

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT FOAMING FALLS



LAURA LEE HOPE

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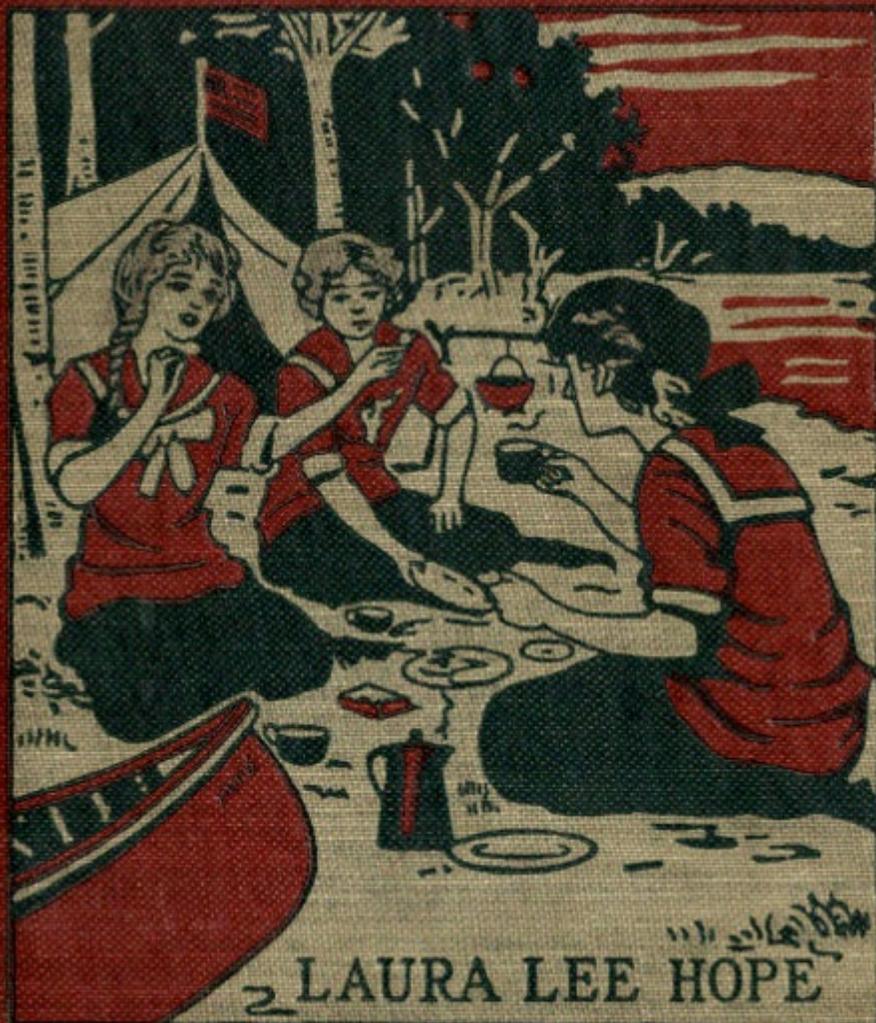
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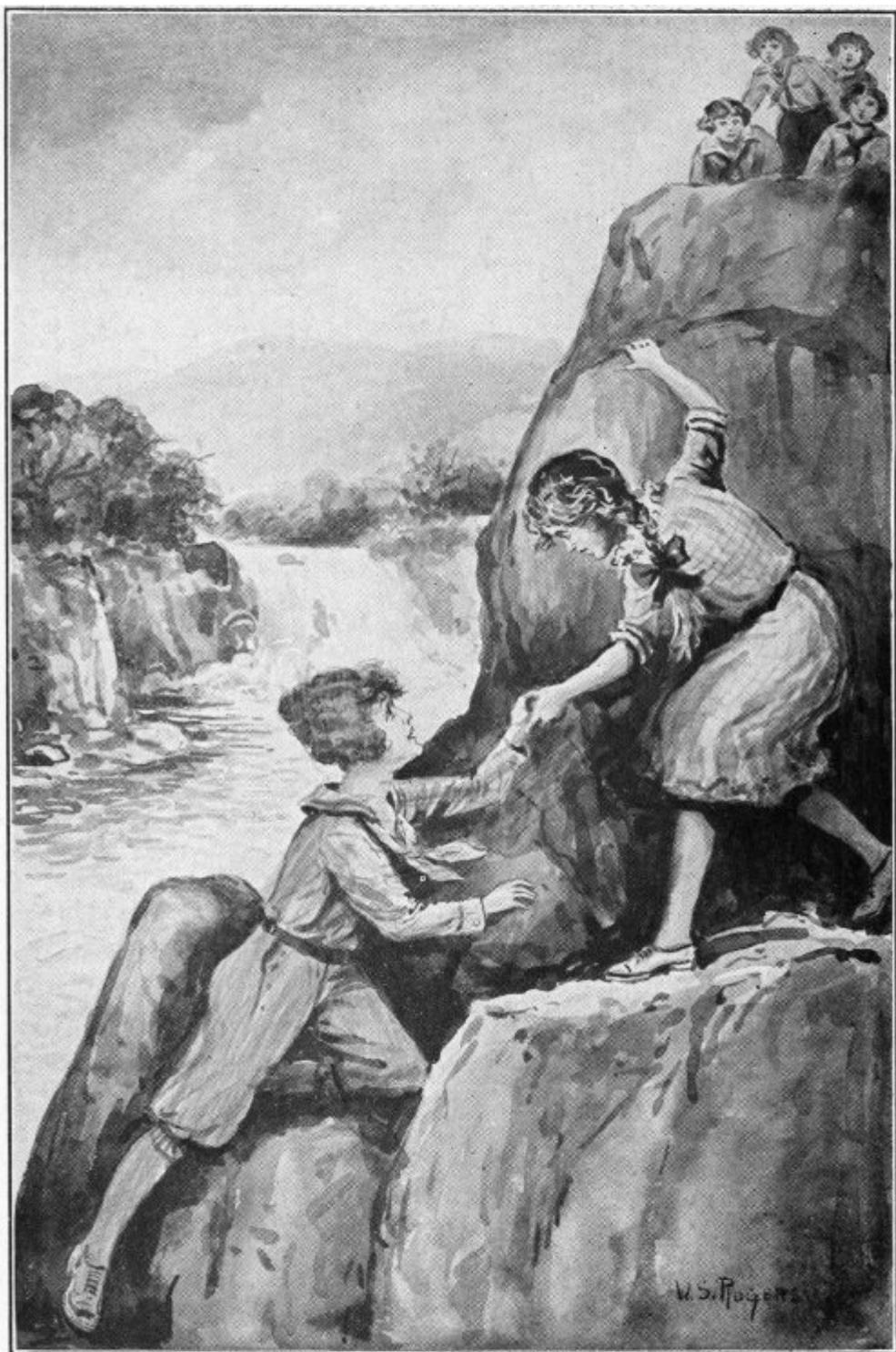
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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT FOAMING FALLS



LAURA LEE HOPE



**SHE REACHED OUT AND CAUGHT HOLD OF
GRACE *Frontispiece*—(Page [138](#))**

The Outdoor Girls at Foaming Falls

or

Robina of Red Kennels

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPALE,"

"THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON CAPE COD,"

"THE BLYTHE GIRLS: HELEN, MARGY, AND ROSE,"

"THE BOBBSEY TWINS,"

"BUNNY BROWN AND HIS SISTER SUE,"

"SIX LITTLE BUNKERS AT GRANDMA BELL'S,"

"MAKE BELIEVE STORIES," ETC.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT FOAMING FALLS

CHAPTER I MAD DOG

Mollie Billette was searching impatiently about the pretty grounds of her house. Her mouth was pouted most becomingly and her brow was wrinkled in a prodigious frown that boded no good for Irene Moore, the absent one.

“She is the most aggravating thing!” Mollie stamped her foot and was aggrieved that it made no sound on the soft turf. “Just as everything is ready she has to go and run away. She ought to be put out of the club—bad child!”

“Ah, now, you could never do a thing like that to me, darling,” said a laughing, coaxing voice from somewhere over Mollie’s head. “You’ve a good heart, despite the fact that it’s well hid!”

Mollie discovered that she was standing beneath one of

her mother's cherished apple trees. She looked up, still wearing her threatening frown, and found among the branches of the tree the smiling and wholly unrepentant face of Irene Moore.

"Come down out of that!" she commanded, her frown deepening. "What do you think you are—a tree toad?"

Irene made a mournful face.

"Am I as ugly as all that?" she complained. "I always knew my beauty was nothing to rave over, but a tree toad!"

"Don't be silly." Mollie was smiling in spite of herself, as one frequently did at Irene's nonsense. "Have you given a thought, young lady, to the fact that you are holding up a very important meeting of the Outdoor Girls?"

"Am I, now?" Irene's tone was deceitfully penitent. "Who would be thinkin' it? Out of the way, darlin', while I leap to yon mossy bank."

Although Mollie could see no mossy bank, she took the precaution to step out of the way, just the same. It was lucky she did, for the next moment Irene landed in a laughing heap on the ground exactly on the spot where Mollie had stood but a moment before.

The latter tried to frown and succeeded only in giggling joyously.

"Come along, you bad thing," she said, with an arm about the younger girl. "Some day you're going to break your

neck, climbing apple trees promiscuously like that.”

“Now, you needn’t go insulting me with your long words,” Irene retorted. “And I’ll have you know I’m not a bit promiscuous. I’m very careful about the apple trees I climb.”

“You’re hopeless,” declared Mollie, with a shake of her head. “I’m afraid, Irene Moore, that you will never see the serious side of life.”

“Well,” returned Irene, voicing a rare bit of philosophy, “what you can’t see never will hurt you. It’s a good thing to be blind to some things, Mollie Billette!”

They had passed around the Billettes’ vine-covered house and invaded the grounds to the rear of it. There was a garden here, bright with early flowers, and there were great old shade trees dotting the bright lawn with splashes of shadow.

As Mollie and Irene approached they could see the other three Outdoor Girls lazing in characteristic attitudes in the pretty rose arbor at the extreme end of the grounds.

Amy Blackford was seated cross-legged on the slatted floor of the arbor, making a sweet-scented wreath of spring flowers. Stella Sibley was busy with pencil and paper, sketching Grace Ford who lolled luxuriously in the old porch swing that stood just without the arbor beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree.

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Surely, the right kind of setting for a meeting of the Outdoor Girls of Deepdale!

Mollie and Irene paused at the entrance to the pretty spot, drinking in the picture. However, at sight of the two missing members the scene changed abruptly. It became imbued with activity.

Amy pushed her flower wreath to one side and scrambled to her feet, and even Grace Ford sat up in the swing, looking expectant.

“Hey! How do you expect me to make a good drawing when my model won’t sit still?” It was Stella Sibley who made the complaint. Grace grinned at her.

“Who said anything about a *good* drawing, old dear?” she drawled.

“Just for that I’m going to exhibit the sketch.” Stella pushed her pad over toward the newcomers. “Picture of Grace,” she announced with deep gravity. “Subtitle, Laziness Complete and Unashamed.”

The two girls chuckled as they bent over the sketch. The girl reclining in the swing was undoubtedly Grace, though the posture of repose and the blissful expression on the face were so cleverly accented as to make the whole thing irresistibly funny.

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The chuckle swelled into a gale of laughter and Grace jumped up and snatched the picture from them.

“Let me see that thing!” she cried. Then, gazing upon her own slightly cartooned though still graceful and pretty self as drawn by Stella’s skillful pencil, a reluctant smile forced itself

to her lips.

“What it takes to do that, you’ve got,” she acknowledged, handing the picture back to its author. “I declare, no one can even think around here, Stella Sibley, but what you have to put it down on paper!”

“If your thoughts are good ones,” said Mollie sententiously, “you have nothing to fear.” At this they all giggled again.

As a matter of fact, they were all immensely entertained by this talent of Stella’s.

Stella Sibley and Irene Moore were younger than the other Outdoor Girls, and had only recently been admitted to membership in their club. Stella had been quiet and a little shy at first and not until her formal initiation into the Outdoor Girls’ Club had she given her new friends any intimation of her unusual skill with the pencil.

6

Now Mollie assumed a serious expression—with difficulty—and called the meeting to order.

“We’ve wasted time enough,” she announced. “If we are ever going to select a new leader to take our Little Captain’s place we had better do it right away.”

There was a brief pause while the four girls looked at Mollie and the expression of their merry faces sobered almost to sadness.

“We can’t do that, really, Mollie.” It was Amy Blackford who put the general thought into words. “We never could find any

one to take Betty's place."

"Don't you suppose I know that?" Mollie spoke sharply because of the treacherous tears that were gathering in her eyes.

She glanced away for a moment and when she spoke again her voice was serious—almost solemn.

"Betty has been the leader of the Outdoor Girls for so long that it seems, now she is married——"

"And gone forever!" came mournfully from Grace.

"And gone forever!" agreed Mollie, with a faint smile. "It really seems as though nothing could be the same again." 7

"But of course we can have Betty with us sometimes——"

"When Allen lets us," again from Grace.

"So that it isn't like losing her altogether," Amy finished.

"Of course." Mollie threw Amy a grateful glance. "And since our Outdoor Girls' Club is still very much alive, having even," with a glance at Stella and Irene, "recently added unto itself two new members, I think you will all agree that we need some sort of leadership."

Grace sat up suddenly in the swing and leaned toward Mollie. She looked very eager and unusually in earnest.

"What's the use of beating around the bush, Mollie?" she

asked abruptly. “We all know who is the logical one to step into Betty’s shoes. You were always second in command under the Little Captain and now we want you to be first. Isn’t that so, girls?”

The others replied enthusiastically in the affirmative.

As she looked about at them something caught in Mollie’s throat and it was a moment or two before she could say anything at all.

“I’m ever so much obliged to you all,” she said at last. “But, of course, I can’t ever take Betty’s place—” She sat down, suddenly overtaken by that choking feeling in her throat and, to use her own disgusted phrase, “proceeded to make a complete baby of herself.”

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It was all over in a moment, being, at most, an April shower, and the girls fell to discussing the next important subject of the meeting. This was the imminence of Betty’s birthday and the all-important problem of a suitable gift for her.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to give her a surprise party?” Irene suggested. “We could say nothing to any one about it and make it a complete surprise.”

The girls were in the act of unanimously acclaiming this suggestion when their attention was diverted in a sudden and alarming manner.

From somewhere close by came a series of short, sharp barks and the next moment a yellow streak burst through the shrubbery surrounding the arbor.

Somebody yelled, “Mad dog!” and five Outdoor Girls darted for cover.

CHAPTER II

MR. WAGS

“Down, Hesper! Down, you bad dog!” Irene shrieked. “What do you mean, coming out this way without leave? Down, I say!”

The other Outdoor Girls from vantage points of comparative safety watched the scene with amazement.

“It’s Irene’s collie, Hesper,” said Mollie.

“And if he’s mad, so am I,” added Irene as she fondled the great golden head of her pet. “Come on out, girls. Hesper’s as safe as a maiden aunt!”

They giggled and came forth. Hesper greeted them all with a friendly, though dignified, wave of his brush.

“What I want to know is how he got loose,” said Stella.

“That’s bothering me, too,” Irene admitted. “We never let him out unless he’s with one of the family. Aren’t you the bad dog!” She turned on him with a ferocious scowl. The collie whimpered and gazed so wistfully at his mistress that Irene relented and tapped him on the nose.

“Don’t look like that,” she entreated. “It makes me sad.”

“I have an idea. It came to me just like that!” Stella, who had been making a rough sketch of Hesper, looked up, her pencil poised.

The girls stared.

“About a present for Betty,” she explained. “We were talking of that, you know, when Hesper so rudely interrupted us.”

“If you have an idea,” drawled Grace, “let’s have it.”

“Why not get her a dog as a present from us all?”

The girls were silent for a moment, thinking this over.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t,” said Mollie thoughtfully. “Just the other day Betty said something about wanting a dog.”

“A good watch dog—she said once she wanted one—one that will guard all her wedding presents,” giggled Irene.

“I’m afraid the one I have in mind wouldn’t be much good as a watch dog,” said Stella. “But he’s awfully cute.”

“Goodness, listen to the child!” Grace was so interested that she forgot for the moment the candy box, so temptingly open beside her. “I believe she has one picked out already.”

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Stella looked slightly embarrassed as the attention of all was focused upon her.

“Well, I did sort of have one in mind,” she admitted. “His

name is Mr. Wags and if I didn't have a big fat tabby cat at home I'd buy him for myself."

"Oh, now I know what you mean!" Irene was eagerly interested. "You were thinking of that auction sale out near us, where even the family animals are to be auctioned off!"

Stella agreed, and she and Irene explained about the auction at the big house on the hill not far from where the two girls lived.

The owners of the big house, it seemed, had been called across the continent on a business trip of indefinite duration and were anxious to dispose of their possessions in Deepdale as soon as possible. As Irene said, even the family animals were to be auctioned off. Since there was quite a menagerie, including a canary bird, a black cat, goldfish, and the aforementioned Mr. Wags, this fact had aroused considerable interest among the neighbors of the big house on the hill.

"What kind of dog is this Mr. Wags?" inquired Mollie. "His name doesn't tell much."

12

"Except that he has a good disposition," chuckled Irene.

"He's a cocker spaniel and he's a beauty," replied Stella. "I had to go up there on an errand one day and he sat up on his hind legs for me. I never saw anything so cute."

"It will be a wonder if Mr. Wags ever gets any further than Stella's front door," chuckled Grace.

Irene gave an exclamation and got to her feet.

“What seems to be the matter now?” queried Mollie.

“I just happened to think! That auction starts to-day.”

Stella looked positively distressed as she pocketed pad and pencil and jumped up.

“Mr. Wags will be sure to go the first thing!” she cried. “Oh, let’s hurry.”

“We shall have to have some money,” said Mollie practically. “Wait a moment while I go in and gather up the sad remains of this week’s allowance.”

A few moments later, armed with her purse, Mollie rejoined the girls at the front of the house.

“Why didn’t I think that the auction started to-day?” complained Stella as she hurried them on. “If Mr. Wags is gone I’ll never forgive myself.”

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Stops were made at the homes of the other girls along the way, each one procuring what funds she could for the purchase of Mr. Wags.

Hesper accompanied them, trotting along with dignity at Irene’s side. When they reached the latter’s home, the collie was shut indoors by his mistress and strict orders given the new cook that he was not under any circumstances to be let out before the return of his mistress.

Then, the last stop having been made, they reached the foot of the hill and above them the big white house loomed

majestically.

“Oh, do let’s hurry!” came from Stella. “I have a horrible feeling that Mr. Wags has gone forever!”

A crowd had gathered at the scene of the auction, and among these people the Outdoor Girls recognized and greeted many acquaintances.

This was not strange since the Outdoor Girls and their friends were perhaps the best known group of young people in Deepdale.

The club had originally consisted of four girls, Betty Nelson, Mollie Billette, Grace Ford, and Amy Blackford.

Betty Nelson, bright, full of vigor and sense, had been the natural leader of the girls. Because of her resourcefulness in cases of emergency, her chums had affectionately dubbed her their “Little Captain.” Betty when a mere girl had been friendly with Allen Washburn, a rising young lawyer of Deepdale. The friendship ripened into something stronger until, as told in the story directly preceding this, the two young people had married, thus to a large extent robbing the Outdoor Girls of their beloved Little Captain. 14

Mollie Billette, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a touch of Latin in her make-up, inherited from her charming French mother, had always been second in command to Betty. Now, as the others had decreed, she was about to take over the leadership of the Outdoor Girls, relinquished by their Little Captain.

Grace Ford, tall, graceful and very lovely, and Amy Blackford, a quiet, sweet-tempered girl, complete the original quartette of Outdoor Girls.

It was after Betty's marriage that their ranks had been augmented by the acquisition of the two new members, Irene Moore and Stella Sibley, whom the Outdoor Girls had met on their trip to Cape Cod.

It is hardly possible to introduce the Outdoor Girls without mentioning the boys, who had shared so many of their adventures.

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Allen Washburn had, of course, with Betty, deserted the "happy family," as the girls were wont to call it. But there were three of the boys left—Will Ford, brother of Grace and for a long time admirer of quiet Amy Blackford; Frank Haley and Roy Anderson, two thoroughly fine young fellows and friends of Will Ford's.

The boys had formed the habit of accompanying the girls on their various adventures, a habit of which the girls quite approved.

The first adventures of the girls began with that never-to-be-forgotten tramping trip, during which they hiked happily across the country, encountering many interesting incidents on the way. The details of this trip are related in the first volume of the series, entitled "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale."

Since then many interesting and sometimes thrilling adventures had come to them. During the World War

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they served at a hostess house, thus doing their bit for their country in her time of need. Then there was that delightful summer in the saddle when as “cow girls” they had encountered a series of thrilling adventures and later still a happy vacation spent camping in their beloved woods.

In the story directly preceding this the Outdoor Girls motored to Cape Cod. It was on this trip that the older members first made the acquaintance of Irene and Stella. During their stay at the Cape they also fell in with a girl named Sally Ann Bevins. With Allen’s help, the girls had been able to aid materially the unfortunate Sally Ann, and by so doing had gained a life-long friend. As the climax to this summer’s fun and adventure had come the marriage of Betty to Allen, a pretty ceremony at which the three remaining Outdoor Girls had acted as bridesmaids. Stella and Irene had been present also, and had later definitely joined the Outdoor Girls, thus swelling their diminished ranks to five.

This resumé brings us to the time of the present story, with the new leader selected for the Outdoor Girls and the Outdoor Girls themselves on the way to secure a suitable present for their former little captain, now the bride of Allen Washburn, attorney-at-law.

As the girls ascended the porch steps of the big white house on the hill they found that the large old-fashioned hall was full of people.

They paused for a moment, looking on at the scene, then pushed forward again as they heard the auctioneer’s voice.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to one of the family’s most precious possessions and one which they found extremely hard to relinquish. Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor to present to you—Mr. Wags!”

CHAPTER III

THE LEASH GOES, TOO

The auctioneer reached down and produced from a cushioned basket at his feet a soft, black ball of silky hair. A ripple of amusement passed over the room as the little cocker spaniel backed suddenly and in panic. In another moment he would certainly have fallen off the auctioneer's table had not the man stretched out a not-ungentle hand and pushed the small dog back into prominence.

Then Mr. Wags, sensing that something extremely unusual was afoot and hoping, perhaps, to disarm his enemies by a proper display of humility, sat up wistfully on his hind legs, his small black forefeet dropped in a prayerful attitude.

There were numerous feminine exclamations.

“Just look at that perfect pet of a dog!”

“Isn't he a darling?”

“I'd just love to take him home to Nina! Wouldn't she have a fit!”

Hearing these exclamations, the Outdoor Girls despaired. The girls knew that some of the women, if they so desired, could easily outbid their humble, combined

capital.

“If worst comes to worst, I’ll draw on next week’s allowance,” Stella whispered in an uneasy aside to Mollie. The latter nodded and raised a hand for silence. The bidding had begun.

“Ten dollars!” said one of the women in the crowd, a pleasant-eyed woman, but one with two double chins—all of them determined! With an anxious eye on the chins, Mollie said: “Twelve-fifty!”

“Fifteen!” called another from the crowd.

“Sixteen,” said the woman of the chins.

Amy swallowed and called out as bravely as she could:

“Sixteen and a half!”

There was another bid and another. Then a third from the woman of the chins, raising the amount to an even twenty. From that point on other contestants dropped out, to watch with interest the battle between Two Chins and the Outdoor Girls.

It was painfully evident to the girls that their opponent wanted Mr. Wags very much indeed—almost as much perhaps as they did themselves. It was she who had mentioned taking home the pet for “Nina”—a grandchild probably who would pull Mr. Wags’ ears and otherwise make his life miserable.

It was this thought that gave Stella the courage to cry a loud “twenty-five” to the “twenty-four” of the stout lady. It was at this point that the latter paused and turned toward the girls. They saw with surprise that her chins were not so determined after all. Anyway, there was a twinkle in her eye.

“My dears,” she said, “I want that small dog very much, otherwise I should not have been foolish enough to offer twenty-four dollars for him. But I am convinced you want him more than I. Take him, girls, take him.”

“Going!” warned the auctioneer, his gavel raised about the head of the shivering small dog as though he meant to bring it down upon his head—at least, from the watchful look in his eye, Mr. Wags thought that his intention. “Going—one more chance, ladies and gentlemen. Twenty-five dollars I have been offered for this dog—an excellent animal, ladies and gentlemen, as you can see for yourselves. Going at twenty-five! Going—going——” The girls held their breath—“gone—at twenty-five dollars. An exceptional bargain. Young ladies, I congratulate you. And now,” producing a large bowl in which swirled several gaily colored fish, “what am I offered for these goldfish? Best of their kind, large, fat and in healthy condition.”

“Better get one of those too, to go with Mr. Wags,” Amy whispered.

21

Irene giggled.

“It might go in Mr. Wags, but I don’t think it would last long with him.”

“Foolish!” exclaimed Stella. “Dogs don’t eat fish. You’re thinking of cats.”

“Don’t they, though!” retorted Irene loftily. “Just come in some Friday after dinner and watch Hesper with the sad remains.”

“Stop talking, you two!” Mollie drew the girls aside. “Give me all your money!”

“Sounds like a hold-up!” chuckled Grace.

The girls giggled, but unquestioningly handed over their combined fortunes. Mollie made rapid calculation and, money in hand, approached the auctioneer’s helper. The auctioneer himself had already successfully disposed of the goldfish and had turned to the family cat—a beautiful, silver-grey Persian.

With a glance at poor pussy where it stood crouched and
bristling in the relentless clutches of the auctioneer,
Mollie handed over the twenty-five dollars. She sighed. It
seemed such a lot to pay for a dog—even Mr. Wags.

22

She was handed a receipt and Mr. Wags. The next moment she was surprised and a bit dismayed to find that she retained only the receipt. In a sudden excess of panic Mr. Wags had broken from her grasp and scuttled among the sea of legs belonging to prospective purchasers.

Mollie screamed faintly and Irene giggled. Only Amy had the presence of mind to run to the front door and slam it shut.

There followed a breathless search, with bidding temporarily

suspended, people everywhere laughing and looking under things in search of the delinquent small dog.

He was found at last, just when the girls were about ready to give up in despair, behind a chair at the far end of the hall.

He was dragged forth, reluctant and sheepish, just as the auctioneer himself hurried up to them, carrying a dog harness with leash attached.

“I forgot to give you this, Miss,” he said to Stella, who had clasped Mr. Wags in an unbreakable embrace. “It goes with the dog.”

“Lucky for us it does,” said Stella, her face scarlet.

“Let’s get out of this,” said Mollie, as she saw that the amused eyes of the room were upon them. “If we don’t there won’t be any more auctioneering done to-day!”

23

They had reached the door when the auctioneer’s helper again hurried after them. This time he had the dog’s basket.

“This goes too,” he said, with a grin. “I’ll have it wrapped if you like.”

“Don’t bother!” said Grace graciously as she, being the nearest, accepted the basket. “Mr. Wags might like to lie down on his way home and it would be just as well to have his couch handy.”

The man chuckled and returned to his duties. Once fairly outside, the girls could hear the auctioneer’s voice as he went

on with his work.

“What am I offered, ladies and gentlemen——”

“I’d love to stay a while,” said Irene, looking back longingly.

“An auction’s lots of fun——”

“And more trouble,” said Grace ruefully. Whereupon Irene commenced to sing in a lilting voice:

“Come to examine my once fat pocketbook,
Once fat pocketbook,
Once fat pocketbook——”

“Some people can make a joke of the most solemn things,” sighed Grace.

24

“Poor Gracie,” sympathized Mollie, with a wicked grin. “No more ice-cream or candy for a week.”

“A week!” retorted Grace. “Three, you mean.”

“But he’s worth it—b’ess him little heart,” crooned Stella. She was still holding Mr. Wags though Mollie had taken a tight grip of the dangling leash in case their new purchase should attempt to make another dash for liberty. Once was enough for Mollie.

“Betty will love him,” agreed Amy.

“Here comes Allen!” cried Mollie suddenly. “Don’t tell me Betty is with him.”

“Calm yourself, darling—he’s all alone,” drawled Grace.

The next moment Allen saw them and with a smile of greeting crossed the street.

“What you got there?” he asked, pointing to the head of the despondent Mr. Wags. “A menagerie?”

CHAPTER IV

SURPRISE

“Menagerie!” repeated Stella indignantly.

“I’ll have you understand, Mr. Allen Washburn,” Mollie laughed, “that if you expect to remain on speaking terms with us you had better treat Mr. Wags with respect.”

“A case of ‘love me, love my dog,’ is it?” grinned Allen. He reached out a finger and stroked one silken ear of Mr. Wags. “Cute little pup. Where did you pick him up?”

“Pick him up!” repeated Grace, with a withering look. “He can ask where we picked him up when we pretty nearly impoverished ourselves buying him away from that dreadful person with the two chins!”

“We bought him,” Mollie explained, taking pity on Allen’s bewilderment. They were walking on again, Allen accompanying them as far as the corner of the street on which his little new bungalow—his and Betty’s—stood. “Furthermore we bought him for Betty—for her birthday, you know. She said something about wanting a dog.”

“Great!” Allen’s approval was prompt and genuine. “A fine idea!”

“And one which you are to keep all to yourself,” said Mollie solemnly. “This is to be a surprise party, Allen. If Betty knows a word of it, the whole thing will be spoiled.”

“I shall be as mum as an oyster,” Allen assured her gravely. “Who’s coming? The regular crowd, I expect?”

“They don’t know it yet,” Mollie chuckled. “At least, the boys don’t. We decided only this morning to give the party. I don’t imagine we shall have any difficulty getting the boys to come, though,” she added.

“I’m quite sure you won’t,” Allen returned gravely, though there was a twinkle in his eye. “By the way, Amy,” he turned to the quiet girl, “I met Will this morning. He seemed excited and happy about something. He was dashing to the ’phone to call you when I met him. Wanted to come around to-night. I imagine.”

Amy’s face clouded.

“I can’t have him to-night. There’s a relative of Aunt Sarah’s visiting us and I have to take her to the movies.”

“Cheer up, honey!” Grace’s voice was almost too sweet as she tucked her arm through Amy’s. “You will be sure to see him the night of the surprise party, anyway.”

27

Grace was just the least bit jealous of her brother’s fondness for Amy and there were times when she could not keep this fact from showing. Now, although Amy flushed a little at the sting conveyed in the other’s words, she said nothing.

They had reached Allen's corner and stood there a moment for a parting word or two, Mollie with an eye fixed anxiously on Betty's house ready to fly with Stella and Mr. Wags should the Little Captain appear.

"We had to tell you about the party," Irene explained, "so you would keep Betty at home that night. But if you breathe a word of it, to her— Are you going to be home for the rest of the day?" she interrupted herself to ask.

"No such luck!" replied Allen. "I was merely on my way home to get some briefs I forgot to take with me this morning."

"Good!" said Irene, with a satisfied nod of her head. "Then you'll have that much less time to let the cat out of the bag."

"Only in this case it's a dog," grinned Allen, as he turned away. "Such lack of confidence," he added dolefully, "is little less than an insult."

"If you only knew what we really think," Mollie called after him, but received only a mocking wave of a hat in reply.

28

The Outdoor Girls went on together to Mollie's house where the latter insisted that Stella hand Mr. Wags over to her keeping.

"If I let you have him another day," she said, in response to the latter's remonstrance, "you would never give him up."

Mr. Wags seemed willing enough to go to Mollie. In fact, he

appeared to have reached that resigned state where nothing could surprise his doggy mind. He had changed owners so many times, why not one time more?

“Be careful Dodo and Paul don’t get hold of him,” Grace cautioned. “Mr. Wags, minus all his beautiful black hair, wouldn’t be a pretty present for any one.”

So far from resenting this criticism of her small brother and sister, Mollie acknowledged the justice of it. For Dodo—christened Dora and given the nickname by herself—and Paul were two of the most mischievous children who had ever plagued the heart and tried the patience of an older sister. It was proof of the strength of family ties, so Mollie had been heard to admit, that she “loved the twins just the same.”

Meanwhile there were numerous matters to be attended to.

29

Will Ford would naturally be informed of the proposed party by Grace, but Frank Haley and Roy Anderson must be called up and invited.

Then there was the caterer to be engaged. Deepdale was very proud of its caterer and the fact that a party could be arranged almost on a minute’s notice.

The girls would really have preferred to prepare the refreshments themselves. But in a surprise party, especially when it is to take place in the home of the person to be surprised, this is, to say the least, a difficult matter.

No, the caterer was the only thing. And although his prices

were rather high, the girls found that they had sufficient capital left, even after the purchase of Mr. Wags, to defray the expense.

Then there was the problem of what to wear. Though this might have seemed the simplest matter of all, in reality it required more thought, consideration and discussion than all the other details combined.

At last all decisions were made, all details attended to. It was dinner time on the night of the party. In five separate households girls hastily swallowed portions of the evening meal, excused themselves as soon as decency would permit, then flew to their several chambers, there to make themselves as pretty as possible for the events of the evening.

30

Grace dressed with unusual care. She thought a great deal about Allen and what he had said concerning her brother. Will had been happy about something and his first thought had been to get Amy on the telephone, to tell her about it, probably.

In the old days, before he became so interested in Amy, she, Grace, had been Will's confidante. He had told her his hopes and troubles and had always been sure of sympathy and understanding. But now!

All through dinner Grace had expected him to say something about his good news—if good news it were. He was very much elated over something, she could see that, but he said nothing to his family. Saving it all for Amy!

Grace slipped her green and silver chiffon gown over her

head, careful not to muss the hair she had arranged so carefully. It was pretty, the dress, and very becoming. As Grace gazed at her reflection in the glass confidence returned and with it, her usual good spirits.

She would go down on the porch a little early before Stella and Irene arrived. The two girls were to stop in on their way to Mollie's house. Perhaps Will would be there early too, and then, when they were alone, he would tell her his news.

31

But in this hope she was destined to disappointment.

Stella and Irene arrived early, Irene radiant in pink voile that made her look like a rose, Stella, pretty and eager, in a corn-colored frock.

"I feel ready for anything to-night," announced Irene. "Where's Will?"

"Primping," said Grace, with a sigh. "These boys are so vain!"

"What base slander is this?" Will himself emerged on the heels of this exclamation. He was in full evening dress and looked happy—pleased with himself and the world.

Irene tucked her arm confidingly within his.

"We'll be late for the party," she said. "But you *do* look nice."

"Don't flatter me," Will warned her, with a grin. "I'm not used to it."

Irene giggled.

“You look horribly abused, poor thing! Come on, every one. Let’s hurry!”

When they reached the Billettes’ house they found the other girls and boys waiting for them.

32

Mollie looked flushed and excited. As a matter of fact, she was on the verge of tears.

“Those awful twins!” she cried to the newcomers. “They thought it would be fun to hide Mr. Wags. Imagine it! I found him only five minutes ago in the clothes press with a belt tassel tickling his nose!”

“Well, you have him now, haven’t you?” said Frank Haley consolingly.

“And him do look too buful with that red ribbon around his neck,” said Stella.

The boys exchanged alarmed glances.

“Come on, fellows,” cried Roy Anderson. “Something tells me it’s time we left!”

It took them only a few moments to reach Betty’s corner. From there on they maintained a dead silence, walking on the grass so that even their footsteps would be muffled.

Tiptoeing up on the porch, Mollie put a finger to her lips.

“The door’s on the latch!” she whispered. “I’ll just put Mr. Wags inside.”

CHAPTER V

THE PARTY

The door of the Washburn bungalow yielded easily to Mollie's cautious touch. She opened it just wide enough for the passage of Mr. Wags. She set him within the aperture, gave him a gentle push, and closed the door again.

Now, though the small dog had become philosophical during the changes and adversities of the past few days, here was a situation that even the most patient of cocker spaniels must resent. To be parted from his new friends—the only friends he had now—was bad enough. But to be thrust unceremoniously into a strange place, a place without one familiar smell! The thing was too much!

Mr. Wags nosed wistfully at the closed door for a moment, then sat upon his haunches and emitted one loud and doleful wail.

The young folks outside giggled.

Betty dropped the brilliant-hued sweater she was making and jumped to her feet. Allen had been reading extracts of news to her from the evening paper. At the plaint of Mr. Wags he grinned, then quickly concealed his amusement as Betty turned to him.

“Whatever was that, Allen? It sounded like a dog!”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Allen dramatically as Mr. Wags paddled forlornly into the room. “It is a dog!”

The red ribbon adorning the silky neck of Mr. Wags had slipped and hung beneath one drooping ear. He paused in the doorway and fixed a wistful eye upon his audience. Then slowly and plaintively he wagged his tail.

Betty cried out ecstatically and caught the little dog up in her arms.

“You perfectly darling forlorn little puppy you! Did it come to see its mitty? But, honey, your necktie’s wrong. Don’t you know it belongs on top?”

“Surprise! Surprise!”

“Happy birthday!”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Oh, Betty, don’t you love him?”

“Of course she loves me!”

These and countless other exclamations so astonished the utterly unprepared Betty that she dropped Mr. Wags and allowed him to crawl into the tempting seclusion offered by the couch.

“Girls, you are giving me a surprise!”

“Did you just find that out, simpleton?”

“And such a beautiful surprise! Come here, all of you, and be hugged!”

“Does that invitation include us?” asked Will hopefully.

“Here, I protest!” came from Allen.

“Oh, go away, silly!” from Betty, as she gave him a gentle push. “I guess I can hug any one I want on my birthday.”

It was some time before any one thought to question the whereabouts of Mr. Wags.

“I think he went under the couch,” Frank volunteered. “At the first wild shout I saw him disappear.”

Betty went down on her knee, peered under the couch and begged Mr. Wags to reconsider his decision to retire from all human—or canine—activity. But the small dog refused to budge and Betty had finally to haul him forth, protesting, by one paw.

“That’s your birthday present, Betty, from us all,” said Mollie, pulling at Mr. Wags’ red ribbon until it stood up at a rakish angle. “There! How do you like him?”

“Like him! I think he’s the cutest thing I ever saw! Girls, how did you know I wanted a dog?”

“You told us so yourself,” Amy reminded her. “Don’t you remember?”

“It seems to me I do.” Betty wrinkled her pretty forehead thoughtfully. “I’ve wanted a watch dog for a long time.”

“He ought to make a fine watch dog!” said Will.

Betty looked up suspiciously but the expression of the speaker was grave, not to say solemn.

“Anyway,” she defended, coaxing the small dog to a sitting posture and rubbing her finger along his silken nose, “he would do his best, b’ess him little heart!”

Will threw up his hands in a gesture of despair.

“No matter where you go, you can’t get away from it!”

Betty declared that she must go and change her dress.

“I look like Cinderella among all you gayly dressed maidens,” she said, with a rueful glance at her simple white linen. “One can’t get dinner in a party dress, you know.”

“If you looked any prettier than you do now,” Amy protested, “we other girls wouldn’t have a chance. Be kind, Betty darling, and remain as you are!”

37

Betty protested at such “base flattery.” But she said nothing more about changing her dress.

The rest of that evening was one round of uninterrupted hilarity.

They pushed back the rugs that covered Betty’s polished

floors and some one put a record on the phonograph. Betty was instantly surrounded, to be captured by Roy Anderson and swung into a foxtrot.

The dancing seemed to confuse and abash Mr. Wags at first. He spent most of his time in a far corner, looking acutely miserable. However, before long, the spirit of jollity became so contagious that even Mr. Wags was tempted to abandon his depression and join in the fun.

He began to look alert and interested and even went so far as to yap playfully at a passing ankle now and then.

Betty frequently abandoned protesting partners in favor of Mr. Wags, declaring that since he was the guest of honor she must not neglect him. The small dog seemed to recognize her as a friend and began following her about, wistfully grateful for a pat or any small sign of recognition.

At last Betty flung herself, laughing, into a corner of the couch.

38

“I must get my breath,” she explained to Frank Haley who happened to be her partner at the moment. “Irene Moore! Where is the child? Come sing us a song, honey. That’s the girl!”

“Goodness! That Betty thinks I don’t need to catch *my* breath!” came from Irene, with a chuckle. “Still, it’s her party and I suppose she must be humored. Come on, Stella!”

Irene was possessed of a fund of clever and funny songs with which she frequently entertained her friends. And since Stella

Sibley was as talented at the piano as she was with pencil and paper, the two girls made a delightfully amusing team.

As Irene began to sing one of her irresistibly comical songs no one noticed that two of the party slipped off to the tiny library that adjoined the living room.

There was a big, comfortably cushioned window seat “in the room and it was to this Will Ford led Amy Blackford. Only one dim, electric lamp lit the place and that with a soft, rosy glow that rather enhanced the duskiess of the place. A splendid spot for confidences!

Amy was looking particularly sweet and pretty in a soft blue organdie with tiny flowers in pastel shades nestling in the lace at the throat of it. She was happy, too, and excitement had brought a flush to her usually pale cheeks.

39

“What fun!” she said softly, moving over to make room for Will beside her. “Betty and Allen are so happy.”

“Why shouldn’t they be with a little house like this and Allen making his way up in his profession? Be funny if they weren’t.”

Amy glanced at him questioningly.

“You said you had something to tell me, Will?”

“Have I! Say Amy, what would you say if I told you that I’m in line for a big advance—an advance that will just about double my present salary?”

“Really?” Amy was leaning toward him eagerly. “Will, how splendid!”

“Better than that!” cried Will buoyantly. “Of course,” he added more soberly, “I haven’t cinched it yet, but I’ve heard on very good authority that my name has been mentioned for the new position. I couldn’t believe it at first. There are so many other chaps in the office who could fill the position better than I——”

“I don’t believe it!” interrupted Amy loyally. “If that were so, they wouldn’t be giving it to you.”

40

Will looked at her and was suddenly encouraged to reach for her hand.

“Amy I’ve been wanting to ask you so long——”

“Oh, so there you are, you runaways! Get out of that seat immediately! We need it!”

41

CHAPTER VI

IRENE'S LOSS

To have the entire party rush down on them! Outraged, Will stalked to a far corner of the room while Amy tried, unsuccessfully to hide the fact that she was blushing furiously.

As to the young folks who had so callously interrupted the pleasant tête-à-tête, they were too intent on their own fun to notice either Will's offended manner or Amy's blushes.

Irene was busy pulling cushions and upholstery from the window seat while Roy pushed a button that filled the room with brilliant light.

Amid encouraging applause from her audience Irene jumped upon the window seat while Stella, still at the piano, played a rollicking Irish jig.

Irene danced with an infectious abandon, her toes twinkling perilously close to the edge of the window seat, one hand held jauntily above her head.

The boys and girls urged her on with shouts of encouragement, beating time with hands and feet to the lilt of the music.

“There—that’s all!”

There was a crashing chord from Stella and Irene jumped down from her perch, laughing and out of breath.

“I refuse to sing another song or dance another step until I’ve been properly fed!”

As though she had been Aladdin rubbing his wonderful lamp, the bell rang at the conclusion of Irene’s sentence, announcing the arrival of the caterers.

There was a concerted feminine rush for Betty’s spotless blue and white kitchen. The caterer and his helper were ushered in as though they were kings and flattered and cajoled into speeding up preparations for the feast.

“You shouldn’t have done so much for me,” Betty protested as the chicken salad, small cakes, and ice-cream made their appearance. “Mr. Wags was present enough without this beautiful spread!”

Mr. Wags, who had quite shed his depression by that time, made his rounds of the feasters, begging prettily, the red bow again beneath one ear, for the odd scraps that were so generously handed out to him.

Betty was finally obliged to call a halt to this promiscuous giving.

43

“I will not have my birthday present killed before I’ve fairly become acquainted with it!” she protested. “Come here, Wagsy, and sit by my chair. That’s right. Good doggie!”

Mr. Wags obeyed docilely enough. But as soon as he reached Betty's side he resumed his pleading attitude, one ear cocked alertly and a hungry eye fixed expectantly upon Betty's plate.

He looked so cunning sitting there that Stella was inspired to call for a pencil and paper. Frank held her plate while she sketched rapidly. When the portrait of Mr. Wags was finished and passed from hand to hand of the amused circle of young folks it was complete, even to the rakish bow beneath the cocker spaniel's chin.

"You will have to make me one of these, Stella," said Betty. "I'd like to keep it as a souvenir."

"Keep that one," suggested Stella. "Mr. Wags has stopped posing now," she added as the small dog gave up begging as a bad job and curled himself in a black ball at Betty's feet. "I doubt if he will ever look so cute again."

"Thanks," said Betty and handed the sketch to Allen, who put it in his coat pocket.

After the refreshments they danced again. In fact, they danced so late that Mollie expressed anxiety as to what Betty's neighbors would say.

44

"Don't worry about my neighbors," said Betty with the new matronly air that sat so becomingly upon her. "They are mostly young people like ourselves, and if they are thinking at all about us they are probably wishing they were in the fun. Oh, girls, it has been such a lovely party!"

Before they went Betty was kissed and hugged all over again.

Betty picked up Mr. Wags and with great gravity made him shake hands with them all.

“He says he thanks you for giving him such a nice home and such a nice mitty,” she said. “Long may it wave!”

“Which—the home or the mitty?” Will inquired gravely.

“Both!” returned Betty with equal gravity.

There was a chorus of gay good-bys. Betty and Allen followed their guests out on the porch.

“Come over some day soon,” Betty called to the girls. “I’ve made lots of pretty new things I want to show you.”

“We’ll come—don’t worry!” they answered.

45

When they had all gone Betty and Allen turned into the house again. Allen closed the door and stood for a moment looking down at his young wife.

“Happy, Betty?” he asked.

“Oh, Allen, so happy!”

But Will and Amy were not so happy. Try though they did, they were unable to get off alone together during the evening and were even forced to say good-night in the midst of a laughing crowd.

It was the day after the party that Mollie, at ease on the veranda of her house, was astonished to see Stella Sibley

coming down the street leading Amy and Grace by the hand, despite their combined protests.

As they came nearer Mollie saw that the protests were prompted by the fact that Stella was hurrying more than seemed necessary on a day as warm as this one was.

Stella paid them no attention however, merely rushing them up the steps of the porch and landing them, breathless and indignant, in the swing beside Mollie.

“Good gracious!” gasped Grace, feeling for her pocket handkerchief. “If you had told me you intended to run a marathon I should have stayed at home where I could be cool and comfortable!”

46

“If you say much more I will send you home,” Stella retorted. “And won’t you be sorry when you find you have missed my news!”

“News?” cried Mollie, instantly alert. “Is there any?”

“Is there any?” repeated Stella. “You just listen a minute, young lady, and tell me then whether you think I have any news or not!”

“That’s what she said when she came popping into my house,” sighed Amy. “But she refused to tell a single word until we could all get together.”

“Very commendable!” laughed Mollie. “Very commendable indeed!”

“On with the news, darling, on with the news,” drawled Grace. “Remember, we die of suspense.”

“Far be it from me to commit murder,” said Stella. “All right, girls—now listen. Dad has an old stone house away up in the country at a place called Foaming Falls——”

“This interests me strangely,” murmured Grace. “Pray go on!”

“Dad has been trying to sell the house for some time,”
Stella obliged. “But the purchasers don’t seem to be
falling over themselves in the effort to buy it. He was talking
about it this morning and I suggested—oh, so very tactfully!
—that we girls might use it. As a sort of summer camp, you
know.”

47

Mollie was delighted.

“Tell us more about the house, Stella,” she urged. “You said it was at Foaming Falls, didn’t you?”

“And I guess the place deserves its name, too,” she added. “At least, Dad says it does. The house itself is almost on the bank of Foaming River.”

“Foaming River!” Amy repeated dreamily. “That sounds romantic enough.”

“If romance is what you like,” drawled Grace. “For my part, I prefer adventure.”

“In this case, I don’t see why we can’t have both,” Mollie retorted a trifle sharply. “I like your idea very much,” she

added, turning to Stella. “Your Foaming Falls sounds like a place where we could have plenty of fun. It was mighty nice of your father, too, to give his consent.”

“Then you will go?” asked Stella eagerly.

Mollie laughed.

“Go! I’d like to see you try to keep us away!”

“Where’s Irene?” Amy asked suddenly.

48

“Had to go to the store,” Stella explained. “She’ll be with us pretty soon. Irene knows about Foaming Falls.”

“How far away is it?” asked Mollie.

“Only about eighty miles. We ought to be able to make it all right in a day. The best part of it is,” she paused and regarded them triumphantly, “that Dad has agreed to let me take the Ford sedan. How’s *that*?”

“About as good as can be,” Mollie responded, with enthusiasm. “With my car and the Ford we shall be amply equipped. Here comes Irene now.”

“She seems to be in a big hurry about something,” Grace remarked lazily. “Why any one wants to hurry in such weather, I certainly can’t see. Hello! what’s wrong?”

Irene flung up the steps with such a look of distress on her face that the girls were seriously concerned.

“Wrong! There’s enough wrong!” Irene groaned. “Hesper has disappeared!”

CHAPTER VII

SO MUCH COINCIDENCE

It was several minutes before her companions could induce Irene to talk coherently. She stammered and sputtered with mingled grief and rage till the others despaired of ever getting a straight story from her.

“But don’t you understand,” she said at last, sitting up and staring at them angrily as though the whole thing were their fault, “that Hesper has disappeared? Some one stole him!”

“How do you know that?” asked Mollie quickly.

“Know it!” repeated Irene. “Do you suppose Hesper would leave us because he wanted to? Why, he’s a one-man collie and Dad is his master. Nothing could induce him to go away from home.”

“How about the day he got loose and came charging into the rose arbor, scaring us all to death?” Amy reminded her.

“I’ve thought of that,” Irene admitted. “But how do we know that occasion wasn’t a first attempt to steal him? He might have broken away from his captors then.”

50

“That’s all very well,” said Grace. “But it seems to me thieves would be apt to leave a full grown collie alone.”

“I don’t know,” said Irene moodily. “No one will ever make me believe Hesper strayed away from home on purpose.”

At the moment the telephone bell rang and Mollie excused herself long enough to answer it. They could not help but hear the conversation, since the telephone was on a table in the living room just inside the open window.

Mollie’s first sentence told them that it was Betty speaking on the other end of the wire.

“Mr. Wags gone! Why, Betty dear, how did that happen? He seemed so much at home——You think he was stolen?——Why, Betty, what makes you think that?——You did?——Yes, I see——Well, I don’t see how you can blame yourself——A man with fair hair——Yes!——Well, of course, if you didn’t really see him——No, nobody has seen him——Wait a minute, I’ll ask the girls——”

Mollie poked her head through the open window.

“Has any one seen anything of Mr. Wags?” she asked.

51

There was a unanimous “No!” and Mollie turned again to the telephone.

“No, they haven’t seen him, dear. I’m so sorry——What’s that? You have sent out an alarm and offered a reward? Good! That should bring results——Wait a minute, Betty. You aren’t the only sorrowing one. Irene’s Hesper has disappeared——I said, Irene’s Hesper has disappeared——Goodness, child, are you trying to insult me? Of course I’m not fooling——Oh, yes, dreadfully of course. The poor girl’s all broken up

over it——Yes, it certainly begins to look that way——A little too much for coincidence——Cheer up, honey, the offer of a reward may help, and I'm quite sure Irene will add more to it for Hesper——Yes, I'll call you up later and let you know if we have any luck——Yes, I will——I'm so sorry, dear——Good-by.”

“Mr. Wags has gone, too!” The chorus greeted Mollie as she returned to the porch.

“The queerest thing!” Mollie nodded. “Betty said she left him out in the back yard for a little while. You know the old-fashioned picket fence they have about the place? Not a chance in the world, she said, for Mr. Wags to squeeze under and absolutely impossible for him to jump over—the fence is too high. Yet, when she went out to get him he had gone!”

52

“Didn't I tell you!” cried Irene, and the girls were forced to admit that her position was considerably strengthened.

“What did Betty do when she found he was gone?” Amy asked.

“Searched the neighborhood of course,” Mollie answered. “And when he failed to turn up she called Allen at his office. Allen said he would put a description of Mr. Wags in the paper and offer a reward for his return. Poor Betty! She seemed dreadfully upset about it.”

“Both Hesper and Mr. Wags were thoroughbreds, you see,” Irene pointed out. “That's almost proof that the dogs were stolen.”

In the days that followed the girls were to incline more and more to Irene's view.

In the first place, nothing was seen or heard of the dogs, though considerable publicity was given to the fact of their disappearance. Then, too, it was found that other dogs of good breed had disappeared on the same day. Owners of these pets were in arms and combined in an attempt to recover their lost property.

Betty had said that on the morning of Mr. Wags' disappearance she had seen a fair-haired man hanging about the place. Still, there was nothing suspicious about this man except the fact of his loitering.

53

Others reported that they, too, had observed a fair-haired stranger in town on the day of the wholesale disappearance of thoroughbred dogs. But there are so many fair-haired men that this poor clue was almost worthless.

Several rewards were offered and advertisements inserted in the local papers, but all without avail.

As day followed day and the missing dogs failed to reappear excitement gradually died down and the owners of the animals accepted the loss as philosophically as they could.

Betty and Irene mourned together, and many hours were spent in making futile plans by which they might recover their pets.

However, as plans for the outing at Foaming Falls matured, Hesper and Mr. Wags gradually faded into the background.

The parents of the Outdoor Girls had given their consent to the trip and now nothing remained but to pack their grips and set the day of departure.

“But I haven’t any clothes,” protested Grace. “You might at least give me time to buy a decent rag or two.”

“Listen to the child!” came from Stella, who was really considerably younger than Grace but liked to pretend that she was not. “As if you would need anything but your bathing suit at Foaming Falls! There won’t be anybody up there but us girls.”

54

“Won’t there, though!” This from Grace in her most superior accents. “Well, young lady, I beg to differ from you. Frank was telling me this very morning that he and Roy hoped to get up for a couple of week-ends, anyway. And of course,” with a meaning glance in Amy’s direction, “Will will be there!”

“Well, I don’t know where we’ll put them if they do come,” said Stella. “There isn’t more than enough furniture and bedding in the old house for ourselves.”

“You don’t suppose they need a house to sleep in, or wish for it, even, do you?” laughed Mollie. “Why, those boys don’t know how to stir anywhere without packing their old tent along with them.”

“Well, as long as they bring their own lodgings—” came, with a chuckle, from Stella.

“It’s terrible to think of going anywhere without Betty,” Amy said. “It won’t seem like an outing at all.”

“And that brings me to something I have been saving to surprise you,” said Mollie, with a look of enjoyment. “Betty says she and Allen may be able to run up for a little time later on.”

If Mollie had suddenly told the girls that to-morrow was Christmas they could not have been any more pleased.

“*That* makes our outing complete,” said Amy, with a sigh of content.

“Let’s see—this is Monday,” Mollie stated. “If we started early Thursday morning, that would give us two days more in which to get ready. Can we do it?”

“We can,” said Irene.

“And we will!” added Stella, with a note of finality.

So it was settled.

Grace still protested that she needed more clothes. But Mollie put an end to this question by allowing to each girl two good dresses to be used on special occasions, their sport suits with knickers, and a bathing suit apiece.

“If we need anything else we can get it up there,” she said.

“Yes, in that one-horse town, I suppose we can expect to find Paris models!” groaned Grace. But her sarcasm was wasted on the empty air. Mollie was no longer listening to her.

The great day arrived. Mollie had invited Amy and

Grace to spend the night with her so that they might get an early start.

They were out of bed almost as soon as the sun itself and were dressed in record time. Even at that they had barely finished breakfast before the sound of a motor horn warned them that Stella and Irene were on hand.

Mollie kissed her mother affectionately but hastily and flew upstairs after Amy and Grace to get her hat on.

Glancing from an upstairs window, Grace called to Amy and Mollie.

“Look!” she said, pointing dramatically to the drive below. “Those two foolish children have brought all the boys along with them. Amy dear, there’s Will. I think probably he’s looking for you.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE SPEEDING CAR

Will was looking for Amy, as his sister suggested, which was proved by the way his face lit up when she appeared with Mollie and Grace. Under cover of the general and noisy greetings he made his way to her.

“I wanted to tell you that I’ve fixed things up so that I can spend at least one week-end with you—maybe two. In the meantime,” he added ruefully, “Deepdale is going to be a pretty lonesome place.”

“Plenty of people left in it yet, old dear,” said Grace, coming up in time to hear this part of his plaint. “Come on, Amy. Mollie’s foot tappeth with impatience.”

“It doth not,” Mollie interposed. “It can’t for the simple reason that it has somebody’s bundle on top of it!”

“Anyway, you will let me know if you get the new position, won’t you, Will?” Amy managed to whisper as she was swept toward the car.

“To be sure!” he answered. “Everything ought to be settled pretty soon now.”

“Good luck,” said Frank as Mollie stepped on the accelerator

and motioned him off the running board. “Wish we were going with you.”

“Some folks have all the luck,” added Roy, with a gusty sigh.

“If you don’t get out of the way, *you* won’t have any!” said Mollie, and wickedly swerved the car so that Roy was forced to jump out of the way.

“I’ll get you for that, young lady,” he threatened, shaking a fist at her.

“Try and get me!” she dared. Since the big car was already gathering headway Roy had small chance to take the dare.

“Wait till I meet you in the country,” he shouted after her and received a mocking wave of the hand in reply. The big car slid from the driveway into the road. The girls were on their way.

Amy looked back and saw Will standing there, gazing after her. She put her head out of the car and cried:

“Good luck!”

He seemed to understand, for he smiled and waved to her just before the car turned a curve in the road and they were all lost to sight.

Stella, driving the Ford, followed faithfully after Mollie. The latter had gone only a block or two when she flung out a hand to warn Stella she was going to slow up. Then she drew the car to a standstill beside the curb.

“Now what?” queried Grace, who was in the tonneau with the luggage.

Stella got out and came running up, thinking that Mollie had discovered a punctured tire or met with some other calamity.

“I thought we might stop a few moments at Betty’s,” the latter explained. “We can’t leave without saying good-by to her.”

“Fine!” said Stella, and darted back to her car.

The two cars drew up before Betty’s home a few minutes later and the drivers honked their horns furiously. The door of the bungalow flew open and not only Betty but Allen came out.

Betty flew down to the cars, looking as bright and pretty as a June rose in a morning dress of blue gingham and an embroidered bungalow apron over it.

“Girls!” she cried, leaning on the door of Mollie’s car while Irene and Stella came and joined the group, “what a gorgeous day to start your trip.”

“Like to go, hon?” Allen was behind her, smiling quizzically. “Like to pop in behind with the luggage and Grace?”

60

Betty shook her head while Grace murmured:

“Thanks for putting me last!”

“I’m afraid there wouldn’t be room,” she said, with a crookedly wistful smile.

“Silly!” Mollie put her hand over the Little Captain’s as it rested on the door. “We’d find room for you somewhere. Betty, I do wish you could come! It isn’t half a spree without you.”

With an effort Betty shook off her wistful mood. She smiled and patted Mollie’s hand in turn.

“Allen and I are coming up later anyway, you know,” she said. “And then you can tell me all about your beautiful good times. Write as often as you can in the meantime.”

“We will!” the girls cried in chorus.

Stella and Irene made a dash for the Ford while Mollie started her motor.

“Good-by, Betty!”

“Good-by, Little Captain!”

“You have all the luck, Allen!”

“I know it!”

“Good-by, everybody. Have a good time!”

All this while the machines were turning round. Then a final chorus of good-by and their Little Captain was left behind for the first time since the forming of the Outdoor Girls’ Club.

“I feel like weeping!” said Mollie and, as though more fully to

express her emotion, stepped on the accelerator. The car leaped ahead. Grace reached for her hat, pulling it more snugly on her head.

“You needn’t wreck the car, for all that,” she said. “Weep if you must, but lay off that accelerator.”

Mollie giggled and the danger was past.

“Keep your eye on Stella to see if she can make the grade,” she instructed. “If you see her falling behind tell me and we’ll slow down.”

“She seems to be coming along all right so far,” said Amy after looking back.

“I don’t think you need worry about Stella,” remarked Grace. “I imagine she must have had plenty of practice with the Ford or Mr. Sibley would not have trusted her with it.”

“Secret practice then,” said Mollie, her eyes intent on the road ahead. “The sly child never told us she was learning to drive.”

“She told me her father bought the Ford for her to practice on,” said Grace. “When she gets so that she can skid the car successfully about dangerous curves—in imitation of you, Mollie—she will graduate into the eight-cylinder class. At least, so I understand.”

“Well, if she makes this trip without coming to grief, I guess we may safely give her a diploma,” laughed Mollie. “From what she tells me of the roads leading up to Foaming Falls, I imagine she will need all her nerve and skill

when we come to them.”

“That’s encouraging,” sighed Grace. “I do hope you are feeling particularly fit this morning, Mollie.”

“Never better,” said Mollie cheerfully. “I guess if I haven’t yet rolled you down a rocky cliff I won’t begin to-day. I say! Look out there! Do you want all the road?”

A handsome limousine had rounded the bend in the road not a hundred yards ahead and was tearing down upon them at an alarming rate of speed.

“Get over! Get over!” shrieked Grace to the driver of the oncoming car. “What’s the matter? Are you crazy?”

CHAPTER IX

QUICK WORK

Mollie swerved her car as far as she could to the side of the road. It skidded, swung sideways like a crab, righted again.

No good! The limousine was still in the center of the road, bearing down upon them like a battering ram! A head-on collision seemed inevitable.

At that moment Mollie needed all her presence of mind and experience. She felt her heart pounding in her throat, her head was hot. Her hands gripped the wheel firmly as she saw the only thing she could do. Charge into the ditch at the side of the road!

It was a perilous thing to do, rash and reckless, but the other way was positive disaster.

With a little prayer in her heart, she gave the wheel a mighty tug, held it with firm fingers as it turned and wrenched in her grasp.

The front wheels of her car took the ditch. There was a sickening lurch, a horrible bumping and pounding. The other car flashed by so close that rear guards almost touched.

“Stella’s coming!” said Grace hysterically, looking behind.

“She’s right after us!”

“Good girl!” muttered Mollie between tight lips.

She bumped along over the rough, uneven ground for several yards more until they came to a place where the road sloped down to meet the ditch.

Here Mollie verged on the road again. A few feet farther on she stopped the car.

“Stella all right?” she asked.

“Right behind us,” from Amy. “She has stopped, too.”

Mollie stepped out on the road a bit shakily. Stella came to meet her. The face of the younger girl was white, but she seemed in perfect command of herself.

“That was a pretty close shave,” she said.

“Close shave!” Mollie clenched her fists and stared in the direction of the vanished car. “I’d like to have the owner of that car up in court for a few minutes. I could tell him several things he ought to know about driving. You did splendidly though,” she added. “That was as rough a bit of road work as I’ve seen. Most new drivers would have been rattled.”

Stella flushed with pleasure at the praise but modestly denied any credit to herself.

“All I had to do was to follow you. If I had been in your place I think I should have been paralyzed with fright.”

Mollie chuckled.

“In a situation like that paralysis is the last thing you can afford to have. But one thing I stopped for,” she added, “was to tell you that from now on you had better take the lead. You have the road map and the route your father marked out for you.”

Stella looked alarmed.

“Oh, I wouldn’t go first for anything!” she protested. “Not after what happened just now! Here, you take the map, Mollie. You know more about such things than I, anyway.”

Mollie accepted the map Stella thrust out to her and studied it intently.

“Um-m. This all seems clear enough. We take the fork to the left and for a long time have nothing to do but go straight ahead. If you are sure you want me to take the lead——”

She was in the act of stuffing the map into the pocket of her sport coat when an exclamation from Irene made her whirl about suddenly.

“I saw Hesper! I know I did!”

Irene had left the Ford and was standing beside Mollie’s car, gesticulating excitedly.

“I saw him, I tell you!” she repeated impatiently, as Mollie and Stella continued to stare at her.

“Where?”

“He came out of the woods on the other side of the road. I saw him as distinctly as I see you now. Come on! I intend to do a bit of investigating.”

She ran ahead toward the intersection of the two roads, Mollie and Stella following more slowly. Grace and Amy had heard Irene’s exclamation and joined them curiously.

Irene reached the place in the road where the collie, according to her, had appeared. She parted the bushes eagerly. The other Outdoor Girls came close and, looking over her shoulder, they saw a great golden dog trotting away from them in leisurely fashion down the woods path.

Irene pursed her lips and whistled softly.

The dog paused and looked back. He was puzzled apparently, but not particularly interested.

Irene whistled again, but this time the collie paid not the slightest attention.

“Anyway, I intend to follow him,” said the girl, resolutely pushing through the bushes and starting along that path. “If that collie isn’t Hesper, it’s his twin brother.”

67

Her companions hesitated for a moment and then started after Irene. There seemed nothing else to do.

“I think you are wrong, Irene,” Stella protested. “If that dog were Hesper, he would have come to your whistle. Hesper

always did.”

Irene did not answer, but continued to press on.

“It seems to me we are taking a risk,” Amy ventured, after a moment or two. “Suppose the dog should turn on us in this lonely place?”

“Sh-h!” said Irene suddenly. “There’s a house. Can you see it through the trees?”

Stella giggled nervously.

“Looks more like a shanty to me,” she said. “However, have it your own way.”

The collie had crossed the road and disappeared around the side of the building. Irene had already abandoned the shelter of the woods. The other girls followed.

The dog had made a bed for himself in the long grass at the side of the shanty. He seemed evidently at home in the place.

The girls approached cautiously. Suddenly the collie, who had been watching them a bit suspiciously, rose to his feet and faced them. The ruff rose on his handsome neck, his feet were planted stiffly before him, his eyes intent and watchful.

68

Even Irene was momentarily daunted by the fierce aspect of the animal. She hesitated, half turned back, then started resolutely toward the dilapidated house.

“Now what?” asked Grace, as they followed her resignedly. “Aren’t you satisfied yet that this collie isn’t Hesper?”

“I won’t be satisfied until I have at least seen his owner,” Irene retorted doggedly. “The whole thing looks suspicious to me.”

She pulled at the rusty bell and a discordant jangle sounded within the house. While they waited for a response the girls kept a watchful eye upon the collie. The brute had lain down again, but he still seemed to regard them with suspicion.

They waited for a considerable time, and when no answer came to the first summons Irene impatiently pulled the bell again.

This time they heard footsteps within the house. In another moment the door was opened just enough to show the unkempt figure and sour visage of the most unpleasant individual the Outdoor Girls had ever laid eyes upon. Even Irene was momentarily daunted by this apparition.

“What do you want?” the woman demanded suspiciously. “Whatever you want,” she added with a grim smile, “I ain’t got!”

69

The girls felt a hysterical desire to giggle, but with the eyes of this grim personage upon them they hardly dared do so.

At last Irene found her voice. She said quite meekly:

“We don’t want anything, really. We only came to ask,” pointing to the watchful collie, “if that is your dog?”

Inoffensive as the question might have appeared to most people, this woman evidently took it as the grossest kind of insult. The frown that gathered on her brow was truly terrifying. The Outdoor Girls had an impulse toward flight, but with the collie on guard they knew that any sign of panic on their part might prove disastrous.

Mollie spoke quickly, hoping to mollify the woman.

“We think he is one of the handsomest collies we ever saw,” she said pleasantly. “My friend here loves animals, and we couldn’t resist the temptation of following your beautiful collie for a little way through the woods. If we have disturbed you, we are certainly very sorry.”

The woman seemed slightly pacified, though she still retained her grim and sullen look.

70

“If I was just to give the word,” she said, regarding them with what seemed to the girls a sort of malicious pleasure, “that collie would see to it that you never troubled honest people again. But I won’t say the word—not if you get out quicker than you came!”

The insulting tone of the woman angered the girls almost beyond their control. But they knew that in this case at least, discretion was by far the better part of valor.

It did not take them long to find the woods path again and to proceed along it swiftly to the comparative safety of the open road.

“Whew!” said Grace, drawing a great sigh of relief. “Don’t

you ever take me again on a wild goose chase like that, Irene Moore! Next time you see a dog that looks like Hesper, that's my cue to run in the opposite direction!"

CHAPTER X IN THE WOODS

The Outdoor Girls drove on for a number of uneventful miles, Mollie stopping occasionally to consult the map or the signposts along the road.

She had little trouble keeping to the right direction since Mr. Sibley had carefully marked the route they were to follow with a broad blue pencil.

As Mollie had said before, the first part of the trip was by far the easier, since it followed the smooth macadam of the state highway.

It was after they diverged from this road and started on the upward climb into the heart of the mountains that they might expect to encounter difficulties.

The girls in the first car were a bit silent during the drive—for them—and finally confessed to each other that they were missing Betty more with every mile they put between themselves and her.

“I suppose we shall have to expect that for a while,” Mollie said. “But just think how much worse it would have been if Allen had taken her away from Deepdale altogether.”

“Nothing so bad but what it could be worse,” murmured Grace. “But that doesn’t make your heart ache any less. Mollie, I want some lunch.”

Mollie chuckled at the abrupt change in subject—and feeling.

“I’m hungry, too,” said Amy, after staring a moment at Grace. “Can’t we stop somewhere and eat?”

“Goodness, it isn’t more than eleven o’clock,” Mollie protested. “Before we get to Foaming Falls you will be famished all over again.”

“I’d just as soon be hungry then as now,” said Grace, with seemingly faultless logic.

“All right,” Mollie gave in. “Keep your eyes open for a likely spot and we’ll turn in.”

However, the ideal spot did not materialize for some time and when it did appear Mollie almost passed by before recognizing it.

With a clever twist of the wheel she was able to turn off the main road into the tempting wagon road that led through the heart of the woods. Beyond, through the trees, they could see the welcome sparkle of sunlight on water.

“We can’t go far,” said Mollie, slowing the machine to a crawl along the narrow rutted road. “But to get off the main road is something. We can park here and carry our picnic things to the water. Is Stella following?”

Amy reported that she was and a few yards farther on Mollie came to a stop.

Behind her, Stella swerved into a verdant parking place which she said was just made for the purpose.

Irene and Stella came running forward eagerly.

“I suppose this is where we eat?”

“Right the first time, children,” Grace returned. “Run back and fetch the victuals.”

“The easiest thing we’ve done to-day,” Irene retorted.

The next moment she and Stella returned bearing an immense hamper between them. Mollie, Grace and Amy had already unloaded their own stuff and were waiting for the younger girls to come up to them.

“I hope that lake, or whatever it is, isn’t any farther away than it looks,” said Mollie, hefting her own share of the load. “This lunch is heavy enough to feed an army.”

“Maybe it’s those biscuits you made,” Irene suggested impishly.

Mollie chuckled.

74

“You can’t insult me,” she retorted. “Mother made ’em!”

The girls found the lake a picturesque small body of water, snuggled in between banks of luxuriant verdure. The sun,

reflected back from its placid surface, dazzled them and caused them to turn with relief to the cool shadows of the woodland.

“I reckon that water is as warm as milk,” said Grace, dabbling her hand experimentally in the tiny ripples that lapped at the bank. “Wish we had our bathing suits handy.”

“Wouldn’t dare take the time,” said Mollie briskly. “Plenty of opportunity for swimming when we reach Foaming Falls.”

“No time like the present!” sighed Grace, as she turned reluctantly to the work of preparing lunch.

Although picnicking in the open was nothing new to the three original Outdoor Girls, they had never lost their delight in it.

As for Irene and Stella, new as they were to this free, nomad existence, the experience held for them all the thrill of a real adventure.

“I feel so happy I could dance,” said Irene. “Only, I wish I had Hesper here with me,” she added.

She stepped out on a broad flat rock that jutted out over the water and, her cheerfulness returning, executed a few experimental dance steps just to prove her first assertion.

75

Stella looked up from her task of spearing pickles and giggled.

“Double dare you to dance the Irish reel on that foot stool,” she said.

Irene grimaced with disrelish.

“I don’t mind taking a bath, darling,” she replied. “But when I do, I want to be properly dressed for it.”

Stella shrugged her shoulder and turned her eyes to the pickles.

“You’re afraid,” she taunted. “You’re afraid of a little bit of water.”

“You know better than that, bad child. But how can I dance without music?”

“Poof, a poor excuse. We will sing for you!”

“I said I needed *music*,” Irene retorted—a taunt that won her four indignant glances.

“Come here and butter some rolls,” ordered Mollie. “And for goodness’ sake, stop balancing on that rock. You make me seasick!”

Irene did as she was bid and in a moment the feast was spread out and ready for consumption. Cold chicken, biscuits with jelly between them, buttered rolls, sliced ham, potato salad, pickles, fruit and cake—in all, as fine a spread as the girls had ever sat down to.

76

It didn’t last long either, what with the appetites the girls brought to it and the deliciousness of the food itself.

Grace had been paying considerable attention to the tray of

sweet pickles. Irene liked pickles herself, and the sight of their rapid disappearance filled her with alarm. Finally there was only one small one left and, seeing Grace glance at this lone survivor, Irene handed the tray to her with a deep, ceremonious bow.

“Take it!” she begged. “The poor little thing is lonesome for its friends!”

Grace stared indignantly.

“If you mean to insinuate——”

“Wait a moment!” cried the younger girl, striking her brow and flinging out her hand in a dramatic gesture. “You have furnished me with the inspiration for a most affecting little poem. Hark!”

She jumped to her feet, almost upsetting a jar of jam as she did so, and delivered herself of the following absurd rhyme with all appropriate gestures and flourishes.

“We will call this little gem ‘The Lay of the Lonesome Pickle.’

77

“One lonesome pickle in the tray
Lying disconsolate on its side.
Deciding it was in the way,
Grace picked it up. It sighed—and died!

“Thus ended the lonesome pickle’s lay.
And, lest you grieve at such sad ends,
’Twere well to remember, friends so gay,

The pickle went to join its friends!”

“Terrible!”

“Worse than that!”

“How does she get that way?”

“If you mean to insinuate, young lady,” this from Grace on a note of indignation, “that I have eaten all the pickles in that tray——”

“Not quite all,” murmured Irene. “I think I had two.”

“Then you had better learn to count!” Grace opened her mouth to bite the pickle whereupon Irene promptly said, in a high, plaintive squeal:

“Eek! E-eek!”

Grace jumped, the girls shouted, and the last lonesome pickle went hurtling out over the water to land with a splash in its placid depths.

“That’s what I call clear wasteful,” sighed Irene when the merriment had abated somewhat. “If *you* didn’t want that poor little pickle, Grace Ford, you might have given me a chance at it!”

78

“You’re a bad child and I refuse to eat another bite with you,” said Grace, stretching luxuriously. “Ooh, what a lazy, hot, beautiful, gorgeous day it is. I could stay here forever and ever——”

“But I tell you there’s some one here, Samuel. I heard ’em talkin’ and laughin’ quite a ways back. We’ll have to travel farther along the shore.”

The words were followed almost immediately by the speaker. As the girls looked curiously in the direction of the voice, a little old lady emerged from the shadow of the trees into the clearing. With her, following close at her elbow, was an old gentleman. It was impossible to tell which was the older of the old couple, since the faces of both were crisscrossed with wrinkles and seamed with age.

They looked inquisitively at the Outdoor Girls, and Mollie went toward them, smiling.

CHAPTER XI

A HAIR-RAISING STORY

“We were just going,” Mollie told the two old people. “You needn’t move on any farther unless you care to.”

While Mollie was speaking the other girls cleared the big rock of the remains of their lunch. Now Mollie motioned toward it, invitingly.

“Plenty of room for us all,” she added.

“If you’re quite sure we wouldn’t be puttin’ you out, now?” the old lady demurred.

“Nonsense, my dear.” It was the old gentleman who settled the matter. He had been carrying a hamper, evidently filled with lunch. This he set upon the ground and wiped his perspiring face with a big bandana. “If the gals are all through we likely won’t be botherin’ ’em much. It’s right kind of you to make room for us,” he added, speaking directly to Mollie.

Mollie disclaimed all merit on her part and led them over to where the other girls waited curiously.

They made room for the old couple and would have helped them to get settled comfortably had they shown a disposition to accept such aid. But it did not take the Outdoor Girls long

to see that their new acquaintances were very independent in spite of their age—or perhaps because of it—and would not relish assistance from any source whatever!

There was more than this curious trait to stimulate the girls' curiosity concerning the old couple. For one thing, they were dressed in a manner usually associated with youth. They wore sports suits and puttees with soft old felt hats pulled down over their eyes. The only difference between them was that the old lady wore a short sports skirt—quite evidently a sop to the conventions of yesterday.

And the eyes of these two were young, as young, so the girls instinctively felt, as the hearts of the old couple would always be.

The old lady opened the hamper and drew forth a huge sandwich. This she handed to the old gentleman with the admonition not to spill the “fillin’s” out of it.

Then she cocked a whimsical eye at the girls and proceeded to answer their unspoken question.

81

“S’pose you wonder why two old folks like us go wanderin’ over the country like a couple of silly young ones, eh? ’Tis sort of unusual, but Pa and me we got tired stayin’ to home so much. While the children was young we had to, but now that they’re married off seems like it’s time for us to have a little fun. So we jes’ go gypsyin’ over the country, picnickin’ like you see us now an’ from present appearances seems like we wuz gettin’ younger by the minute. Leastways, that’s the way we feel. Have a bite?” she asked hospitably, holding out her

basket.

The girls declined, saying that they had already eaten far too much for comfort.

“We must run along, I’m afraid,” said Mollie. She spoke regretfully and, indeed, the girls were sincerely sorry that they might not improve the acquaintance of this queer and likable old couple.

“If we don’t get started now,” said Stella, with a glance at her wrist watch, “it will be dark before we get to Foaming Falls.”

“No telling how many punctured tires we may have on the way,” added Grace. She got up reluctantly.

82

“How cheerful of you, Gracie,” Amy remarked as she gathered up odd scraps of paper and piled them up to burn before leaving. “Anyway, we have a couple of spares for emergencies.”

“You say you are going to Foaming Falls?” asked the old lady, regarding them curiously with her bright old eyes.

“That’s sort o’ strange. Pa and me hails from there, though we don’t never stay there long enough at a stretch to get rightly acquainted. What part of Foamin’ Falls are you aimin’ at visitin’?”

“The old stone house on the bank of the river,” Grace responded. “Mr. Sibley’s place.”

Both the old people started perceptibly. The old lady put down the sandwich she was eating, the better to stare at them.

“The old stone house!” she said, almost in a whisper. “Why, you never mean you’re goin’ there!”

“Why not?” Mollie questioned, a little disturbed by the manner and words of the old lady. “The roof is rainproof, isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t say as to that. Ain’t never been near enough to rightly tell. And I ain’t aimin’ to go near that place, neither!”

The girls were puzzled. They exchanged glances of bewilderment.

83

“What makes you talk like that?” Irene demanded. “Is there some mystery about the place?”

“Mystery!” Stella scoffed, before the old lady could answer. “I guess my father would know if there was some mystery about the place!”

“If he ain’t visited Foamin’ Falls lately, there ain’t no reason why he should know,” said the woman.

By this time the old gentleman had satisfied his hunger to some extent and so could take a more active interest in the proceedings.

“If I was you, Ma,” he remonstrated, “I wouldn’t go fillin’ the gals’ heads with all sorts o’ ghastly yarns. Won’t do no good as far as I can see.”

“’Twill do some good if it keeps ’em from goin’ to that house,” retorted the old lady, with a flash of her eyes and a

defiant toss of her head. “Anyways, I can at least warn ’em.”

“Warn us against what?” asked Mollie, trying to be patient. “What terrible thing is the matter with the house, anyway?”

“Enough,” responded the old lady solemnly. “That old house at Foamin’ Falls has got a hant!”

“A what?” gasped the girls together.

84

“She means it’s haunted,” Amy said wonderingly. “Now what _____”

Mollie gave a sudden squeal of delight.

“How jolly! Now I *know* we are going to enjoy ourselves!”

Grace chuckled.

“We certainly will give that ‘hant’ the time of his young life!” she said.

The old lady regarded the girls with astonishment while in the eyes of the old gentleman grew a dawning admiration.

“You mean,” said the former, “that after all I’ve told you you still expect to go to Foamin’ Falls?”

“And the old stone house!” said Mollie lightly. “Of course we do! Why not?”

The old gentleman chuckled and looked around at the group of eager young faces.

“D’you all feel the same about it?” he queried.

“Of course!” they chorused. It was almost as though they felt affronted by such a question.

“By cricky!” The old gentleman slapped a gnarled and wrinkled fist upon his bony knee, “if you ain’t gals after my own heart, I’m a——”

“Don’t you dare to say it, Samuel,” the old lady interrupted. “I’m surprised at you, settin’ such an example to these young ladies. Jest the same,” and she turned solemn again as she looked at the girls, “I think you’re just plumb foolish, if you’ll excuse an old woman for sayin’ so. I ain’t a finicky or nervous sort myself, but it would take a heap of urgin’ to get me near that place, now let me tell you!”

85

Irene sat down cross-legged before the old lady and fixed a pair of dancing eyes upon her.

“Tell us about the ‘hant’,” she coaxed. “I never met one before and I’d like to be able to recognize him when I do.”

“Irene, why ask for trouble?” put in Mollie, knowing as she spoke that it was useless to prevent the mischievous girl from indulging her whim. “What we don’t know, won’t hurt us, you know.”

“What we do know won’t hurt us either, as you know very well,” returned Irene, making an impudent face at the older girl. “Anyway, I don’t intend to be cheated out of a perfectly good ghost story!”

“I think you had better do as Mollie says,” observed Amy. But her protest was unheeded. The old lady had already begun her story.

“It began with Jasper Hill. He was the one first saw the rockin’ chair.”

“The rocking chair!” cried the girls as the story-teller paused and again regarded them solemnly. “What rocking chair?”

86

“I’ll tell you,” the old lady replied in a tone of reproof, “if you’ll please give me time.”

“I wish you wouldn’t, ma,” the old gentleman protested weakly. “I know ’tain’t right.”

The old lady treated this protest with the contemptuous silence she evidently thought it deserved.

“The rockin’ chair,” she continued, regarding her audience intently, “sets all by itself in the front room. You can see it any time you have the courage to go up the front walk. An’ it’s jest as plain on moonlight nights——”

“Yes! Yes!” they cried breathlessly; all of them fascinated now.

“Well, it seems one time Jasper Hill—he’s the mail clerk at Foam’n’ Falls—happened to be passin’ the old house an’ he had a curiosity to look in at the front window. He goes up the porch an’ looks in the window——”

She paused and the girls edged nearer.

“What did he see?” queried Irene beneath her breath.

“He see that old rockin’ chair,” said the old lady triumphantly. “An’ it was rockin’ away jest like they was some one sittin’ in it, and the moonlight was streamin’ over it an’ makin’ it look plumb ghastly, I can tell you.”

87

“Oh, so it was at night?” put in Amy.

“Yes. Didn’t I say so?” The old lady was evidently irritated by the interruption. “Jasper says as how he could feel the hair beginnin’ to stand up on his scalp—you know how it does when you’re terrible scared? Well, he gives one yell and gets away from that place like the old Nick was after him.”

“Please let me get this straight,” said Grace, as though she were learning a lesson at school. “You said the rocking chair was rocking, but there was no one sitting in it?”

Ma nodded, well pleased with the sensation she was making.

“Not a soul,” she answered.

“But there may have been tramps in the house, or something,” said Stella, hugely excited. “One of them may have been sitting in the chair and when he heard some one coming hid himself.”

The look the old lady bestowed upon the girl was almost pitying.

“In that case the chair would stop rockin’ a second or two after the person got up who had been sittin’ in it,” she pointed out. “But this chair didn’t stop. It kept on rockin’ easy an’ gentle an’ steady, like some one was sittin’ in it, readin’ a book or knittin’.”

By this time none of the girls was as gay as at the beginning of Ma’s story.

“Was this Jasper Hill the only one who saw the chair rock?” Mollie asked.

“Bless you, no, child! There was a-many who went back in the day time—never at night, mind—an’ they saw the same thing. Now no one goes there no more. If you enter that old stone house,” she sank her voice to a sepulchral whisper, “you’ve got more courage than I’ve got—nor yet any one else at Foamin’ Falls!”

CHAPTER XII

THE WRONG ROAD

For a long moment there was silence while the Outdoor Girls stared at the old lady as though hypnotized.

Her description of the destination to which they had been so blithely repairing was anything but a pleasant one. In fact, the description was so graphic that even in the reassuring sunlight they could feel their flesh creep. What would be their sensations when night fell?

Mollie was the first to fight off the spell that held them.

She shrugged and laughed. Then she went over to the pile of papers Amy had gathered and put a match to them.

“Well,” she said, turning back to the girls, “if we’re going, seems to me it’s time to start.”

The old gentleman beamed. The mouth of the old lady fell open in incredulity.

“You never mean you’re goin’ to that house anyway—you gals all alone?”

Mollie turned to the others, who had scarcely changed their position since the end of the startling tale.

“How about it, girls?” she asked quietly. “Are we going to let a story of ghosts spoil a perfectly good adventure for us?”

Grace roused herself with a deep sigh.

“Of course not, Mollie. Why, that *is* the adventure!”

“Quite so!” Irene jumped up. “It’s the most thrilling thing I ever heard of. Think of putting up in a haunted house——”

“And facing the ‘hant’ in his lair!” finished Amy, with a chuckle.

“When do we start, Mollie?” asked Stella. “I’m crazy to make a sketch of the ‘hant’! Wouldn’t that be novel? I might even sell it as a curiosity!”

Irene giggled.

“It’s the only way any of your sketches would be sold!” she said wickedly, and Stella caught her and ruffled her hair until it stood up in charming disarray on her pretty head.

“Come on, you two, stop your fighting. Don’t you know we have a serious time ahead of us?” Though Grace laughed as she said it, she knew, as did all the girls, that a good deal of joy had been taken from their adventure by the tale of the old lady. She, like the others, was anxious to get to Foaming Falls while there was still plenty of daylight in which to inspect their new and “spooky” quarters.

The old lady did not cease to protest against their mad resolve of proceeding against all caution to the old stone house until

the girls had finally said good-bye and were on their way to the spot where they had left their automobiles.

Even then they could hear her apostrophizing her husband excitedly.

“Tain’t right, noways, Samuel. I feel sort of responsible for those gals. They was so sweet and purty-like. If anything was to happen to them I’d feel like I was all to blame.”

“Nonsense, Ma. You can’t help it if the house is haunted. You gave ’em warnin’ enough. Too much, if you ask me.”

“Pa’s right,” muttered Mollie. “What you don’t know isn’t apt to hurt you.”

Stella laughed a bit nervously.

“If there is a ‘hant’ we would probably find it out anyway,” she said, with an attempt at airiness. “They have a way of making themselves felt.”

“Oh, you horrid girl! Do keep quiet!” Irene was actually shivering. “If you say any more I certainly will turn tail and run back to Deepdale as hard as I can go!” The more she thought of the “hant,” the more it seemed to get on her nerves.

92

“I don’t suppose we are going to allow an old woman’s story to frighten us,” said Amy quietly. They had reached the cars and were stowing away the empty hampers and other camp paraphernalia. “It seems to me the best thing for us to do is to forget we ever heard the weird yarn—that is, if we expect to have any fun at all at Foaming Falls.”

“Right you are, Amy!” returned Grace. “Otherwise, we might just as well turn back to Deepdale at once.”

“And acknowledge we’re afraid—and of ghosts!” added Mollie scornfully. “Think what the boys would say. We never would hear the end of this escapade.” She climbed into her car and started the motor. The sound was familiar and reassuring. Mollie glanced about at the Ford.

“Back out first, Stella, will you?” she called. “I can’t get out of here without more room.”

Stella obeyed. She was a bit nervous with the eyes of the other girls upon her. But aside from scraping her rear guard against an inconvenient tree, she managed very well. In a few moments they were clear of the woods and once more rolling easily over the road. 93

They had gone only a short distance when Mollie found by the road map that they must leave that highway and diverge onto the mountain road that led with many tortuous turnings and windings up to Foaming Falls.

However, for a considerable distance the road was not so bad as Mollie had feared. Although rough and bumpy in spots and full of sharp curves, it was fairly level most of the way. Still, it was necessary to proceed cautiously, and Mollie grew impatient as she realized that the afternoon was getting well along.

“Think we can make it before dark?” Grace asked once. For some time the candy box which was her inseparable companion had lain open beside her, neglected and forgotten.

“I don’t know,” Mollie answered shortly. “This road isn’t any too good.”

They came suddenly to an obstruction in the road and a sign:

Bridge Down. Detour.

“All that was needed to complete our happiness!” cried Mollie, in exasperation. “And just look at that road they are switching us to!”

Grace and Amy looked and were not encouraged.

94

“Maybe it won’t be so bad when we once get on it,” Amy suggested mildly and received a withering glance from Mollie.

“It will be ten times as bad as it looks,” she retorted. “You ought to know that as well as I do, Amy Blackford. We’ve met enough of those roads in our previous adventures.”

Stella tooted impatiently from the rear. Mollie answered by waving her hand toward the barred road.

“Detour!” she shouted. “Follow me—if you can!”

Mollie turned and backed and got off for a good start on the wretched road.

“Hold your hats, girls. We’ve got to make time and I don’t

intend to humor these bumps. Ouch—that was a good one!”

They met other “good ones,” many of them!

“Help! My jaw will never be the same again,” wailed Grace, holding on to that part of her anatomy. “Every tooth has come loose from its moorings!”

“As long as you don’t swallow any of them you’re tolerably safe,” said Mollie calmly. “Hold on, now! Sharp curve ahead!”

They looked back from time to time to observe Stella’s progress and found her following gallantly after them, jarring and jolting but always there about thirty feet behind.

95

“She’s game, that youngster,” said Mollie admiringly. “When you think that this is her first long trip and her first experience as a real chauffeur one has to marvel.”

“Lots of fun too, both of them,” Grace agreed. “We did a remarkably clever thing when we allowed them to join our distinguished club—*ahem!*”

“She doesn’t mind handing herself roses, does she?” laughed Amy.

“As long as I’m handing them to you at the same time, you shouldn’t object!” retorted Grace.

After a while, when they had failed to come out again on the main road, Mollie came to the uncomfortable conclusion that they were lost.

“What fun!” sighed Grace. “Alone in a Woodland Wilderness; Four Girls and a Fifth. Wouldn’t that make an interesting title for a book?”

“Not when we happen to be the four girls and a fifth,” retorted Mollie. “I am having far from an enjoyable time, I can tell you. Will somebody please tell me where we go from here?”

They had come to a crossroads and there was no signpost, no writing of any sort to tell the bewildered wayfarer which way to turn to reach the main road.

96

Mollie stopped the car. She was baffled and impatient. More than that, she was becoming actually worried. It was no small thing, this being lost in a strange country with the responsibility for the mishap on her shoulders. She had the road map. It was up to her to keep the road.

Amy had closed her eyes and was saying something beneath her breath, pointing her finger from left to right.

“What *are* you doing?” demanded Mollie.

“‘My mother says that I shall take this one!’” chanted Amy, and triumphantly pointed her finger at the fork that turned to the right. “Go that way, Mollie. You can’t miss the road!”

Grace chuckled and Mollie snorted.

“What sort of buncombe is this?” she demanded. Nevertheless she threw in her clutch and turned to the right. “The Fates defend you, Amy Blackford, if you guessed wrong,” she said. “This is a terrible road and I doubt if we could back and turn

however great the necessity. If we get stuck, here we shall have to stay till the end of time!”

Once more they went ahead but this time with added caution for every moment the road seemed to grow worse.

97

“I—I—don’t know about this,” stammered Amy at last. “Oh, Mollie, look!”

There was no necessity to call on the newly-appointed leader of the Outdoor Girls to look for all could see what was ahead. But that knowledge came too late. Crash! went the first car through a thin fringe of bushes. Bump! followed and then the car came to a standstill in a hollow two feet deep and half filled with muddy water. A wild shriek arose and the second car came to a halt with a suddenness that nearly hurled its occupants through the windshield.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

“Now we are in a pickle.”

“Anybody hurt?”

“Well, I know I’m shaken up,” groaned Grace, as she flung aside a suitcase that had gone up in the air to land in her lap.

“I thought I was going through the windshield, sure,” panted Stella.

One after another the girls got out and inspected the car that had landed so unceremoniously in the mudhole in the woods.

“Looks as if we were stuck for keeps,” sighed Amy.

“And night coming on, too,” added Irene.

“If only I didn’t break an axle or some springs,” came anxiously from Mollie.

The automobile was too deep in the mud to make much of an inspection. Mollie looked it over as well as she could and concluded that the axles at least were intact. Then she made the discovery that the woods road wound around the mudhole and that something like a real highway was not a great distance beyond.

“You’ll have to help haul me out, Stella,” she said. “It’s lucky we brought the chain along.”

99

Stella understood, and soon she was working the Ford around the mudhole. This done she backed up as near as she dared, and then the chain was fastened to both cars and Mollie got down behind the wheel she had been manipulating.

It was no easy task to budge the mired car, but at last it came out of the hole, safe and sound, and both cars rolled forward to the safer ground beyond.

“Good work, Stella!” cried Grace. “You deserve a medal.”

“I didn’t do so much,” was the answer. “Mollie’s car helped itself a whole lot.”

“Come on, we must have many miles still to go,” said Amy anxiously.

Mollie would not believe they had actually found the right road again until they came out upon it and saw a short distance back of them the ruins of a bridge.

They encountered no further detours and it began to look as though they would get to Foaming Falls in reasonably good season after all.

By common, though tacit, consent they had not mentioned the old lady’s weird story. They knew that to discuss the ghastly details would be to work themselves into a state of mind which would make absolutely impossible their stay at Foaming Falls.

100

As it was, the nearer they came to their destination the more their thoughts centered upon the unpleasant subject. They longed for, yet dreaded, their first sight of the old stone house.

As they came to the outskirts of Foaming Falls village they noticed a difference in the temper of the people. These were friendly enough about giving directions and advice—the girls were frequently forced to stop for both—until they heard of the chums' destination.

At the mention of the old stone house the expressions of the country folk changed immediately from amiable curiosity to suspicion and dread. They regarded the girls, as Grace afterward declared, as though they themselves were inhabitants of the shadow world.

This attitude on the part of the natives confirmed the old lady's story and did little to reassure the girls. After the second of these meetings Amy voiced the unspoken thought of them all.

“I don't know but what the wisest thing, after all, would have been to turn back to Deepdale. Now we couldn't possibly start back until to-morrow, no matter how much we wanted to.”

101

“Do we want to?” asked Mollie, in a queer voice.

There was silence. Then Grace spoke resolutely.

“I don't suppose there's anything to be gained by refusing to admit that this weird and ghastly story—silly as it is—has us pretty well scared. I can't say that I myself will particularly

relish spending a night in the place. But I'm going to do it because I'm more afraid of being thought a coward. I'll spend the night in that house if I have to do it alone!"

"There speaks resolution," laughed Mollie. "You won't have to stay there alone, Grace dear."

They came after a short time to the general store at Foaming Falls where one could purchase anything from stockings to cheese.

Before the store Mollie stopped the car. She jumped out and stretched herself to relieve her cramped muscles.

"Better get what canned goods we need here," she said, and beckoned to Stella as the Ford slithered to the curb behind the big car. "Better all come," she called. "There will be plenty to carry."

102

There were several loungers in the store sitting or standing about a stove which, though now fireless and rather dreary looking, still seemed to furnish a center about which all could gather.

These looked up curiously as the girls entered and several of them had the grace to remove their feet from the fender about the stove. One of these was a tall fair-haired, gangling young man with a wide, easily smiling mouth and merry grey eyes.

"Better be gettin' on to the post-office, Jasper," said one of the loungers, addressing the grey-eyed young man. "Old Si will come hollerin' his head off for you like he done before."

“Si just loves to holler,” returned the gangling young man addressed as Jasper. “Why deny the poor old boy the pleasure that’s comin’ to him?”

The girls were conscious of a vague stirring of memory at the mention of the young man’s name, but they were too busily engaged with the grocery clerk to pay much attention to the conversation of the loungers.

But when they were about ready to go, with packages made up containing food enough to last them for at least a week, a diversion occurred that could not fail to attract their attention. 103

A small, weazened, worried-looking man dashed into the store, looked wildly to right and left and then rushed up to the gangling young man named Jasper.

“You lazin’ again!” he cried, fairly dancing on his short legs. “With all the evenin’ mail still to be got ready and delivered? What you aim to do, anyway—worry me into an early grave?”

“No such luck, Si,” drawled the young man, slowly disentangling his long legs from about the chair. “Come to think of it,” with a not unamiable smile, “it couldn’t be such an early grave, could it?”

“Don’t you go slingin’ insults at my age, young feller,” said the little man as he retired toward the door, shaking his fist at the postal clerk. “You stop your loafin’ and git to work, Jasper Hill, or your place’ll be took by some one else. Come on now! Get a move on!”

“Jasper Hill!” thought the girls, with a start.

As they followed the young fellow out of the store Amy plucked at Mollie’s sleeve.

“That’s the man the old lady was telling us about—the one that started the story about the rocker,” she whispered.

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“I know,” and Mollie nodded.

The young man had paused on the steps of the store, evidently reluctant to resume his labor. A sudden impish impulse came to Mollie and she acted on it.

Stepping to Jasper Hill’s side and raising her eyes innocently to his, she asked:

“Would you mind directing us? We are strangers in the neighborhood.”

“Not at all,” said the young fellow, regarding Mollie with frank approval. “What do you want to know?”

“Which road we have to take to get to the old stone house on Foaming River,” said Mollie demurely.

“You ain’t aiming to put up there!” said Jasper Hill, half as an assertion and half as a question.

“Of course we are,” replied Mollie, feigning irritation. “We have come to spend a little vacation there.”

“A little vacation!” The young man’s expression was fatuous, his eyes seemed about to pop from his head. He made a visible effort to gain command of himself and the situation.

“Now, look here!” he said. “You girls bein’ strangers in these parts explains why you don’t know about that house. You can’t stop there. There’s an inn in town—at least, that’s what it likes to call itself—and you’d better put up there for to-night.”

105

“What’s the matter with the stone house?” queried Mollie, the imp in her still uppermost. “Why can’t we stay there if we want to?”

The young man looked embarrassed, glanced at Mollie, looked away again, then finally blurted:

“Because, if you’d like to know the truth, that house is haunted!”

This was Mollie’s chance to show her scorn for all such superstition. She laughed merrily and Jasper Hill seemed not only taken aback by her merriment but grossly offended as well.

“All right, you can laugh if you like,” he said grumpily. “But if you don’t come runnin’ back here to-night, askin’ for shelter at the inn, my name ain’t Jasper Hill. You know that old saying about the fellow who laughed last!” And, with a touch to his disreputable old straw hat, he turned and lounged across the street toward the post-office.

“Now you’ve offended him,” said Amy regretfully. “It really

seems a shame. He meant his advice to be friendly.”

“Maybe he will keep back our mail, who knows?” chuckled Grace. “You ought to be careful whom you pick on, Mollie.”

106

“It was funny though—when his mouth dropped open,” Irene added, with a reminiscent giggle. “It looked big enough to swallow the Ford.”

“Anyway, that boy will have something to think about for a little while,” said Mollie as she stowed away the last of the packages. “Something to add a little excitement to the dull life of a postal clerk.”

“I have a feeling,” said Grace as she climbed in over the packages, “that our own existence during the next few days is not to be entirely free from excitement.”

“Oh, look at that lovely golden collie! He looks like Hesper!” cried Irene, pointing up the street to a dog trotting after its master. “I think it’s just too mean that the police can’t get any trace of those stolen dogs. I don’t believe they try!”

“Oh, I’m sure they do,” answered Mollie. “They had very little to work upon, you know. But come on, Irene, get in there with Stella and let’s be off.”

The girls drove on quickly. Jasper Hill had been too greatly stupefied by Mollie’s revelation to answer her question concerning the direction in which lay the old stone house. But the girls really had need for no further aid on this point since one fact had been reiterated by every stranger they

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had questioned. After reaching the general store in the village of Foaming Falls they were to follow the main road straight ahead as the crow flies. There was a church on the outskirts of the village and about a mile farther on was the old stone house.

They came to it sooner than they had expected. Stella caught a glimpse of the old house set well back from the road with a glint of water in the background.

She tooted wildly to Mollie and the latter waved back reassuringly.

“I guess,” said Mollie to Amy and Grace, “this is where we get off!”

CHAPTER XIV

INVESTIGATING

A beautiful spot, the surroundings of the old stone house, despite its desolate appearance. The house itself was set high on a knoll which in the rear sloped back sharply toward the river.

Near the house a clearing had been made and wild flowers bloomed in riotous tangle everywhere. On every side great old trees flung out their protecting branches.

As the Outdoor Girls alighted and looked about them they could hear the silvery rush of the falls in the distance, the merry ripple of the water nearer by.

“Beautiful!” murmured Grace. “What a spot for a vacation!”

“Oh, how that beautiful river calls to me!” came from Stella. “Girls, how long will it take to unpack our bathing suits?”

Mollie laughed.

“We have a good deal to do before we think of bathing suits,” she said. “We’ll have to do some scurrying about if we expect to get anywhere near settled before dark.”

The statement awoke the girls unpleasantly to the realization that the moment had come when they must brave the

mysteries and terrors of the “haunted house.”

Outside every thing was beautiful and sunny and friendly. If only they might remain outside!

Mollie, who sensed the tension in the air, decided on quick action.

“You have the key, haven’t you, Stella?”

For answer the latter removed the key from a ribbon about her neck.

“Here,” she said, holding it at arm’s length as though it shared the ghastly secret of the house. “You open the door, Mollie.”

“Front door or back?” asked Mollie briskly.

“I think it’s the back. Dad said the front lock was always hard to turn.”

Mollie, as well as the other girls, experienced a quick sensation of relief. It was in the front room of the house that the vacant chair rocked and it was from the front porch of the house that the ghostly phenomenon had been witnessed. The girls had no great desire at that moment to enter the house by the front door!

They had driven the cars down the weed-overgrown driveway around the side of the house. They made their way now around to the back and found an old vine-covered back porch.

“Let’s hope the key works,” said Mollie as she fitted it in the lock.

She exerted pressure and the key turned. She grasped the knob and the door swung slowly inward.

The damp and musty odor that came forth from the interior was scarcely reassuring. The girls paused and faced each other irresolutely. No one cared to be the first to explore behind that open door.

Suddenly Mollie gave a little exclamation of disgust at herself, flung wide the door and marched boldly into the space beyond.

This proved to be a narrow passage at one end of which stood a tall, old-fashioned ice-box. The girls followed closely as Mollie pushed open another door and entered the kitchen.

Not a bad place, that kitchen, though the musty odor still persisted and dust and cobwebs were everywhere. Mollie’s first act was to throw the windows wide open.

“Get some fresh air in here and it won’t be so bad,” she said. “Come on in, girls,” she added, with a laughing glance at the doorway where the others still lingered, irresolute. “Nothing will bite you.”

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“I’m not so sure of that,” giggled Irene, and was immediately silenced by a chorus of indignant protests.

With the fresh sweet air flowing in at the open windows, the girls’ spirits began to revive. They started immediately on a

tour of exploration and found that there was an abundance of tableware, cooking utensils, and old china stowed away in the dusty cupboards. These would all have to be thoroughly scoured before they could be used, of course, but that part was comparatively easy.

“I was afraid we might have to eat with our fingers,” said Irene. “Hello! what’s this?” She had stopped before the sink. But it was plain to be seen that it was not the sink that engaged her attention, but rather the rusted object above it.

“Oh, that!” Stella said, stopping beside her. “Haven’t you ever seen a kitchen pump before? See, you have to grab hold of the handle like this.”

She seized the clumsy bit of iron and gave it a vigorous wrench. A horrible grinding, groaning noise came from the mouth of the pump—a noise so weird and startling in that ghostly place that the girls started and jumped back. 112

Stella dropped the handle as though it had burned her.

“Wh-what was it?” gasped Mollie.

“Only the pump.” Stella was trying to laugh and not making a great success of it. “It probably hasn’t been used in ages and I scared the poor old thing to death.”

“And the rest of us, too,” said Grace reproachfully. “The next time you do that, Stella dear, please give us warning!”

Mollie approached the old pump and regarded it curiously.

“I wonder if that old thing will really pump water,” she said, and resolutely laid hold of the handle.

The pump groaned again but Mollie kept on doggedly and Irene came forward and took hold of the handle to help her. It was hard work and the faces of the two girls grew red with exertion, but they were finally rewarded by the spurting out of a thin stream of water from the mouth of the pump.

Thus encouraged, they worked harder and soon had a good stream flowing into the rusted sink. It ran dirty at first but soon cleared itself.

“So much for that!” said Mollie triumphantly. “Now, girls, I think we had better go over the rest of the house before it gets too dark for us to see well. We’ll have to fix up some sort of sleeping quarters, you know.”

113

The girls did know, but they were not particularly cheerful about it. To get to the rooms upstairs one must presumably pass the parlor, and in that parlor was—the rocking chair.

However, Mollie was already leading the way resolutely from the kitchen to the adjoining room and the others had no choice but to follow.

The next apartment was the dining room, and this they found not at all bad. To be sure, the furniture was dark and gloomy enough and the place had the same musty, closed-in odor as the rest of the house.

But there was a bay window at one side of the room with a wide window seat. And on the further side was a great, old-

fashioned fireplace.

“We’ll find some good dry wood to-morrow and have one crackling fire in the grate,” said Mollie exultingly. “Girls, I begin to see where we are going to have loads of fun.”

Despite her cheery words, Mollie found it hard to open the door into the hall. It was locked, surprisingly, on the inside and the lock groaned complainingly as she turned the key in it.

The door open, the hall without took on a dark and ominous appearance that nearly daunted the girls, overtired as they were by their hard trip. It seemed for a moment that they could not force themselves to venture into that grim and cobwebbed place, to pass in semi-darkness the door of that mysterious front room.

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Irene made a move as though to retreat to the comparative cheerfulness of the dining room and kitchen, but Mollie halted her sharply.

“We can’t sleep in the kitchen, you know,” she said. “Come on, girls! One, two, three—and up!”

They kept close together from instinct. The doors of the front rooms were closed. The girls saw the wide staircase and made for it as quickly as they could.

Reaching the staircase, they ran up the steps, stumbling and crowding each other. They had a horrible feeling that some one, some *thing*, pursued them from those quiet rooms below!

CHAPTER XV

A TOUCH IN THE DARK

In the upper hall the Outdoor Girls leaned weakly against walls and door casings, looking sheepish and very much ashamed of themselves.

“A fine crowd we are!” cried Grace scornfully. “Afraid of our own shadows!”

“Well, we aren’t any more,” said Mollie, adopting the brisk matter-of-fact tone that always seemed to help in such emergencies. “Come on, girls, it’s getting dark and we still have a good deal of exploring to do. Front rooms first?”

“Oh, who cares as long as we get it over with?” came feverishly from Irene.

“I’m sorry I got the club into this,” said Stella contritely. “I didn’t know the house was haunted.”

“It’s not your fault,” answered Mollie quickly. “We’ll have to get over being scared, that’s all.”

The girls found the four rooms on the upper floor anything but reassuring. They were all furnished in black walnut and the pieces were stiff and stilted in line.

The two front rooms were large and were joined by a

communicating door. Each boasted a huge four-poster bed, an old-fashioned dresser and a highboy—this last, the girls thought, about the ugliest piece of furniture conceivable.

The only difference in the furnishings of the two rooms, as far as the girls could see, was that the larger one contained a cretonne-covered cot.

On the table in one of the rooms the girls also discovered a small kerosene lamp.

“There were two other lamps downstairs,” Mollie observed, turning the wick to see if there was enough of it left to light. “We shall have some sort of illumination, anyway.”

“I came across a can of kerosene downstairs, too,” said Stella. “And that’s lucky, because we never thought to buy any.”

The two rooms at the back of the house on the second floor were far more dreary and deserted looking than those at the front. One glance at them told the girls that the front rooms would be their sleeping quarters during their stay in the house.

“There will be room for two apiece in the big beds,” Amy said. “And one of us can use the cot.”

117

“That communicating door will be a blessing,” said Grace. “We can all be together, and, as we have so often been told, in unity is strength.”

“I don’t know whether that applies to ghosts,” said Mollie flippantly, and the next moment could have bitten her tongue out for making so silly a speech.

“Let’s get a light,” said Grace abruptly. “It’s altogether too dark for comfort up here.”

They descended the staircase in mass formation, trying not to hurry too much, yet scuttling past the closed door of the living room in haste.

In the kitchen they found the two lamps and lighted them.

“Better get our stuff out of the cars,” Mollie advised. “We’ll want the bedding and I think it will be just as well to make up our beds for the night, even before we eat.”

“I don’t feel as if I could ever eat again,” said Grace, shivering.

Irene giggled nervously.

“Good gracious, Gracie must be in a bad way if her appetite has failed her. I wonder if there is a good doctor in Foaming Falls!”

Mollie was glad that the girls could still joke and tried her best to keep up a running fire of light conversation as they went back and forth, carrying the luggage from the cars. This was a heroic attempt for Mollie, too, since, in her heart, she dreaded the return to the upper rooms as much as anybody.

At last all the things were indoors. Mollie suggested that they spread the tarpaulins over the cars as a precaution against wind and weather.

“It may rain to-night,” she said. “Seems to me the air is rather damp.” And all this when the day had been a gloriously clear one and the evening gave no promise whatever of storm! Was Mollie deliberately trying to put off the evil moment when they would have to pass the parlor door again? The girls did not have to wonder—they knew and were grateful for the few moments of respite.

With the cars snugly insured against the weather no further excuse for loitering below remained.

The girls shouldered sheets and pillowcases and a blanket apiece—for the nights often blew up cold and raw in the mountains. Mollie went ahead carrying one lamp and Grace was designated to bring up the rear with another.

“Why anybody should pick on me—” protested the latter plaintively. But her voice died away suddenly. In breathless silence they approached the closed door of the parlor.

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Was it imagination or did they hear a weird small scratching sound within that room? The girls did not stop to inquire, but stampeded up the stairs.

It was little short of a miracle that saved Mollie and Grace and the kerosene lamps they carried from immediate and perhaps frightful disaster. As it was, they breathed twin sighs of tremulous relief as they set the lamps upon the table.

“Mollie,” Grace demanded in a frightened whisper, “what was that noise we heard in the room below?”

Before Mollie could attempt to make reply the quiet of the upper rooms was broken by a shrill and terrible scream. The next moment Irene staggered into the room, wild-eyed, sobbing.

“Oh, I must get away from this horrible place! Do you hear? I’ve got to get out!”

CHAPTER XVI

IRENE'S STORY

The terrified Irene was actually following her words with action. Grace and Mollie caught her as she started to plunge past them into the shadows of the hall.

“Come back here, Irene! What is the matter? Answer me!”

In her fright and bewilderment Mollie was shaking the younger girl roughly.

“Stop crying and tell me. What frightened you so?”

The girls were clustered within the pale radiance of the lamps, their faces white and tense. Irene had sunk upon the edge of the bed, trembling violently. Mollie still retained her hold upon the girl's shoulder.

“Oh, I felt it!” Irene's voice sank to a tense whisper. “It was like a hand, a shadowy hand, brushing across my face!”

Amy cried out and caught the arm of the girl nearest her. This happened to be Stella.

“What happened then?” she asked feverishly.

121

“I ran in here. I thought I should die of fright. Oh, it was horrible, horrible! Don't let's stay here to-night, girls! Can't

we get out? Can't we?"

With an effort Mollie pulled herself together.

"We could," she replied with a pitiful imitation of her usually brisk manner. "But since we have come this far, it seems to me we ought to manage to put up with one night, at least."

"The thing that brushed your face, Irene, was probably a cobweb. Goodness knows, there were plenty of them when we came up here before." Grace was bravely trying to follow Mollie's lead.

But Irene stubbornly shook her head. She was calm now, but pale and shaken.

"It was not a cobweb," she said decidedly. "I opened another door—I think it was probably the door leading up to the attic—by mistake. Before I could close it again I heard a horrid slithering noise and something brushed past my face. It was a hand, I tell you. I could feel it reaching for me out of the darkness."

Mollie jumped quickly to her feet. She knew that their courage could stand no more of this. She was conscious herself of a desire to turn and run to get somewhere, anywhere, away from this terrible house—to go where there were people and lights and familiar things.

122

"We need something to eat; that's what's the matter with us," she said. "Anybody's nerves are apt to be jumpy on an empty stomach. I think what frightened you, Irene, was, as Grace said, only a dangling cobweb. We'll get after them with the

broom and dustcloth to-morrow and so lay that particular kind of ghost.”

Irene was silenced, but it was easy to see she was not in the least convinced. It required considerable persuasion and Mollie’s arm about her to induce her to descend the stairs and again pass the closed door of the front room.

Once in the kitchen, all felt better and set about preparing the evening meal with more cheerfulness than they had yet shown.

“Let’s get something we don’t have to cook,” Amy suggested. “I have a horror of that oil stove. I’m quite sure it won’t work.”

“Oh, it will work all right,” said Mollie. “Only I’d rather have time to clean it and refill the tank before we experiment.”

“What shall it be then?” asked Stella as she examined the row of canned goods they had bought at the general store. “Baked beans or sardines?”

“Both—and plenty of them!” commanded Grace. “I have just begun to realize what a painfully empty void I possess.”

123

“Ha, she recovers!” cried Irene, trying her best to follow Mollie’s example and be brave. “I guess we won’t have to call in the doctor, after all.”

By the time the five Outdoor Girls had consumed the contents of several cans of beans and sardines and two quart bottles of

milk they found themselves in better spirits. They could even face with equanimity another trip through the terrors that lurked in the gloom of the big hall.

Mollie took advantage of this spurt of renewed courage—she knew from her own sensations that at the very best it was only temporary—to urge the girls upstairs at once.

“We can leave the dishes until morning,” she said. “I, for one, am too tired to work that old pump to-night and everything will seem better in the sunshine. What do you say?”

“Wisdom falleth from your lips like pearls, my dear,”
applauded Grace. “Let’s hie us to the upper regions
while we still have strength. Only,” she added, with a frown
that included them all, “if anybody jostles my elbow again
while I am carrying the lamp she is apt to get badly jostled in
turn. Remember, I carry a dangerous weapon in the shape of
yonder trusty lamp, and I shall not hesitate to use it should
occasion require!”

124

“Break not that lamp on my old white head,
But use poor Stella’s head instead!”

chanted Irene, thereby proving that she had recovered from her fright in the hall above.

Stella gave her a good-natured shove toward the door.

“Better not pick on me or I’ll make a cartoon of you what am a cartoon,” she threatened.

“You’ve already done your worst,” Irene retorted. “I’m not

afraid of you any more.”

The girls managed to get upstairs without a return of the wild panic that had sent them scuttling twice before. Perhaps it was the effect of their dinner or perhaps it was because they were already becoming used to the happenings in that strange house.

Nevertheless, they were relieved when they reached the sanctuary of the front rooms and locked the doors behind them.

“As though locking the door could keep the ghost out!” said Amy whimsically. Nevertheless, she turned the knob experimentally the second time to make quite sure that the door was locked.

125

The sight of the beds made up with clean sheets and blankets neatly spread at the foot was reassuring. The girls had dug up their nightgowns too on that earlier visit to the upstairs rooms, and these lay invitingly at hand, giving an atmosphere of home to that dreary place.

The windows had been flung wide open and the soft summer breeze floated in, bearing the scent of flowers and the musical rush of the waterfall in the distance.

Irene came over and joined Mollie at the open window. Together they stared out into the mysterious night. Irene sighed and turned away.

“It would be such a beautiful place if it were not for that miserable ghost story,” she mourned.

“Well, all we have to do is to say we don’t believe it and then stick to it,” Mollie pointed out.

Irene shook her head and there was a return of the frightened expression in her eyes.

“I could say that,” she whispered, “if it had not been for that thing in the hall, Mollie. That was horrible!”

“Sh-h!” Mollie put a firm hand over the younger girl’s lips. “Don’t let’s talk about it any more, dear. Probably to-morrow we shall all feel very different about everything.”

126

It was decided that Mollie and Irene should sleep together in the room without the couch, the other three girls occupying the second room and taking turns with the couch.

Grace was to be the first to have the single bed and she insisted that it be moved from its close proximity to the door.

“Not that I’m in the least nervous,” she told the teasing girls, “but I really do need all the air I can get from that window over there.”

They crawled into bed declaring that they could not sleep—and slept almost as soon as their heads touched the pillow.

It was near midnight when Mollie awakened to find the moonlight streaming in her window. She lay there, every nerve tense, listening.

127

CHAPTER XVII

BAYING THE MOON

Again Mollie heard the sound that had awakened her. With a swift sensation of relief she realized that it came from without the house.

Dogs were baying and barking in several different keys—the baying of hounds, short, yapping howls of terriers, the deeper bass of larger, fiercer dogs. For a time, half way between sleeping and waking, Mollie listened to the weird noise, not comprehending, half believing that she was still asleep and this was part of her dream.

Gradually she came to full consciousness and with a sudden movement sat upright in her bed. The full moon, brilliant above the trees, shone full on her, bathing her in the weird radiance.

Listening to the baying of the dogs with the moonlight streaming over her, she was seized with a sudden chill of terror.

She glanced swiftly toward the door. Nothing there, not even a shadow. In its gaunt dreariness the room stood all revealed.

Mollie slithered down under the sheet again and wondered, as

she shivered, whether she ought not pull up the blanket as well.

“It isn’t that kind of a chill, Mollie, and you know it,” she said, trying to scold herself out of such foolishness. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The scolding did no good whatever. She continued to shiver. The moonlight filled her with a sort of weird terror. And the baying of those dogs——

Mollie got up quickly, went over to the window and pulled down the shade with a jerk. She had not meant to pull it down so hard. The next moment the roller followed, the shade dropped on her head with a thud and clattered to the floor with a racket.

Instantly the other girls were awake and crying out in alarm.

“Good gracious, there’s the ghost!”

“Where? Where?”

“Oh, let me get out of this! Where did I put my bedroom slippers?”

Mollie sank down on the edge of the bed and began to laugh, quietly at first then with an abandon that shook the bed and brought Irene to her feet in an excited bounce.

129

“Whatever is the matter, Mollie Billette?”

Amy, Grace and Stella were standing in the doorway that

separated the two rooms, staring at the spectacle of Mollie holding on to her sides and half hysterical with mirth.

“What ails the child?”

“Has she gone crazy?”

“Oh, it’s you who are crazy!” Mollie gasped. “There’s your ghost,” pointing to the fallen shade. “Take a good look and may the hair rise on your head!”

“May some sense come into yours,” returned Grace grumpily. She hated to be roused from sleep and she hated still worse to be frightened by nothing at all. “Haven’t you any more sense than to pull shades down on you in the middle of the night, Mollie Billette?”

“It was the moonlight shining in the window,” Mollie explained, partially recovering her composure. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“There is a glorious moon,” said Amy, going over to the window.

“But listen to those dogs!” said Stella. “They evidently don’t agree with you, Amy. Gracious, what a noise they make!”

“Does sound weird,” said Grace, as all clustered close to the open window. “Wonder where they all come from?”

“Makes you kind of scary about venturing into the woods around here,” said Irene. “But let’s get back to bed,” she

added, with a yawn. “I was having a perfectly gorgeous time when Mollie pulled down the shade.”

“Some one will have to help me fix it again,” said Mollie, winding up the shade on its creaking roller. “I can’t sleep with that moonlight slithering over me.”

“Does moonlight slither?” giggled Irene. But despite her mockery she was the first to get the shade readjusted in satisfactory fashion and pulled down so as to obscure the too brilliant moonlight.

The girls tumbled into bed again and were soon asleep—all except Mollie, who lay awake for some time listening to the barking of the dogs

“It’s the most mysterious thing—where they all come from,” she said, and at the end of the sentence herself slipped off into dreamland.

With the coming of morning and bright sunshine much of the superstitious fear that had beset the Outdoor Girls on the previous night disappeared.

They set to work after breakfast to pump water enough for the dishes. They took their turn at the old pump and soon became almost expert in manipulating it.

131

They found too that the oil stove was not so old and useless as it looked. On the contrary, once the tank was filled, the flames under its three burners burned with a cheerful blueness and set the kettle to boiling in a few moments.

It is amazing how far a kettle of hot water can go toward making a cheerless, disorderly place neat and cheerful. It was not long before the dusty, musty kitchen of the day before became sweet-smelling and pleasant.

“Now for the hall and upstairs!” cried Mollie gayly as she hung up her dishcloth. “We’ll get all those cobwebs out and sweep and air the place before noon or my name isn’t Mollie Billette.”

“But, Mollie, the blue sky calls and the water urgently invites us to a dip,” Grace reminded her plaintively. “Must we do all this hard labor in one day—and that our first in this glorious spot?”

“I suppose it will take us several days to get the place really clean,” responded Mollie practically. “And of course we won’t try to do it all at once. Just the same, a couple of hours, if we all work together, ought to accomplish wonders.”

132

Mollie was right. With the prospect of a hike in the woods and a possible dip in the river later in the day, the Outdoor Girls set to work with a will and it was not long before the house began to take on an air of occupation.



THE OUTDOOR GIRLS SET TO WORK WITH A WILL.

They made beds, swept and dusted, cleaned out the cupboards, and put the few clothes they had brought with them carefully away.

They paid little attention to the part of the house they were not going to occupy, leaving that, as Stella said, for a rainy day when they had nothing better to do.

By tacit consent they all avoided the closed door leading to the parlor. Though the house had certainly lost a good deal of its terror for them, they still were uneasily superstitious about that rocking chair.

Not one of them but what knew that the easiest and most sensible thing to do would be to go into that room immediately, fortified by the bright sunshine, and have a good stern look at the rocking chair, bearing it out to the woods behind the house if necessary and breaking it into small bits or reducing it to cinders by means of a bonfire. Either method of destruction would have done equally well, since the main object was to prevent that particular rocking chair from ever rocking again.

However, though they acknowledged the sensible course, they failed to take it. Each one gave to herself a different excuse. It was too good a day to waste; they were too busy; or, to quote Stella again, they could save that part of the housecleaning along with the rest of it until that rainy day in the future when so much might be accomplished.

Mollie even went so far as to turn the key surreptitiously in the lock, thereafter dropping the key in her pocket. It was silly, of course, but somehow one did feel safer when things like that rocking chair were behind lock and key. Mollie privately decided that she would have a reckoning with the chair on the morrow—and wondered at the same moment whether she would really have the courage to do so.

After all, perhaps the best way of combating this superstitious nonsense was by ignoring it.

At any rate, as soon as the house was in order the Outdoor Girls got into their hiking suits and went out.

The glimpse which they had had of the river and the surrounding country on the evening before carried out its promise of beauty to the full upon closer acquaintance.

134

Foaming River was situated in a valley with the wooded and picturesque hills rising on either side of it. The Outdoor Girls wandered idly about for a while, drinking in the beauty of the woods, stopping to marvel over strange woodland flowers and ferns that abounded there.

They found several little mountain springs and paused to drink and finally stumbled over one of the prettiest and most picturesque little brooks they had ever seen.

Here they stopped and returned to childhood long enough to take off shoes and stockings and paddle in the delicious depths of it.

They stayed for a long time and would probably have stayed

longer had not the pangs of hunger urged them back toward the house.

“Let’s follow the river,” Grace suggested. “See, there it is, shining through the trees, and if we keep close to it there’s no chance of our getting lost.”

“Humph, as if there were any chance of that, anyway!” retorted Mollie.

However, Grace’s suggestion was followed. The girls had had enough of the woods for the time being and the river called to them.

It was farther to the river than they had thought at first. But when they stepped out upon its bank all gave an involuntary cry of delight.

135

The bank at that spot was high. Two great rocks jutted out over the swirling water and in the distance shone and sparkled the waters of the waterfall.

“Oh, perfect!” cried Grace, and dashed out along the rock.

She was not prepared for the damp and slippery footing it offered. She slipped, tried to recover her balance, and fell with a cry of fright over the edge of the rock!

136

CHAPTER XVIII

PERIL

For a moment Grace's companions were struck dumb by the surprise and horror of the thing.

Then they rushed forward, jostling each other, crying Grace's name wildly.

But before Mollie, who was ahead, could reach the spot where Grace had disappeared, another figure rushed past them, an apparition of flying yellow pigtail and swishing skirts.

In sheer surprise the others paused. In that moment of hesitation the stranger reached the treacherous ledge of rock and stood poised on it easily, as sure-footed as a deer, and peered over.

Then she ran back swiftly and lowered herself near the side of the rock where the descent was not so sheer.

Recovering, the Outdoor Girls followed. At least, they followed to the spot where the strange girl had disappeared. Here they were halted by an imperious command from this person herself.

137

“Don't risk your necks,” she cried. “I know this place. I'll get her!”

It was then that the girls saw Grace. With a great heart-throb of thankfulness they realized she had not gone tumbling on to the swirling river below but had been caught in a two-pronged formation of rock a few feet above the surface of the water.

She looked up at her companions beseechingly. They could see that her refuge was uncomfortable, probably dangerous, and that the rush and swirl of the water below made her faint and dizzy.

She seemed to their frightened eyes to be already slipping. What if she could not hold on to the slippery ledge of rock? To be swept into the river at that point meant almost certain destruction.

With this terrible thought in mind, Mollie forgot herself. Grace must be saved at all costs. She was about to lower herself over the edge when Amy caught her by the sleeve.

“That other girl’s got her, Mollie! Look! If you go down now you will only be in the way.”

Mollie saw that this was the truth. She drew back and watched the strange girl with amazed and admiring attention.

138

This stranger was possessed of great strength. She reached out a round brown arm and caught Grace firmly about the waist.

“Raise yourself. Careful!” the girls heard her say. “Feel for a footing on this rock. That’s right. Don’t be afraid. I ain’t going to let you slip. There, do you feel it? Good. Now easy—just feel your way. Don’t get scared. There you are!”

The four Outdoor Girls on the rocks above watched, fascinated, holding on to each other in their fierce anxiety. A terrible climb, with the rocks damp and slippery from the spray of the foaming river, only now and then a sapling or a tough bit of root to cling to for support.

“If they should slip—if they should slip—” muttered Stella until Mollie could stand it no longer and put a hand over her lips.

“Oh, don’t!” she begged. “I can’t bear it! They can’t slip! They mustn’t slip!”

“Oh, look there! They’re going!” came the sharp cry from Amy and, on top of it, one from Irene.

“No, they aren’t! That girl is hanging on. How strong she is! See, the worst of it is over!”

As Grace and the strange girl who had so mysteriously come to her rescue neared the top of the ascent, eager hands were stretched out to help them to safety.

139

The other Outdoor Girls clustered about Grace, half-laughing and half-crying, patting her all over to make sure no bones were broken.

The strange girl, temporarily forgotten, started toward the woods and had almost disappeared when Mollie discovered her.

“Oh, come here, please!” she called impulsively. “You weren’t going away without letting us thank you, were you?”

The girl paused uncertainly while a rich color flooded her skin and spread to the roots of her hair. Now that the danger was over she seemed suddenly and painfully shy.

“I don’t want thanks just for doin’ my duty,” she said simply.

“Well, I intend to thank you whether you like it or not!”

Grace had recovered from the shock somewhat and now came forward, albeit a bit stiffly, with outstretched hands. “It isn’t every day one has her life saved you know, and you’ve got to humor me long enough to let me say I’m grateful to you. You must be very strong.”

The girl regarded her bare, sunburned arms questioningly as though it had occurred to her for the first time that they might be worth something.

140

“Maybe I am, havin’ lived most of my life in the open,” she answered indifferently. “Anyway, I never thought much about it.”

“You don’t mind if we ask your name, do you?” Amy asked a little shyly. This great, bronzed girl rather overawed her.

The latter looked at Amy curiously as though she wondered that any one should take sufficient interest in her to want to know her name. But she gave it readily enough.

“My name’s Robina Robinson. I live over yonder,” with a vague gesture into the woods. “Hark, what’s that?”

She started back. The girls, listening, heard the noise that had startled her, the deep baying of a large dog and the yapping of

a smaller animal, probably a fox terrier.

Instinctively the girls moved closer together. There was something reminiscent of their adventure of last night in that deep baying.

In a moment they saw a great creature leaping toward them through the trees with a small dog, like an insignificant shadow, running at his heels.

“A police dog!” muttered Grace, and grabbed Mollie’s arm. “He looks as if he meant business, too.”

141

As the great beast, fangs bared in a terrifying snarl, sprang toward them the girls cried out and looked wildly about for sticks and stones with which to ward off the assailants.

Mollie had found a bit of stout sapling and Grace had armed herself with a rock when the sound of Robina’s voice, fearless and fierce, ordering the dogs back caused them to look toward her wonderingly.

The girl had picked up a long stick and with this she threatened the big dog and his yapping companion.

“Get back there, you! Get back there, you big brute, before I bring this stick down on your ugly head!”

She looked so splendid standing there, arm upraised in threat, head thrown back, eyes blazing with anger, that the Outdoor Girls paused to admire her despite their apprehension.

It was a thrilling struggle, that between the girl and the big

dog, a struggle of wills. The brute was in an ugly mood, and a police dog when roused is not easily daunted.

Nevertheless, as the girl advanced a foot he gave ground, slowly, head hanging, teeth bared, but he gave ground. With a final flourish of the stick and a stern command Robina made her victory complete. 142

The big dog bared his teeth, rumbled threateningly deep down in his throat, then turned and trotted off into the woods, the small dog at his heels.

“Why, you were wonderful!” This from Amy on a sincere note of admiration. “I never could have done a thing like that. How did you manage it?”

Robina flung down her stick and shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

“I’m used to dogs—all kinds,” she said, and turned once more to go.

“Can’t you stay with us a little while?” Irene interposed hastily. She, like all the Outdoor Girls, had taken a liking to this handsome country maid who took her really magnificent exploits so easily and indifferently. “We are going back to the old stone house. Won’t you walk with us a way?”

“The old stone house!” the girl repeated quickly. She stared at them with the first hint of curiosity she had shown. “You are staying there?”

Irene nodded while the other Outdoor Girls watched

with curiosity the effect of this statement on a native of the place. But if they expected any display of emotion on Robina's part they were destined to disappointment.

After that one quick query of surprise the old stolid expression of the girl's face returned—spread over it like a sudden pulling down of the shades in a lighted house.

“Can't you walk with us a little way?” Mollie repeated Irene's question.

The girl shook her head and turned away.

“I have work to do,” she said shortly. “I have been away too long already.”

Without a word of farewell she walked off, head thrown back as when she had faced the dogs, hands swinging sturdily by her side.

“What a splendid girl,” Mollie cried, looking after her. “She must be every bit of five foot ten. And so strong!”

“Disagreeable, too, you might add while you're about it,” said Grace, a bit nettled by the strange girl's manner. “Did you see the way she acted when I tried to thank her for saving my life? And she didn't even ask us our names!”

“I don't think she means to be disagreeable,” returned Mollie slowly as they turned to walk on toward the house. “She acts to me like a person who has spent a great deal of time by herself and has forgotten how to be sociable—if she ever knew. But no matter what we may think of

Robina,” she added, with a thankful glance at Grace, “the fact remains that we owe her a great big, big debt of gratitude. Whatever you do, from this time on, beware of a slippery rock, Grace dear!”

“Oh, dear, those dogs made me think of poor Hesper,” sighed Irene.

“Must have been because they were so unlike him, then,” giggled Stella.

When the girls came near the house, Amy held back, a troubled look in her eyes.

“I wish we didn’t have to go in,” she sighed. “The very look of the place fills me with dread!”

CHAPTER XIX

LOST

Although the other girls were not so frank about it as Amy, they all felt as she did about their present habitation. Nor did the passing days lessen their dread of the grim old house.

They came to spend more and more time in the open, taking basket lunches with them so that they would not need to return to the place until the gathering dark drove them homeward. There was only one thing they dreaded more than sleeping in the old stone house, and that was being caught in the woods after dark.

Ever since their meeting with Robina Robinson and the episode of the savage dogs the girls had had a fear of the woods. The thought of meeting the police dog in the depths of the woods was not a pleasant one.

They would probably have forgotten this episode and overcome their fear of the shadowy woods but for the fact that the barking of many dogs at night kept the incident fresh and vivid to them.

146

It was Stella who recalled Robina's statement that she was "used to dogs—all kinds," and wondered if this strange girl knew the secret of the weird canine serenade at night.

“Even if she did you would never get anything out of her,” Grace replied to this supposition. “I never saw such a close-mouthed person in my life.”

If the country about Foaming River had not been so genuinely beautiful and if the girls had not enjoyed themselves so thoroughly during the sunny daylight hours when they could forget the old stone house and the dusky woods they would probably have packed their bags and started back to Deepdale the second day after their arrival.

As it was, they lingered and hoped that they might overcome their dread of the house and solve the mystery of the barking dogs.

“Most things have a very simple reason when you know it,” Mollie remarked sagely.

“Yes. But that’s just the trouble,” Irene pointed out. “We don’t know. And after this no one can ever make me believe that ‘what you don’t know won’t hurt you’!”

Jasper Hill came back and forth from the village with letters. The girls noticed that on these trips he very carefully refrained from going to the front door and always brought the mail around to the side entrance. Also, though he was pleasant to the girls and exchanged some jokes and bits of village gossip with them, he never lingered long in the vicinity. The girls imagined they could hear his sigh of relief as he left the house behind him and set off down the road.

“You can see the ghost is still real to *him*,” Irene sighed after one such occasion. “Look—that foolish postal clerk is almost

running away from here!”

It was this remark that inspired Stella to do one of her humorous sketches. It was only a rough and hasty effort, but when she passed it around to the other girls they could detect the gangling likeness of Jasper Hill in the hurrying man's figure, while behind him—“just two jumps behind,” as Mollie laughingly remarked—was a ghostly figure floating along, feet scarcely touching the ground and bony claw outstretched as though to grip Jasper by the collar.

It was very funny, but there was something ghastly about it too. The girls laughed, but they shivered while they laughed.

Directly afterward they left the house in great haste and set off upstream for a swim in the river.

148

It was necessary to walk for the better part of a mile from the old stone house before one could reach that portion of Foaming River that was quiet enough to permit of bathing and boating.

Here was a small body of water cut off from the main river by the projecting arms of two tiny islands. Connecting this miniature bay with Foaming River proper was a narrow inlet scarcely wide enough for two boats to pass.

Near this portion of the river gathered all the summer pleasure seekers. There was a good hotel built close upon the shore of the picturesque river and a dock extended out into the water. Here was a boathouse where it was possible to hire by the day, week, or season, almost any sort of river craft that might be desired.

All these things delighted the girls and made one of the reasons for their prolonged stay at the old stone house.

They had hired two canoes for their own use immediately. And when they heard on the Thursday after their arrival by means of letters brought from the village and delivered hastily by Jasper Hill that Betty and Allen would come up by motor the following Saturday and that the three boys would follow them on a train that would get them to the place only a short time later on the same day, the girls immediately rented another canoe. There promised to be a great demand for these small pleasure craft during the next week or two and the girls dared not delay for fear there would be none left when their friends arrived.

149

“And what,” Irene declaimed, “is summer without a canoe?”

Needless to say they were immensely excited over the imminent arrival of their Little Captain, her very new husband, and the three boys.

Amy had received a nice long letter from Will, all to herself. Though the other girls begged and teased for a glimpse or a hint of the contents of this epistle, Amy persistently turned a deaf—though rosy—ear to their entreaties. “I suppose we ought to fix up one of those horrid musty back rooms,” Amy said when they were discussing ways and means of entertainment. “Though I don’t know how it can be fixed up to look anything but dreary and forlorn,” she added, looking about one of the small apartments.

“It can’t!” and Grace grimaced distastefully.

150

“Somehow, I hate the idea of putting Betty and Allen here.”

“Don’t let’s!” Mollie was struck with a happy thought and before any of them knew what she was about had run back to the front room and was stripping the cot of bedclothes.

“Now what—” began the girls as they followed and surveyed the scene.

Then they saw that to which Mollie pointed so triumphantly. The cot that they had been too indifferent to examine and that they had thought all the time to be a single one, was double. By seizing hold of a little iron railing at one side of it and pulling vigorously they could make a full-sized bed of it.

“Even so,” said Stella puzzled, “I can’t quite see——”

“Oh, you are all so dense!” Mollie stamped her foot at them impatiently. “Don’t you see that this makes it possible for Betty to bunk in here with us?”

“But Allen—” Amy protested.

“Allen will want to camp in the tent with the boys,” Grace said, suddenly seeing Mollie’s point.

“Even if he doesn’t want to he’ll have to,” giggled Irene.

“You don’t suppose he will want to be the only man in a houseful of girls, do you?” asked Grace.

“Oh, goodie!” cried Amy. “It will seem like having our Little Captain back again!”

“Won’t it be nice to see the boys, too?” Mollie added.

“Maybe,” she said so softly that none of the girls gathered the full purport of her words, “with them on the spot the ghost will take wings unto itself and fly away!”

Before the arrival of Betty and Allen and the three boys, the girls were destined to meet with more adventure.

It happened that on the Friday afternoon—the very day before the one on which the company was to arrive—the Outdoor Girls did an unusual and aggravating thing. They allowed themselves to become lost in the woods!

It came about in this fashion.

They had been wandering rather aimlessly, discussing happily the subject that had been uppermost in their minds since the day before.

Suddenly they heard a dog bark off in the distance and Grace—brave because of the imminent arrival of the boys, perhaps—suggested that they investigate in the direction of the sound.

The other girls hesitated, remembering the savage police dog. But Grace’s gibes and persistence eventually turned them in the direction of the distant barking.

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They wandered for a considerable distance but seemed to get no nearer to the sound than they had been at the start.

“Probably we have been brilliantly traveling about in circles,” Irene suggested, and chanted:

“The Outdoor Girls lost in the vale,
Like a pussy cat chasing its tail.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if that observation comes too close to the truth for comfort,” said Mollie a little anxiously. “Where, for instance, is that friendly little footpath we have been following all along?”

The girls attempted to answer the question by looking for the path. At first they searched confidently, laughing at themselves for entertaining any anxiety on the subject.

When the path remained undiscovered and they failed to find any familiar landmark confidence gave way to alarm. The girls began to feel harassed and searched rather wildly. All to no result. They faced at last the appalling fact that they were lost in the woods with darkness not far distant.

Were they mistaken in thinking that distant baying of the dog a little nearer?

“Whatever are we going to do?” queried Grace, trying to laugh. She stumbled and sat down on the ground from sheer weariness. “A pretty kettle of fish, I must say!”

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“Hark!” Mollie spoke sharply. “I thought I heard a whistle!”

They listened, but heard nothing.

“Guess again, Mollie.”

Once more Mollie cried out.

“There it is again! Hello-o-o!” she cried, making a megaphone of her hands. “Who’s there?”

CHAPTER XX

A GHOSTLY PHENOMENON

There was a moment of silence. Then the Outdoor Girls heard the sound of some one crashing heavily through the undergrowth.

“Where are you?” called a man’s voice that was familiar to them.

Jasper Hill! They could have cried with thankfulness.

The postal clerk appeared the next moment, a catch of fish slung over his shoulder, surprise and curiosity in his eyes at sight of the girls.

“Well, how did you get here?”

“If you will tell us how to get out, it will be more to the point!” Grace spoke dolefully and Jasper Hill suddenly understood their plight.

“Lost, eh?” he queried. “Well, now, that’s funny!”

“‘Funny’!” Irene caught him up indignantly. “I guess you wouldn’t think it was funny if you’d been in our shoes!”

“It’s funny,” repeated Jasper Hill, fixing her with a whimsical regard, “because, as it happens, you’re

within a stone's throw of the road!"

"Does sound rather ridiculous now you tell us about it," sighed Mollie. "But do be a good boy, Jasper, and show us out."

They came to the road almost immediately. As the girls thanked Jasper Hill and turned away, the latter spoke hesitantly.

"It's almost dark. You goin' to the old stone house?"

"Of course! Where else?" from the girls.

"You certainly don't still believe in that old ghost story, do you?" asked Grace tauntingly.

Jasper seemed to hesitate again, then spoke hastily. The expression on his usually merry face was solemn in the extreme.

"Have you ever looked in the window near the front door?" he asked, his voice instinctively lowered in key.

The girls answered in the negative, shivering and anxious to be on their way. It *was* getting dark.

"Then," said Jasper Hill, his tone still solemn and awesome, "I advise you to have a peek for yourself before you condemn everybody hereabouts as fools. Just take a look. I double-dare you!"

Mollie alone rose to the challenge.

“Nobody ever double-dared us and got away with it,” she assured him. “We will look in that foolish old window at that foolish old chair any time you say!”

“Then,” said Jasper Hill, turning away and grinning wickedly over his shoulder at them, “I dare you to do it now—with the darkness coming on!”

The girls watched him till he disappeared down the road then turned slowly toward the house. At the moment, in spite of the fact that he had helped them out of an embarrassing predicament, the girls found it in their hearts to wish Jasper Hill at the bottom of the sea.

“Are you really going to do it?” asked Amy as they reached the house.

“Do it?” cried Mollie, with forced bravado. “Of course I’m going to do it. You don’t suppose I intend to let a country bumpkin like Jasper Hill stump me, do you?”

The other girls said nothing, but followed Mollie along the path that led to the front porch—the path that they trod now for the first time since their arrival at Foaming Falls.

“If you look in that window,” said Irene, with a nervous giggle, “we all will, Mollie.”

“You don’t need to,” said the latter shortly. “I was the one to accept the dare.”

In spite of this, the other girls kept close to Mollie as she ascended the porch steps. Whatever horror lay

hidden in that closed front room, whether they would see something or nothing, the loyalty of the girls forbade that they permit Mollie to bear the revelation alone.

Yet it was so near to dusk and the window so grimed inside and out with cobwebs and dirt that the only way Mollie could see within the room at all was to peer closely, her nose almost touching the glass, hands serving as blinders to her eyes to shut out the confusing outdoor light.

She leaned close to the window, adjusting her sight to the dimness of the room, while the other girls crowded close, trying vainly to see into the room over her shoulder.

Suddenly Mollie gave a low, shuddering cry and, turning from the window, pushed wildly past her comrades.

“Oh, horrible, horrible!” they heard her mutter as she fled.

Frightened as they were, curiosity forced the others to press close to the glass to see with their own eyes what Mollie had seen.

There, in the center of the room, was the rocking chair, weirdly and horribly incited to motion by some hidden and mysterious power!

For one long, terrified, incredulous moment the girls stared. The blood in their veins seemed to congeal. It was as though they were suddenly enveloped in an icy wind.

Grace broke away, as though from some tangible spell. The others followed her, fleeing down the porch steps, following

Mollie around to the side of the house where they gathered close together and stared at each other with frightened eyes.

They were trembling. For awhile no one could speak.

Then, in a queer faraway little voice, Grace said:

“What was it, Mollie? Do you know?”

Mollie shivered and shook her head.

“Don’t let’s talk about it now!” she said.

The question and answer seemed to rouse her to a need for action. Mechanically she felt in the pocket of her coat for the key which had been entrusted to her from the beginning.

“We will have to go in. We can’t stay out here all night. How dark it is!”

At first the girls rebelled against entering the house at all. How could they stay in the place another moment with that rocking chair, rocking, rocking in the front room— Yet they could not remain outside. The shadows were growing in the woods.

They went in at last, choosing the lesser of two evils.

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The evening meal was eaten in silence—what little of it was eaten at all. The girls did not stop to wash the dishes. Their one thought was to pass that parlor door before the courage to do so entirely deserted them.

They got through with the ordeal somehow, reached the upstairs hall, which, they felt, was a sort of sanctuary for them. Mollie, as usual, went ahead, carrying the light while Grace brought up the rear with her lamp.

Amy's skirt caught on something. She paused to unfasten it. As she turned again something brushed her face with a whirring of wings and flew off in the darkness.

She cried out shrilly, her nerves suddenly beyond control. Her comrades came running to her, Mollie and Grace holding up their lamps so that they might see her face.

"It flew over there! It touched me!" Amy pointed waveringly to the shadows at the farther end of the hall.

The whirring sound came again close to their faces. Mollie raised her lamp and a great winged creature almost hit against it and darted off into the gloom again.

"Bats!" cried Irene hysterically. "Bats! I bet that's what scared me so badly that night, too. Oh, let's get out of this awful house!"

160

"Come into the room!" commanded Mollie. She pushed Irene before her and the other girls followed.

Even when the doors were shut and locked there was no sense of security. All felt going to bed was a mere form. None of them could possibly sleep.

"This is a terrible place," said Irene. She shivered as she slipped into place beside Mollie.

For once the latter did not contradict her.

The girls lay awake for a long time listening to the weird, unearthly howling of the dogs. It was long past midnight before any of them fell asleep and then their slumber was interrupted and fitful, broken by uneasy dreams.

When they got up the next morning they were a pale and sad looking group of girls. Mollie was pale, but she was also determined.

“We’ve got to do one of two things, girls,” she said, after breakfast. “We have either to lay that ghost once and for all, or we start back for Deepdale before noon to-day, regardless of whether Betty and the boys are coming or not. I, for one, don’t intend to spend another night like last night in this house.”

“I guess none of us does,” said Stella gloomily.

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“It was one long nightmare!” sighed Amy.

“Oh, how sorry I am that I got you to come here!” ejaculated Stella.

“Nonsense, Stella,” said Amy, throwing her arm about the younger girl. “It’s not your fault. We’re in this thing together.”

“Well, I vote that we take the bull by the horns, as it were, and have a look at that rocking chair in the full light of day,” said Mollie.

The others agreed, albeit a little unwillingly. Mollie marched ahead like a general leading a victorious army. But in her heart Mollie felt anything but valorous. She longed to run away from that spot as fast and as far as she could.

All the more credit to her, perhaps, that she fitted the key in the lock and opened the door of the front room without an outward tremor. They all stopped on the threshold and looked in.

Everything was as quiet and orderly as possible. The rocking chair stood in the center of the room on the same spot that it had stood the night before. But it did not rock!

After one startled glance the girls gathered courage to proceed farther into the room. The chair was still stationary!

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“Could we have imagined that last night?” asked Amy, in a queer little voice.

“If that was imagination, then we must all be crazy!”

They mustered courage after a moment or two to move the chair from the spot it had been occupying. They examined under it, around it and on all sides of it, finally pulling the worn old rug off the floor lest, perchance, the answer to the riddle might lie hidden there.

All to no avail.

Suddenly Amy uttered an exclamation. Her face lighted up eagerly while the girls stared at her.

“Do you think you can put the chair back exactly as it was before?” she asked.

“Of course,” retorted Grace and suited the action to the word. “What, may I ask, is the big idea?”

“It may not be a big idea at all. Then again—” Amy left the sentence unfinished and darted out to the porch.

The girls looked after her, bewildered, and in a moment saw her reappear at the window. She came close to it, looked in.

They were so absorbed in watching her that at first they did not notice the strange phenomenon. It was Stella who finally pointed to it.

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“Look!” she said in a voice hardly above a whisper. “The chair!”

Animated once more, the chair rocked steadily back and forth, a slow motion, rhythmic, deliberate!

Irene screamed, then stared as Mollie gave a joyful cry.

“Glory be, the ghost is laid! Long may he lie in peace in his grave! Amy, you precious old sleuth, come in here, while I fall on your neck!”

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CHAPTER XXI

A BONFIRE

“How easy it is to explain things after you know the explanation,” observed Grace.

“A very sage remark, Grace dear,” gibed Mollie.

“But Amy explained the old ghost without knowing the explanation,” giggled Irene.

The board in the flooring of the old house, just as Amy had suspected, extended out to the porch. It was on this board that Jasper Hill had stepped when he had made his first visit to the house—that epochal visit when the absurd ghost story about the old place had first had its origin. This board, common to both the house and the porch, had vibrated in response to the pressure, thus causing the slow rocking back and forth of the “ghost” chair. How simple, when it was known, yet how weirdly dreadful when the cause still lay a secret!

“If we had only found this out when we first came,” mourned Irene, “how much worry and uneasiness we might have saved ourselves!”

“Well, just think how much worry and uneasiness we are going to save ourselves,” said Mollie cheerfully.

“Now,” taking firm hold of the rocking chair, “who is going

to help me burn this thing?”

She did not lack for supporters. The girls bore the chair between them to the cleared space at the back of the house and danced a wild dance of thanksgiving as the erstwhile “ghost” went up in smoke.

“Goodness!” Mollie glanced at her wrist watch as this ceremony was completed. “It’s dreadfully late, girls. It’s almost time for Betty and the boys to be here now. I don’t believe we will have time to clear the house up!”

In spite of Mollie’s prophecy, the Outdoor Girls flew about, setting the old house to rights and really accomplishing an astonishing amount of work. They felt joyful and as light as air, now that the “hant” was definitely dislodged.

However, despite their best efforts, they had not quite finished their work when the sound of a car on the road outside and the tooting of a motor horn brought them to the door with a rush.

“It is Betty and Allen!” cried Amy. “Oh, the sweet thing!”

“Who?” giggled Irene behind her. “Betty or Allen?”

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Amy did not hear her. She was already half-way out to the familiar little roadster, the other girls trailing after her, shouting joyful greetings to the newcomers.

“Have pity on my new sport suit,” laughed Betty as she was pulled and hauled eagerly by six arms from her seat beside Allen. “It’s the only one I’m apt to get this year. Oh, girls, but it’s good to see you!”

The Outdoor Girls—the three older club members, at least—were so enthusiastically of the opinion that it was good to see Betty that Allen found himself for a time completely forgotten.

They remembered him at last, but then only because he was needed to carry into the house and upstairs the two heavy suitcases belonging to himself and Betty.

“Betty’s going to bunk in with us, Allen, and you can camp with the boys,” announced Mollie in an off-hand manner.

“Well, I guess—oh, all right,” was the dubious reply.

“We must have our Little Captain.”

“I’m just an also-ran,” Allen told Grace dolefully, meeting her on the stairs. “Guess I’ll go and cool my heels in the old family well!”

Grace laughed and patted him on the arm.

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“Cheer up, lawyer Allen. The boys will be here presently.”

“Honest?” grinned Allen. “Then there’s hope for me!”

Betty was at once taken up to the big front room and shown where to hang her hat.

“Which is about all I brought with me, really,” she laughed. “Allen and I will have to start back to-morrow.”

“Oh, Betty—so soon? We hoped to keep you for a week, at

least.”

The girls were so utterly taken up with Betty that they had no suspicion of the arrival of the three boys until Allen ushered them in and called loudly for his wife.

“Fine lot of hostesses you are!” he exclaimed, grinning, as the girls appeared at the head of the stairs and looked eagerly downward. “How do you expect your guests to know they are welcome if you don’t tell them so?”

“They aren’t guests—they’re part of the happy family,” chortled Grace.

There was a rush down the stairs and the boys were immediately surrounded. If there had ever been any doubt as to their welcome, that doubt was instantly dispelled.

“Where’s Mollie?” Roy cried. “I’ve got hold of something, but you can’t see a thing in this dark place.”

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“Come into the kitchen then,” Mollie invited. “The sun does shine in there once in a while.”

“So does grub,” returned Frank Haley hopefully. “You have the right idea, Mollie. Lead us to the kitchen!”

A laughing crowd pushed its way into the kitchen, but Will and Amy were left, standing close together in the hall looking after the rest.

Will laughed, then turned to Amy and took both her hands in his.

“Can’t we get out of this and take a little walk somewhere?” he begged. “You’ve no idea,” sadly, “what countless æons have passed since we last met, Amy Blackford!”

Amy laughed and was glad the hall was too dark for Will to detect her heightened color.

“I suppose we could go for a walk,” she said, in reply to his question. “But don’t you think—to slip away now—would look a trifle—well—marked?”

“Who cares if it does?” said Will, suddenly masterful as he led her to the front door. “We can slip out this way and the probabilities are they will never miss us.”

Amy hesitated briefly, then gave in. For the moment she was as brave as Will. After all, what did it matter if they were missed? They would return in a little time, anyway!

169

Out in the lovely woods, trailing slowly along the banks of the river, Will and Amy had surprisingly little to say to each other, considering all the things they had intended saying when they should meet!

A curious restraint seemed to envelop them, causing them to speak of small and unimportant things when the only possible subject of importance to them just then was that all-absorbing one—theirself.

As Amy glanced covertly at Will, sauntering along at her side, she wondered if he were unhappy about something or worried. He had omitted all mention of the new position in the two letters she had received from him since leaving Deepdale.

Was it possible that something had gone wrong there?

“Is something the matter, Will?” she asked gently. “You seem just a little bit too—thoughtful—for you——”

Will kicked a stone out of the path and turned abruptly to a big flat rock on the edge of the woods that offered an excellent seat.

“Let’s sit down here,” he said. “I’ve got to tell you, and I suppose I might as well get it over with as quickly as possible.”

Amy’s heart sank. Then she had been right. She said nothing, only regarded him with troubled eyes as he sat on the rock beside her, fiercely frowning at the ground.

170

“I’m afraid it’s all off, Amy—the new position, I mean,” he said in a gruff voice that did not in the least hide the fact of his misery. “I boasted too soon—and received the reward of the boaster. The new job, increased salary and all, goes to another chap in the office, Joe Harrison.”

“Oh!” Amy drew a long tremulous breath. For once gentle Amy was fiercely indignant. She turned to Will with blazing eyes. “It isn’t fair! I know that Joe Harrison can’t do the work as well as you! I know it!”

The girl’s championship warmed Will’s heart. He looked at her quickly, but the momentary gleam in his eye was again submerged by misery as he slowly shook his head.

“It’s mighty fine to hear you say that, Amy. You’re a little

brick. But it really isn't true. Joe Harrison is a fine fellow and I guess is as well fitted to the new job as I am—maybe better. The boss must think so, anyway,” with the first touch of real bitterness he had shown, “or he wouldn't have put him over me.”

Amy sat quite still for a long moment. She was not thinking of herself now—of her own bitter disappointment. Her sympathy was all for Will in his trouble. How could she comfort him? The answer came impulsively. Reaching out a warm little hand, she touched Will's as it lay, a hard brown fist on the rock beside her.

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“I'm so dreadfully sorry, Will,” she whispered. “But there will be other chances.”

“Maybe.” Will caught her hand in his and turned toward her miserably. “But, I didn't want to wait, Amy. I thought maybe—you and I—” He jumped to his feet suddenly and thrust his hands resolutely deep in his pockets. “Let's join the others, shall we?” he asked in a strained voice. “I—why—” with a change to surprise as he peered through the woods, “here they come now—the whole crowd!”

“You two runaways!” cried Grace, suddenly spying them. “We're on our way up the river. Want to come?”

Every one had a glorious time that afternoon except Amy and Will.

All paddled lazily about in the canoes, always on the smooth portion of the river, admiring the view and basking in the sunshine.

The glimpse that they got of the dazzling waterfall in the distance excited the interest and curiosity of the boys. They went for a look at it, first restoring the canoes to the boathouse dock.

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It was a beautiful sight, that rushing stream of water dashing from a dizzy height into the foaming river, sending up its spray against the rocks in myriad tiny rainbow drops.

“Only it seems to me Foaming Falls are in rather dangerous proximity to the more quiet water,” Frank said seriously. “A canoe slipping through the inlet might find itself caught in the current and swept on resistlessly to the Falls.”

“And, oh, what a fall that would be!” chuckled Irene. “You needn’t worry, Frank Haley. We aren’t any of us ready to die just yet!”

They returned to the stone house soon after that, driven to return by the knowledge that camp was still to be made—the boys’ camp, that is—for the night.

A wagon had been found at Foaming Falls village to transport the camping paraphernalia, and as soon as the boys returned to the house they set to work to assemble the separate parts into a respectable camp.

A sudden change in the weather forced them to hurry with their work. Rain had been threatening all afternoon and now it seemed that the storm was fairly upon them.

173

“Lucky we managed to get everything under cover,” said Will as the boys stamped into the house in answer to the girls’ third

call for dinner. “We may be able to keep dry at least.”

However it was not till the girls and boys had retired for the night that the storm reached its full fury. About two o’clock in the morning the chums were startled wide awake by the slamming of the shutters, the creaking of old timbers, and the sheeting fury of rain upon the window panes.

Betty started to her feet with a cry of alarm.

“The boys! Their tent will be blown down!”

She had scarcely stopped speaking when there came a hammering of fists on the door below and a shout of voices.

The girls slipped on dressing gowns and slippers and rushed downstairs.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM

The door opened and the boys fairly fell in with it. They were drenched through and disgruntled.

“Whew—such a night!” Roy reached for a towel and rubbed his face until it glowed. “Nice sort of welcome to give a fellow, I must say.”

Betty was regarding Allen anxiously.

“You are soaked through, dear,” she said. “And you already had a cold.”

“Next thing you know, Allen,” said the grinning Frank, “she will be asking you why you didn’t wear your rubbers.”

This made them all laugh and they felt better. Mollie suggested that they light a fire in the dining-room grate so that they might dry out a little.

The boys accepted the suggestion eagerly and set to work energetically. They soon had a cheerful fire lighted, using wood the girls had gathered earlier in the week and huddled over it, spreading out their hands to the grateful warmth. They had caught up what articles of clothing seemed to be at hand when awakened by the storm, and though they

were respectably dressed, they were not, as the boys themselves ruefully admitted, “altogether at their best.”

“Russian refugees at an American relief station,” giggled Irene, pointing to the sodden group before the fire. “My, but they do look sad.”

“If you are not extremely careful, young lady,” Roy threatened, “we may not be the only sad ones in the party!”

As the boys dried out a little their cheerfulness returned. They drew up chairs before the fire for the girls and themselves. It was cozy there, and seemed all the cozier because of the moaning of the wind about the house and the creaking of ancient timbers.

“Lucky we got rid of the ghost this morning,” Grace drawled as she stretched her slippered feet closer to the warmth. “Can’t you imagine us lying there shivering and listening to this wind last night, girls?”

There was a chorus of lazy protests.

“Why remind us of those dreadful times now past and gone?” came from Stella.

“It seems incredible to me now that we ever allowed ourselves to be frightened by that silly rocking chair,” Mollie remarked.

176

“It wasn’t the rocking chair. It was what sat in it—or rather, what didn’t,” chuckled Stella.

The boys listened with interest. While Will had been off in the woods with Amy the rest of them had learned the details of the girls' ghostly experience. Since then Will had learned of it and was, like the rest, intensely interested.

"The only thing I object to," he said now, "was the fact that you were inconsiderate enough to kill off your ghost before we got here. You might at least have given us a hack at him."

"I imagine from the way we were feeling yesterday morning," Grace chuckled, "that you might have had several hacks at him, and welcome."

As they talked the girls were aware that the wind had increased in volume. It roared around the house with the force of a gale.

They felt uneasy and restless and several times approached the window to look out into the storm-swept night.

"It begins to look as if we would have to fix up those back bedrooms in some fashion, after all," said Mollie at last. "You boys will never be able to get your tent up again to-night."

177

She had scarcely spoken when there came a rending, tearing jar that shook the house to its foundations. Then, before any one could move or cry out, smoke began to roll into the room in suffocating clouds.

Those still about the fireplace staggered away from it, hands over eyes, making instinctively for the windows. Allen flung one of these open, others followed, but still the suffocating

smoke poured into the room.

“The chimney!” gasped Mollie, a hand over her stinging eyes. “It must have blown down! Some one put out the fire, please, and stop that awful smoke.”

The boys were already at work deadening the fire in the grate. In a few moments they had it out and the smoke began gradually to clear from the room.

But in opening the windows to let out the smoke, they had also let in the wind and rain.

“Let’s try to make those two back rooms habitable, girls,” said Mollie. “You can see this storm will last out the night, and we certainly can’t sit up and wait for it.”

“Especially when we haven’t any fire!” sighed Irene. “I wonder what really did happen, anyway.”

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“Part of the chimney blew down probably,” Allen answered. “As soon as morning comes we’ll scout around and see just how much damage has been done.”

With Betty’s help the Outdoor Girls soon made the dreary back rooms into respectable camping quarters for the night. In fact, the boys declared them palatial quarters when compared to their dreary, rain-swept camp in the woods.

“I hate to get up in the morning, honest,” admitted Roy, as the girls said good-night for the second time. “I hate to think what may have happened to that tent!”

However, the tardy sunlight of the next morning revealed less damage to the camp than the boys had feared. The tent ropes had come loose from two of the stakes, but the canvas, being made of durable stuff and seasoned to rough weather, was untoned and the contents of the tent intact.

“Not so bad!” said Roy contentedly. “We’ll set her up again and be all ready for next week-end.”

Since the boys were to start back to town on the late afternoon train, it was decided to make the most of what time was still left.

179

“We’ll take a dip,” suggested Mollie. “If any one can tell me of any better way to spend the shining hours, let ’em try!”

“But before we go, suppose we look over the house and see just what damage was done in the storm last night,” Will suggested. “It sounded like the chimney, but for all we know, the roof may have caved in somewhere.”

The damage proved to be all with the chimney, however, as they had thought, and the boys insisted upon spending some of their precious time in trying to clean it out.

All slipped into bathing suits soon after that and started up the river.

Betty ran before them as they reached the dock and flung them a laughing dare over her shoulder.

“Catch me, who can!” she cried and dived as straight as an arrow into the gleaming water.

There was a shout as the rest followed and a wild scramble in pursuit of Betty. Allen reached her first, as was eminently fitting and proper, and bore her off triumphantly.

The others followed, swimming lazily, laughing and shouting at each other, reveling in the warmth of the sunny water.

It was hard to tear themselves away at last, but trains and law-cases and jobs wait for no man, as the boys, and girls too, must reluctantly acknowledge.

180

“I don’t want to go home,” Betty admitted, once more back in the house and packing her things and Allen’s. “This morning was like the dear old times back again. Did any one see my hair brush?”

Amy handed her the required article.

“You and Allen are coming back next week-end, anyway, aren’t you?” pleaded Amy.

Betty reluctantly shook her head.

“I’m afraid not, though I’m crazy to. Did you hear those dogs barking last night?” she broke off to ask, regarding her companions curiously.

“Did we hear them!” repeated the girls, and proceeded to tell Betty how they had been disturbed by that weird serenade ever since their arrival at Foaming Falls.

Betty was interested.

“Sounds queer to me, to say the least of it. Made me think of Mr. Wags last night,” she added pensively. “I can’t get that little dog out of my mind, girls, nor the mystery of his disappearance.

“How about Hesper?” sighed Irene. “I don’t think I shall ever get over his loss.”

181

They were interrupted by Allen calling. Betty answered that she would be down in a moment.

It had been decided that Mollie would drive the boys down to the station at Foaming Falls, thus accompanying Betty and Allen that far on their trip.

Before he went, Will made an opportunity for a word alone with Amy.

“I’ve thought of what you said—about there being other chances,” he said, in a husky whisper. “I’m going to make that come true, Amy, if only to justify your faith in me!”

He was surrounded then and hurried into the car by main force. But there was time, just the same, for him to catch the look in Amy’s eyes. He thought of it and what it might possibly mean for him all during the long ride home.

It seemed lonesome in the old house after the departure of Betty and Allen and the boys.

“If we only could have kept Betty!” Grace mourned. “If I didn’t like Allen—” she vindictively kicked a stone into the water as though to show what she might do to that young man

were he not protected by her liking.

This was the next day and the girls were walking in the woods. The tramp was an aimless one. They had been canoeing, but had left one of the boats hidden on the banks upstream, feeling suddenly tired of the water.

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Amy had insisted upon staying in the other canoe.

“You go and take your hike,” she insisted. “I must admit I am too lazy. All I want is to sit here and let the current do the work.”

Now, as the girls walked slowly along the river bank in the direction of the Falls, they saw something small and light bobbing upon the restless surface of the water.

The sight was unusual enough to chain their attention immediately. No small craft ever ventured on this part of the river.

The occupant of the canoe seemed suddenly to awaken to this fact, to become conscious of danger. The paddle rose and fell swiftly, in an attempt to swing the canoe in toward shore.

Grace said suddenly in a queer, faint voice:

“Girls, that girl in the canoe is Amy!”

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CHAPTER XXIII

LIFE OR DEATH

It took the girls only a moment to grasp the full force of that terrible situation.

Amy must have drifted unawares into this dangerous part of the river—dreaming of Will perhaps. And when she became conscious of her danger it was too late to save herself.

Too late! Was it too late? the girls asked themselves feverishly.

The current had caught the tiny craft and was carrying it swiftly toward the cascading torrent of the Falls. Amy's frantic efforts were turning it toward the shore as the canoe rushed onward. The awful, the horrible, question was: Would it be possible for her to reach land before the merciless current swept her over the Falls and into the swirling vortex of waters beneath?

It seemed not! Fear caught at the hearts of the Outdoor Girls as they realized that nothing short of a miracle could save Amy from that terrible fate.

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“It’s a judgment on me,” cried Grace, wringing her hands. “I was mean to her, I was jealous of her——”

“Oh, hush!” cried Mollie. “Come with me. There’s a chance—just a chance—that we may save her!”

The others did not stop to question, but followed Mollie as she plunged through the woods toward the head of the Falls.

As they came out again upon the bank the other girls saw in a flash what Mollie had in mind.

A long slender arm of land extended out into the river. By going out upon this, one might be able to hold out a hand or, failing this, fling a rope to the imperiled girl.

“But we have no rope!” This from Stella between chattering teeth. “Mollie, what can we do?”

For answer Mollie picked up a long stick that lay on the ground. Her face was white and her lips were shut in a determined line.

“One of you come behind me, please,” she directed. “Hold on to me if I slip. I am going to stretch out this stick to Amy. If only she can reach it!” Mollie had already started out upon that thin stretch of land. Irene followed close behind her.

Amy was tearing toward them now in the light canoe, working desperately to get it in toward shore. She was closer, but not close enough. A moment more and she would be swept past the girls and over the edge of the falls.

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Mollie flung herself flat on the ground. Working herself as far as she could out over the swirling waters she held the stick from her at full length. Irene and Grace held to Mollie to

prevent her, too, from falling into the river.

No use! Amy could not reach that stick held out to her. Only a miracle could save her now! Then—it happened!

A cross current caught the canoe in its grip, whirled it about suddenly, almost upsetting it, and shot it inward to the shore. The canoe, propelled by this invisible power, was heading straight toward the waiting girls!

They cried out in incredulous hope.

“Hold it, Amy, hold it!”

“Harder on the paddle! That’s the girl!”

“Oh, she can’t make it—she can’t!” came sobbingly from Stella.

“She is making it! Look!”

At the moment Amy came abreast of the point, reached perilously far out over the water and grasped the end of the stick with her fingers.

186

Lucky that the girls were on their guard! Lucky that Grace and Irene were holding fast to Mollie in preparation for just that moment! Otherwise Mollie, too, would have gone into the water and over the Falls with Amy.

Marvelous that Mollie could retain her grip upon the sapling. The rough bark cut her fingers, tore viciously at the tender flesh of her palms. But she gritted her teeth and held on—held

on while the canoe, half filled with water, tilted drunkenly and swerved inward to the shore—held on until Amy, sobbing and nearly done for, staggered with Stella’s help from the canoe and fell, safe, upon the bank.

Mollie had sufficient presence of mind to catch the canoe as it slipped backward into the current and drag it up into shallow water.

It was some time before any of them could speak. Between them the others half carried Amy up to the higher land, soothing and comforting her until she had partially recovered command of herself.

“You were wonderful, girls! Mollie dear, how did you come to think of that stick? It saved my life! Why, Mollie—your poor hands! They are bleeding!”

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“It’s nothing,” Mollie hastily hid her bruised hands behind her. “What does a little cut matter——”

But Amy pulled the hands from hiding and kissed them and they all cried together foolishly and happily while Grace tore some strips from their handkerchiefs and bound up Mollie’s “wounds.”

“Talk about the World War!” said she, with a feeble attempt at a joke. “It certainly had nothing on this!”

After a while, when Amy had gained strength, they started back again along the point of land. Irene, Stella and Grace carried the canoe, while Mollie, excused because of the hurt to her hands, walked behind, an arm about Amy.

“Amy dear,” she said after a long thankful silence, “what would Will have said to us if we had let anything happen to you?”

“It was all my silly fault.” Amy spoke contritely. “I don’t know what made me act so, but I had a notion when I was alone out there on the river that I wanted to float about for a little—just drift you know—and dream a little with my eyes closed. Ridiculous of me, wasn’t it?” She looked at Mollie flushed and pleading.

The latter chuckled and tightened her arm about Amy.

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“Of course it was! But you really weren’t responsible, honey. If we ought to blame any one, it would be the time of the year—and Will. I have seen the same thing happen to Betty, and I know the symptoms!”

“When I opened my eyes,” Amy continued in haste to change the subject and rather more rosy than she had been before, “I saw that I had drifted through the inlet. I tried to turn back, but it was too late. Mollie, that awful current——”

This time it was Mollie who interrupted hastily. With a hand over Amy’s lips she said gently:

“Don’t talk of it, dear. We must none of us ever talk of it again—or think of it.”

Amy shuddered.

“I am afraid,” she sighed, “that it will be a long time before I can really obey that command, Mollie, no matter how much I

try!”

In fact, the Outdoor Girls all found it so hard to forget the dreadful happening of the day that for some time afterward they could not bring themselves to approach that part of the river at all. They spent most of their time inland, discovering new beauty spots in the woods. They found a fishing pond, too, and thereafter spent many mirthful hours trying to inveigle the inhabitants of the pool into impaling themselves foolishly on the end of a bent pin.

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They really did catch a few fish in this manner and never failed to celebrate this event by a sort of triumphal march back to the house where they cleaned and fried and ate the day's catch with great appetite and gusto.

“They taste better than the cook's best company dinners at home,” said Irene on one such occasion, “even if once in a while we do have to piece out with canned sardines.”

One day the girls penetrated further into the woods than they had done yet.

It was a beautiful day with a tang in the air, almost like a day in early fall. They carried a generous lunch with them and started on the hike with the avowed purpose of working up a better appetite than usual, which, as Irene slangily remarked, “was going some!”

They had gone for a considerable distance, reveling in the sunshine and sweet smells of the woods, when Grace called their attention to the fact that the path they had been following, a new one, had ascended steadily since leaving the

banks of the river.

“If we keep on this way we have a very fine chance of reaching the moon,” she said, pausing to wipe her very warm face with an insignificant bit of handkerchief. “Seems to me it’s getting hotter, too.”

190

“Maybe it’s the sun we’re nearing instead of the moon,” chuckled Irene. “I begin to feel a trifle warm myself.”

“Listen!” said Mollie, suddenly.

As she spoke the sharp bark of a dog reached their ears. It was so close to them that they were genuinely startled. Even as they looked at each other the barking was swelled to a chorus, gathering in volume and swelling to a rather terrifying crescendo.

Their first instinct was to retreat. But curiosity proved the stronger force and urged them on to have one look at these mysterious dogs, now that chance had brought them so near their habitation.

They proceeded cautiously for a way and finally came to a clearing. In this open space were situated several long, low red buildings. In front of the largest and most imposing of these was a sign:

Red Kennels. J. Smuddy, Prop.

“Dog kennels!” whispered Grace. “We might have known that.”

“Look at the dogs in that wire enclosure!” giggled Irene. “Every variety known to man!”

191

“No wonder we can’t sleep at night,” came resentfully from Stella.

Emboldened by the fact that the dogs were imprisoned in the wire enclosure and so rendered temporarily harmless, the girls left the shelter of the trees and advanced a bit closer to the group of queer—looking buildings. As they did so a girl slipped from a side door of one of these and disappeared around the farther corner of the house. The Outdoor Girls could not be sure, but the latter certainly resembled Robina Robinson.

Even as they noticed this, the attention of the other girls was caught by a sharp cry from Irene.

“Girls! I can’t be mistaken this time! If that collie dog isn’t Hesper——”

The sentence remained unfinished as Irene, heedless of danger to herself, rushed toward the wire enclosure.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT DISCOVERY

“Be careful, Irene!” Mollie warned, as Irene ran toward the kennels.

But the girl was deaf to reason. She whistled as she ran the old familiar signal to which her collie dog, Hesper, had never failed to respond.

Suddenly a large golden collie at the farther end of the kennels flung up his magnificent head and emitted a bark of rapture. As Irene ran forward, hands outstretched, calling the name of her old comrade, the dog bounded to meet her and flung himself against the wire with a force that shook the entire structure.



W.S. ROGERS.

THE DOG BOUNDED TO MEET HER.

“Oh, you old beauty! Hesper, old boy!” Irene was down on her knees with a hand thrust through the wire netting, fondling the head of the great dog while Hesper nosed at her hand, whined deep down in his throat, and tried in his rapture to tie himself into knots.

The girls were so absorbed in this spectacle that they did not notice two men who bore down upon them from the direction of the red buildings.

“Hey! Get out of there, you!” called one of the men when the pair came within hailing distance. “What do you mean by handling one of my dogs?”

193

Irene, looking up, was about to say that this particular collie was hers, not his. But the ferocious scowl on the man’s face and the sullen aspect of his fair-haired companion caused her to change her mind.

Instead of answering she beat a hasty retreat, rejoining the girls who, observing the approach of the two men, had already retired to the shelter of the trees.

The proprietors of Red Kennels—for such the girls decided they must be—looked after Irene until she had disappeared, then, evidently deciding that she and her companions had gone for good, turned back to the buildings in the rear of the enclosure.

“What can it mean, girls?” Irene clasped and unclasped her hands excitedly as she faced her companions. “What is my

Hesper doing here?”

“Hush!” warned Mollie, drawing her further into the woods. “We must get away from this awful place. Then we can talk.”

But they had gone only a short distance along the path when they were surprised to see Robina Robinson standing before them. The girl was out of breath. She looked pale and ill-at-ease.

194

“Robina!” said Amy softly. “Where did you come from?”

“I followed you,” said the girl abruptly. “I saw how they—how my uncle—treated you up yonder.” She turned to Irene. “I want to tell you that I’m sorry.”

“Then you live at Red Kennels?” asked the latter eagerly.

Robina nodded. Her strong, brown hands were clenched at her side. Her face grew whiter still as she burst out passionately:

“It ain’t fair! I’m just about a prisoner there, that’s what I am! Nobody don’t dare come near me because they’re scared to death of my uncle! I’m about to die of loneliness, I am!”

The girls scarcely knew what to say to this passionate outburst. It remained for Amy, with her usual gentle tact, to do the right thing at the right moment. She took a step toward Robina and touched her hand.

“We’d like to be your friends, Robina, if you’ll let us,” she said.

The girl turned to her quickly.

“D’you suppose I could have you for friends if I wanted to? And I do,” she cried fiercely. “Didn’t he just send one of you away? And he’d do the same again if you were foolish to come again, only after awhile he’d begin settin’ the dogs on you. Oh, I hate him! How I hate him!”

195

“Robina,” asked Mollie quietly, “does your uncle keep you at Red Kennels against your will?”

At the question the fierce light died out of the girl’s eyes. She seemed to droop, to wilt before them.

“I ain’t got a mother nor a father,” she said flatly, speaking in a dead voice. “Only my little brother and sister. They were sent to relatives in Ohio and Smuddy—he wanted me to be his washerwoman, I suppose, and scrub up the kennels,” with a flash of her former fierceness. “And then,” she added, giving them an odd look, “I love dogs and I understand them. They don’t snarl and snap at me like they do at Smuddy and Jake. If it wasn’t for them two,” she added, her blue eyes smoldering with the light of a hidden ambition, “I could run Red Kennels like they ought to be run!”

The Outdoor Girls glanced at each other, the same thought in the minds of them all. Could this girl who appeared so frank and truthful know anything of how Irene’s collie, Hesper, a stolen dog, came to be in her uncle’s kennels?

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Irene, unable longer to stand the suspense, put the question indirectly.

“Do you know anything about how your uncle gets his dogs, Robina?” she asked.

Robina looked a bit surprised at the question, but shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

“No, I don’t. He buys ’em and breeds ’em, that’s all I know. All of ’em though,” she added with pride in her eyes, “are right fine dogs.”

“You bet they are!” said Irene beneath her breath, but Mollie threw her a warning glance.

It was quite clear to her, as indeed it was to the other girls, that Robina was not in her uncle’s secret as to how he procured some of his dogs. The girl’s honesty was too transparent to be assumed. Mollie determined to try another approach to Robina.

“I suppose,” she said, “you want your little brother and sister with you very much, Robina?”

Tears sprang to the girl’s fierce eyes and she turned away abruptly as though to hide them.

“That,” she said in a muffled voice as fierce as ever, “is what I have against Smuddy more than anything else he’s ever done to me. But I’ve got to be goin’,” she added, glancing uneasily about her. “If he was to catch me talkin’ to you, there ain’t any tellin’ what he might do. Take it out on you, probably. Good-by, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll give Red Kennels a wide berth!” She made another of her abrupt exits, striding off through the woods

before the Outdoor Girls could so much as protest at her going.

They continued on toward home, tremendously interested and excited.

Irene was for notifying the authorities at once, thus taking steps to recover the stolen Hesper.

Mollie and the others counseled patience.

“Wait until the boys come,” they insisted. “They will know what to do and will help us to cope with J. Smuddy and his helper lots better than we can alone.”

“But this is Thursday and the boys aren’t coming until Saturday,” wailed Irene. “Suppose something were to happen to Hesper before that time?”

“Nothing is apt to happen to him between this and Saturday, especially if we don’t let out to J. Smuddy or Robina that we suspect his unlawful possession of Hesper.”

“I feel awfully sorry for Robina,” said Amy. “I wish we could help her.”

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“Maybe we can,” said Mollie. As the others looked at her inquiringly she added: “Perhaps if we can succeed in discrediting her uncle, for whom, as you can see, she bears little affection, we may be doing Robina the best kind of a good turn.”

“But how could she live?” cried Grace practically. “After all,

her uncle supports her, no matter how poorly. From the way she spoke, I judge she has no money of her own.”

“She might be able to run Red Kennels honestly—even make good money out of it—with her love of dogs and her hard common sense,” Mollie pointed out. “As for funds,” she looked oddly at her chums, “I imagine we might be able to help out there, don’t you?”

It was here that Irene hugged the speaker with great warmth.

“You old darling, of course we could—and would! At least, our fathers will. I personally would be willing to give up my own allowance for the next two years for the sake of getting Hesper back!”

“And I,” murmured Grace fervently, “would do more than that. I haven’t forgotten that she saved my life.”

The rest of that day and the early part of the next dragged interminably—for all but Amy. To her, the thought that Will would return on Saturday with the other boys for his second week-end at Foaming Falls was one that shut out for her all lesser considerations. She went about with a faraway look in her eyes and in more than one instance her companions were forced to speak to her twice before gaining her attention.

199

But the others could scarcely await the arrival of the boys to help them solve the mystery of Red Kennels and bring J. Smuddy to the accounting they felt he so richly deserved.

After an early lunch Mollie took Grace aside and spoke to her

earnestly.

“I have a great longing to visit Red Kennels again,” she confessed. “I don’t dare take Irene along because she is so anxious to get Hesper she is apt to say something that will give the whole thing away. Will you come with me, Gracie?”

“Will I come?” returned the other. “As though I hadn’t been dying to all the time!”

The two girls set off almost at once, Mollie telling Stella of her destination but begging her not to let Irene follow.

“We will be back shortly, anyway,” she said. “In the meantime you can tell the girls we have gone for a hike.”

200

Mollie had her field-glasses with her, a precaution that would permit them to look over J. Smuddy’s domain without approaching too close to it.

They neared the group of red buildings rapidly and paused just outside the clearing to put the field-glasses to use.

The dogs evidently scented their approach and again set up a concerted howling and barking and yapping that rather disconcerted the girls.

“If J. Smuddy appears we’ll cut and run,” said Mollie to Grace. Then, looking through the glasses, she added: “Grace, that little black dog over there huddled against the back of the enclosure—doesn’t he look familiar to you?”

She handed the glasses to her friend and with their aid Grace located the little black dog.

She started, then lowered the glasses from her eyes to stare at Mollie.

“I believe—I do believe that little cocker spaniel is Mr. Wags!” she breathed.

Here was a development that temporarily deprived the girls of all caution. They ran to the enclosure and to the spot where the small black dog lay huddled miserably against the wire. 201

“Mr. Wags!” coaxed Mollie, regardless of the furious barking of the other dogs. “Beg for it, old boy, beg for it!”

She snapped her fingers coaxingly and the small black dog sat up wistfully upon his hind legs, small forepaws dangling prayerfully.

“It is Mr. Wags!” cried Mollie joyfully. “It is!”

A furious shout caused both girls to jump to their feet in alarm. J. Smuddy was descending upon them.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BRIDE'S BOUQUET

“You here again!” the proprietor of Red Kennels cried, brandishing his arm threateningly above his head. “Want I should set my dogs onto you, hey? All right!”

His hand was actually upon the gate in the enclosure. Several ferocious looking dogs crowded close in expectation of being set free. The girls watched fascinated as the gate slowly opened.

Suddenly a yellow-haired fury descended from the direction of the house, flung itself upon J. Smuddy, closed the gate fiercely and stood with her back to it, panting defiance.

“Don’t you dare, you great big bully!” she flung at the infuriated man. “I’ll have you know these girls are friends of mine!”

“Friends of yours!” sneered the man. “Since when did you set yourself up to have such fine friends? Stand away from there, Robina, or it will be the worse for you!”

“The worse for you, you mean,” the girl spoke quietly, but there was something in her voice that halted the furious Smuddy. “You open that gate and I’ll set the dogs on you! They hate you and they love me and they’ll turn on you

if I say so. Now—” she stepped aside from the gate and challenged him with her fine eyes—“just open that gate if you dare!”

The furious man took a step toward the gate of the enclosure, paused, baffled, then turned and vented his fury on the Outdoor Girls.

“Get out of here!” he shouted. “Don’t you know you’re on private property?”

“Even at that, we’re more than even,” said Mollie quietly, emboldened by Robina’s splendid championship. “Perhaps you will explain to us how you come to be in possession—unlawfully—of some private property that belongs to us?”

The man stopped in his advance and stared at her. Mollie continued before he could speak.

“That dog,” she said, pointing at the great collie, “and that little cocker spaniel belong to friends of mine. They were stolen—” she held J. Smuddy’s startled gaze accusingly—“only a short time ago and we can positively identify them.”

At the word “stolen” Robina gave a great start and came hastily toward Mollie.

204

“Are you sure they were stolen?” she asked, in a queer voice.

Mollie had time for nothing more than a nod of the head. J. Smuddy advanced with uplifted hand, rage once more overmastering him. His face was red and contorted. Against

their will, the girls gave ground.

“Come here again with your lies!” the man shrieked at them.
“I’ll show you!”

At the same moment voices could be heard, their owners approaching rapidly through the woods. J. Smuddy dropped his hand and stared uneasily about him.

“The boys ahead of time!” cried Grace, giggling nervously.
“That was Frank’s voice, as sure as shooting!”

The next moment two boys proved her right by appearing in person. Irene and Stella were with them and, upon seeing Mollie and Grace, the entire party advanced hurriedly.

“But you weren’t coming till to-morrow!” Mollie heard herself saying, weak with surprise. “How does it come—”

“Never mind,” said Roy. “We are here, and it looks as if we were just in time.”

However, J. Smuddy, seeing that he was outnumbered and guessing, perhaps, that the game was up, shook his hand threateningly at the newcomers and retired to the house, muttering to himself.

205

Frank and Roy, at Foaming Falls a day early in order to surprise the girls—which they certainly had done—plied Mollie and Grace with questions as to their interview with J. Smuddy. Robina stood at one side, looking on with a puzzled expression.

Will was not with Frank and Roy, having stayed behind at the old stone house with Amy, as Grace and Mollie heard later. Their personal affairs, it seemed, were ever so much more important to them than J. Smuddy or the mystery at Red Kennels!

Mollie and Grace told as briefly as they could of their meeting with the unpleasant proprietor of Red Kennels. The boys were as interested and excited as the girls, especially when they learned that Mr. Wags and Hesper had been discovered also. They announced their intention of hurrying to the village at once, to return with an officer of the law upon whose authority they would be able to enter and search the kennels.

“Take the car,” Mollie called after them. “It will be ever so much quicker.”

As soon as the boys had gone Robina demanded an explanation of the accusations against her uncle. As gently as possible, the girls told her about Hesper and Mr. Wags and their inevitable suspicion that most of J. Smuddy’s dogs were obtained in the same way.

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“A thief!” muttered the girl beneath her breath. “I always hated him, but I never guessed he was a thief!”

The boys returned sooner than the girls had expected. With them was a constable from the village and two natives of Foaming Falls, one of them the postal clerk, Jasper Hill.

The officer lost little time in demanding entrance to the house of J. Smuddy. The suspicion of the village had long centered upon Red Kennels, but up to this time no direct charge had

been brought against the proprietor. Such evidence as the boys and girls could give was just what this officer of the law had been waiting for.

Contrary to expectations neither J. Smuddy nor his companion made any trouble when told that they were to be taken into town and held while further investigation was instituted. They submitted sullenly, saying nothing.

Only when they were being led from the house J. Smuddy turned to Robina with such a vicious look that even that fearless girl was momentarily daunted.

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“You’re to blame for this!” he ejaculated. “Wait till I get out of jail! I’ll get even with you, you scheming hussy!”

Robina recovered herself.

“You’re welcome to try it,” she flung after him. “If you can!”

After the men from Foaming Falls had left with their prisoners Robina led the boys and girls out to the wire enclosure. She paused at the gate.

“Tell me which of the dogs are yours,” she said simply, “and I’ll get them for you.”

Irene pointed eagerly to Hesper and whistled. The dog leaped at the wire and once more tried frantically to knock it down. As Robina opened the door she waved the other dogs back, speaking to them gently.

The next moment Hesper was upon Irene, whining and trying

to reach her face with his tongue. Irene hugged him, laughing and crying and talking unintelligible nonsense to the animal.

“And the other one?” asked Robina.

It was Mollie who pointed out Mr. Wags, as usual shrinking in the most remote corner of the enclosure.

Robina dragged him forth from his retirement and Stella made a rush for him and cuddled him in her arms, cooing over him ecstatically.

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“Was him a buful dog?” she cried, rubbing her nose in his silky hair. “And did the wicked, wicked man steal him?”

“Come on, fellows!” cried Roy, flinging up his hands in a gesture reminiscent of some former occasion like this. “Again I say it is time we left!”

Robina was standing alone near the wire enclosure, moodily watching the dogs. In some strange way all her splendor seemed to have departed. She looked only forlorn and friendless.

The girls exchanged glances, then approached Robina, leaving the boys impatiently awaiting them on the edge of the clearing.

“You can’t stay here alone, Robina,” said Mollie gently. “Come back with us to the house.”

“Why,” said the girl, turning to her slowly, “should you want me to do that?”

“Because we have a business proposition to lay before you,” said Mollie briskly. She knew instinctively that Robina would not accept aid from them in any but a business way. “We want to help you to run this place honestly, Robina —”

“Because we have faith in your ability,” added Stella earnestly.

“Run this place honestly!” muttered the girl incredulously. “Faith in my ability!”

“In other words, we’re sort of partners,” laughed Irene. “Or want to be. We’ll put up the money and you can put up the brains. Fair enough, isn’t it?”

Robina looked at them steadily for a moment as though to make sure they were not joking, then turned from them quickly so that they could not see her face.

After a moment Mollie reached out a hand and gently touched her. Robina had been crying, and yet when Mollie said, “You will go back with us now, won’t you?” the girl turned to them resolutely and said in her usual composed and quiet tone:

“Yes, I will go back with you now!”

Meanwhile Amy and Will had made very good use of their time.

As soon as they started off into the woods alone, after the other girls and boys had left them to go in search of

Mollie and Grace, Amy sensed that something nice—something very nice—had happened to Will. They had gone only a short distance when the young fellow stopped and caught both Amy’s hands in his own.

“I can’t wait another moment to tell you or I’ll blow up into several small and worthless pieces!”

“I like you better as you are,” replied Amy demurely. “Please tell me!”

“I got the position, after all!” Will fairly shouted. “It was a mistake about Joe Harrison. I was the man the boss wanted all the time. How’s *that*?”

“Oh, Will, glorious! I knew there must be a mistake!”

“And now—there’s—really—there isn’t a thing, Amy—to stand in the way of—Amy, will you——”

He never finished the sentence, but Amy seemed to understand. And though she did not say a word her answer appeared to be perfectly satisfactory.

It was a long, long time before Amy thought to say:

“Let’s go and find the others!”

And even then Will said:

“The others have waited so long—let them wait a little longer.”

The guests at the wedding gathered in the hall and living room of the Stonington house, waiting expectantly for the bride to descend the staircase.

Five girls, close friends of the bride, were gathered in an animated group discussing the wedding. They were lovely in pastel-colored frocks, although Grace Ford, as maid of honor, was particularly fine in orchid organdy with a wide-brimmed, drooping hat of the same color.

“Wasn’t she a lovely bride?” breathed Betty. “I never saw one so pretty!”

“You never saw yourself, my dear,” came loyally from Mollie. “But Amy was sweet—like an angel in her white veil.”

“I cried,” Grace admitted. “An unforgivable sin in a bridesmaid! Do my eyes look too terribly red?”

“They look terribly pretty,” said Irene generously. “You never have to worry, Grace.”

“I had a letter from Robina to-day,” went on Mollie. “Her little brother and sister arrived safely at Foaming Falls and Robina is half mad with joy. The kennels are doing well, too. I have her word for it that we may soon expect payment on what we lent her.”

“Bless the girl!” giggled Irene. “She has too much conscience for her own good. Betty, how is Mr. Wags?”

“Perfect, as ever,” laughed Betty. “If anybody tries to steal

him again they will have to take me too. Hush!” she added, “here comes the bride!”

Amy appeared at the head of the stairs. She looked pale, but very sweet in her simple grey traveling suit. She was smiling and in her hand was her bride’s bouquet.

The girls looked upward, guessed her intention, and tried to dodge. Too late! Grace caught the bouquet fair and square. Every one looked at her and smiled.

“You’re next, Grace,” giggled Irene from behind her.

“Lucky that I am not superstitious,” said Grace, with a shake of her head.

“Time,” said Mollie sententiously, “alone will tell!”

THE END

This Isn't All!

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[The end of *The Outdoor Girls at Foaming Falls* by Edward Stratemeyer (as "Laura Lee Hope")]