sybil went to a great picnic celebration gotten up by the boys, and Billy asked Jean what the girls had done to her to make her look so different.

"We have not done anything, Billy, except to make her have happy times. It's that she has some respectable clothes now and doesn't have to kill herself working. The village women must have shamed Mrs. Klein into getting her a decent dress for the funeral and the neat skirt and middy and sweater that she has for every day is as good as anything we are wearing out here. She told me that she borrowed the money for those, but that they didn't cost much in the little town."

"Poor kid! Isn't it awful what some are up against?"

"Yes; and I never thought about it before. I'm always going to think more about other girls and not take everything for granted after this. By the way, Billy, I've a lot to tell you some time."

"Why not now?"

"Because we have to play games and things. Wait till we get home. I have something on hand now that is very exciting. Could you keep a secret?" Jean's eyes were dancing and the dimple was in evidence.

"Try me."

"I haven't said a word to Molly or Nan or any of the girls, for fear Sybil might get a hint and then have her heart broken."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Right away, Billy, as soon as Sybil said that Jacob Klein took her out of Lake Michigan, I thought of that awful summer when my uncle's whole

family were in a dreadful storm and wreck. They were going to visit us and they never came at all. Don't you remember about it? Mr. Standish had a piece in his paper about it. Uncle Everett and Aunt Fanny were saved and the two little twin boys, but a girl about my age, mind you, Billy, and a baby, were just swallowed up some way, though they found the little baby. Wouldn't it be strange if Sybil were Uncle Everett's child? If she is, her name is Ann Gordon."

"Say! But things don't happen that way, Jean."

"*Why* don't they? She has to be somebody, doesn't she? And maybe I was sent up here to find my cousin. I wrote a letter to Daddy right away, all about it and when it happened, as nearly as Sybil could tell from what Mrs. Klein said. I'll let you know when I hear. Perhaps," Jean added impressively, "everybody will know very soon, if it turns out that way!"

But Jean herself was surprised when, before she thought her uncle could possibly have heard from her father, out came the Gordon car with a lady and gentleman whom she had never seen, her uncle and his wife. Sybil was not there, but Jean was, almost afraid that she had done something she should not when she finally realized who had come. "Oh, perhaps I've made a big mistake," she cried, "and then you will be so terribly disappointed!"

"Jean," said the quiet gentleman who was Uncle Everett, "for four years I have gone to every place where I heard of a child's having been found and adopted. You would be surprised to know that there have been several children saved from wrecks on the big lake. This is only another chance, though, more likely, for we were not so far from that shore, but there was no report of anything but wreckage found there. Your father telegraphed. Fanny wanted to come with me, to see if she knew the beads you mentioned, and here we are."

There was a little time of waiting before Sybil, the unknown, came in from the woods with the other girls, all laughing and happy. Never did she look more like Jean than when with eyes alight, she handed Jean a branch which held a little humming-bird's nest, like a lichen-covered cup. "It was broken off by the storm, Jean," she said; and then she saw that they had company. "Oh, excuse me," she said, stepping back.

But "Greta Klein" had not changed so much in four years that her own mother did not know her. "Ann,—Ann-girl," said Mrs. Everett Gordon, rising at once from her chair and walking across the big room as if there were no one there but herself and the girl who was staring at her with

startled eyes. “Oh, what have they done to my little girl all this while! Don’t you remember, Ann?”

One by one the girls began to slip out of the room. It was very confusing to the girl who had been Greta Klein as she thought. Even Jean deserted her, and here were a gentle lady and a kind man, who held her close by turns and scarcely said more than her new name, Ann, Ann and Ann again. Best of all she knew them for her own. “Oh, yes, it’s you, Mother! I know! Please take me home, Father!”

It was not necessary to look for the identifying beads and handkerchief. Ann had changed very much, her mother said, in height and expression, but the face could not be mistaken. Nothing but some disfigurement could have made her hard to recognize at once. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon could scarcely bear to have her out of their sight. Jean protested against her being taken away at once, but Ann drew Jean’s arm within her own as she said, “Suppose you had just found your father and mother again, Jean, wouldn’t you want to see home with your own eyes? I’ll never forget what you girls have done for me and my father says I may come back; but I have two little brothers, Jean. Think of it! I will write you all about it.”

With this Jean was satisfied. In a whirl of cheery goodbyes the Gordon car took them all back to town and the train. “My,” said Jean, “doesn’t it seem lonesome without Sybil?”

“Yes,” Grace answered, “yet she was here only two weeks. Do you realize, girls, that the time I have to spend here is getting short?”

The vacation was flying, as Grace said, but when Grace felt that she must go back, there were several tired mothers that thought a short vacation would do them considerable good. They were welcomed as chaperons by the S. P.’s and not allowed to cook or lift anything but an admonishing finger. By this time, moreover, the S. P.’s could “really cook,” as Jean put it. The advent of the mothers, one by one, prolonged the camping until within a few weeks before school began; then the beloved cottage was dismantled and the caravan of campers returned. The boys had gone first, but some of them came back to help the girls pack up.

Billy persuaded Jean to ride on the truck which Jimmy drove, with Grace beside him. He fixed a safe perch and sat beside her to hear the latest, he said.

“Well, Billy, the latest is that we are really the Social Progress Club, announcing our name to everybody, and that we think the Sibyl Pixies a

clever idea of you boys. The only thing secret will be our initiations; so that that mystery is over. But the great mystery of the S. P.'s was the one we didn't expect at all, the one that made Ann Gordon out of Greta Klein! Sure enough, I *did* go up there to find a cousin. Suppose we hadn't gone camping. Suppose we hadn't had a S. P. Club!"

"You would have gone East with your father and mother, and Leigh would have gone somewhere with hers, and Molly,—well, you would have been scattered."

"And oh, Billy, I've something to confess to you. I've just dreaded doing it, but I have to, for the sake of my little conscience!" Then Jean started in to tell Billy all the details about how she started the S. P.'s. Fortunately, Billy did not take it as seriously as she feared, though she did not spare herself. He doubled over with mirth when she told him how she saw the S. P. on a sign as they passed.

"You can tell the other boys if you want to. I deserve it. There was a real club, though, by the time they heard of it. But I made you think that *there had been one*. It's taken me a long time to bring myself to telling you, but I had to be straight with myself, anyway. Whatever happens, I'm going to stick to the straight up and down truth forever!"

Billy was a little embarrassed by Jean's earnestness, but as Molly had once said, he was both level-headed and fair.

"So far as I'm concerned, it's all right, Jean. You've fixed it up with your little conscience, so forget it. I don't blame you, for I suppose I was blowing about our pin that I was showing you, I had to show somebody or 'bust,' I reckon. Jimmy's taken a lot of that out of me this summer. Let's draw a long breath and start in, Wizards and S. P.'s, to raise money for the new library. You're great on thinking things up, Jean. Get up some good schemes and I'll back you."

"Thanks, Billy. It's a great relief that you don't think that so terrible. And speaking of schemes, Uncle Everett says that he will give a contribution to the S. P.'s for any cause they like. My cousin Ann writes to me, you know. They are not rich, but so happy. I'm to go there on my Christmas vacation and Ann is going to be an S. P. So are a lot of other girls if they will join us."

But Billy was laughing over a thought of his own. "Think of all the names we boys made up for you, and all the time you were trying to fit something to S. P. and rousing our curiosity!"

“I’m sorry about that, Billy, but the S. P. mysteries are all over, though it is almost a pity. And our greatest find was Greta-Sybil-Ann. I’m not so sorry, after all that I started the S. P.’s. Even if Ann might have found her parents in her own way, she would never have known the ‘why,’ if it hadn’t been for Molly, and we hurried up the happy ending, or beginning, just by being on hand. My! You never can tell what’s going to happen when you start *anything*!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

A table of contents was added to the book for reader's convenience.

[The end of *The S. P. Mystery* by Harriet Grove Pyne]