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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT BLUFF POINT



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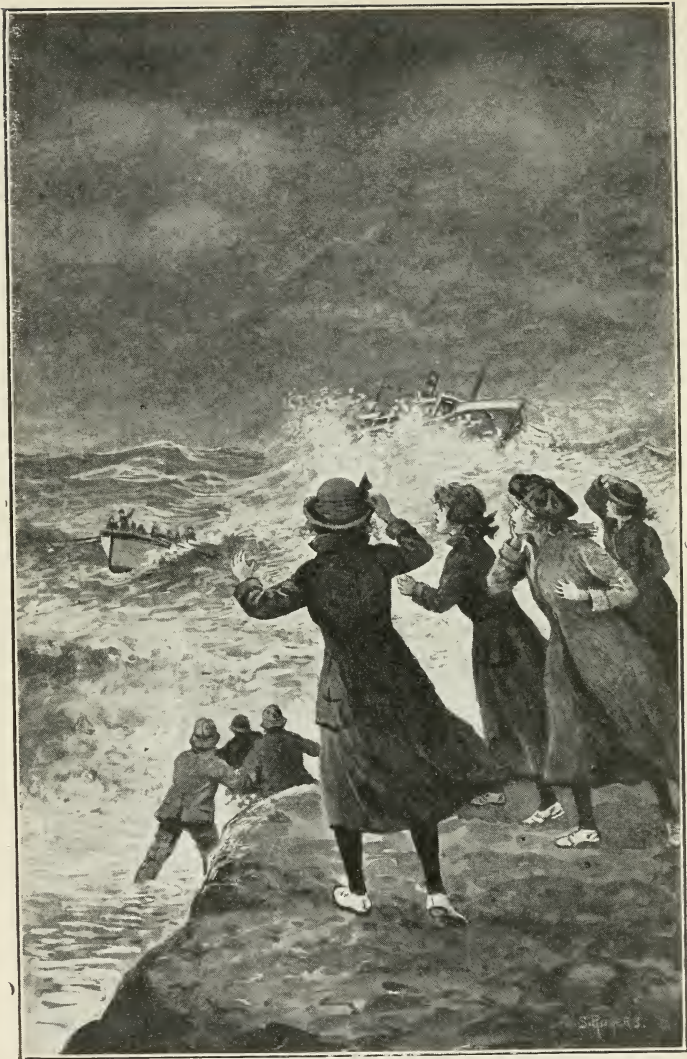
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THE BOAT CAME RUSHING TOWARD THEM.
The Outdoor Girls at Bluff Point. Frontispiece (Page 232)

The Outdoor Girls at Bluff Point

OR
A WRECK AND A RESCUE

BY
LAURA LEE HOPE

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

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By LAURA LEE HOPE

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(Five Titles)

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT BLUFF POINT

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT BLUFF POINT

CHAPTER I

TO THE FRONT

"I KNOW it's utterly foolish and unreasonable," sighed Amy Blackford, laying down the novel she had been reading and looking wistfully out of the window, "but I simply can't help it."

"What's the matter?" asked Mollie Billette, raising her eyes reluctantly from a book she was devouring and looking vaguely at Amy's profile. "Did you say something?"

"No, she only spoke," drawled Grace Ford, extricating herself from a mass of bright-colored cushions on the divan, preparatory to joining in the conversation. "I ask you, Mollie, did you ever know Amy to say anything important?"

"Why yes, I have," said Mollie unexpectedly. "In fact, she is about the only one of us Outdoor Girls who ever does say anything important—except Betty, perhaps."

Amy withdrew her gaze from the landscape and looked at the speaker with a twinkle in her eyes.

"What will you have, Mollie?" she asked whimsically. "When you become complimentary, you are apt to rouse my suspicions."

"Well, whatever you were going to say, please say it, and let me get back to my book," returned Mollie, ignoring the imputation. "I was in the most interesting part—"

"Why, I'm just plain homesick," said Amy, adding quickly, as the girls looked at her in surprise. "For Camp Liberty and the Hostess House, you know. I miss the work and the long hours of entertaining and cheering people up. I feel," she looked around at them as though finding it hard to explain just what she meant, "sort of—lost."

The three chums, Mollie Billette, Grace Ford, and Amy Blackford were gathered in the comfortable library of Betty Nelson's home—Betty being the fourth of the merry quartette, dubbed the "Outdoor Girls" by the people of Deepdale, because of their love of the open and of outdoor sports.

The girls, as my old readers will doubtless remember, had helped establish a Hostess House at Camp Liberty, and since then had given all their

strength and time and youthful enthusiasm to the great work of cheering our young fighters, entertaining their loved ones, and, in the end, sending them with fresh courage and happy memories to the "other side" for the great adventure.

And now the girls, completely worn out in their loving service to others, had been sent, much against their will, home to Deepdale for a rest that they sorely needed.

To-day they had gathered in Betty's house to discuss the rather hazy plans for their brief vacation. And Amy had simply voiced what was in the thoughts of all the girls. They were, undeniably and heartily, homesick for Camp Liberty and their work at the Hostess House.

"Lost?" Mollie repeated Amy's expression thoughtfully. "Yes, I guess that would pretty well describe the feeling I've had for the last few days. Sort of restless and aimless—wondering what to do next."

"Goodness!" cried Grace whimsically, stretching her arms above her head and smothering a yawn, "this is terrible, you know. If we don't look out, we'll be forgetting how to enjoy ourselves."

"That would be queer, wouldn't it?" agreed Mollie, with a chuckle as she started to resume her reading. "Especially for the Outdoor Girls,

who used to know how to enjoy themselves remarkably well."

A brief silence followed, broken only by the rustle of paper as one of the girls turned a page. Then, so suddenly that Mollie jumped nervously and Grace almost upset a box of chocolates at her elbow, Amy threw down her book and sprang to her feet.

"I can't stand it another minute!" she exclaimed desperately. "Girls, I must get out and do something—this loafing is getting on my nerves."

"Goodness, the child's mad," declared Mollie, looking at her chum with a mixture of amusement and sympathy in her eyes. "What do you want to do, Amy, start a fight, or set the town on fire? Whatever it is, I'm for you, as Roy would say."

"Oh, I guess I must be crazy," said Amy, subsiding and seeming a little ashamed of her outburst. "Only, after so much band music and parades and bugle calls—everything in Deepdale seems so quiet."

"Well, if all you want is noise, we'll easily fix that," said Mollie briskly, running to the piano and gathering in Grace and Amy on the way. "Sing," she commanded, "and I'll make as much noise as I can on the piano."

Half laughing, half protesting, the girls obeyed while Mollie conscientiously made good her threat with the piano, and it was into this uproar that Betty Nelson stepped a moment later.

"Have mercy!" she screamed above the noise, both hands clapped over her ears while she laughed at them. "I thought they had turned the house into a lunatic asylum or something."

The music, if such it can be called, stopped so suddenly that Betty's last words rang out with absurd distinctness.

"Or something," Mollie mimicked, whirling around and catching the newcomer in a bear's embrace. "Come over to the couch, Betty Nelson, and explain yourself. Where have you been and why did you keep us waiting?"

Laughingly the Little Captain, as she was often called by the girls because of her talent for leadership, permitted herself to be dragged over to the couch by the impulsive Mollie, while Amy and Grace seated themselves on the arms.

"What would you?" protested Betty, looking from one accusing face to another. "I said I would meet you here at two-thirty, and it is only quarter past now."

"Only quarter past!" exclaimed Amy.

"Oh, is that all?" asked Mollie, in astonishment, adding, as Betty lifted her wrist watch for

inspection: "Goodness, I thought we had been waiting ages."

"I'm glad you wanted to see me so much," chuckled the Little Captain, adding, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes: "I imagine you would have been still more impatient if you had known—" she paused wickedly and just looked at them.

"Don't tease, Betty! What is it?" they implored in chorus, fairly pouncing upon her, while Grace added, eagerly:

"Is it possible you have anything really interesting to tell us?"

"I shouldn't wonder if you would think so," Betty teased, adding quickly to forestall the outburst she saw was coming, "It really isn't anything at all—only—I met the postman on my way—"

"Betty!" they cried, unable to contain their impatience another moment. "You have letters! Letters from our soldier boys!"

"How did you guess it?" said Betty, her eyes dancing as she brought from a convenient pocket three—yes, three—fat letters, each containing the longed-for foreign postmark.

"How much will you give me?" teased Betty, holding the precious missives behind her back.

"Not one other word, Betty Nelson!" they

cried, and after a merry but brief struggle the letters were seized and delivered to their rightful owners.

"Now I wonder," drawled Grace with a twinkle, as she hastily tore open her envelope, "who could possibly be writing to us from the other side?"

"Now I wonder," chuckled Betty, as she happily drew from the convenient pocket the last, but in her estimation decidedly not the least, fat letter and proceeded to devour its contents without delay.

And indeed the Outdoor Girls had little reason to wonder who their correspondents might be, for as regularly as clockwork those precious letters with the strange foreign postmarks were delivered to their eager hands.

There were other letters with that foreign postmark, too, for in addition to their work at the Hostess House, the girls had faithfully kept up a large correspondence with the brave boys who had already crossed the water and were waiting impatiently for their chance "at the Huns."

But the four special letters were from their closest friends—boys who had lived in Deepdale before the war and were now in France preparing for the last stage of their journey.

Allen Washburn, on his way to make a great name for himself in the law before the war put a

temporary check upon his ambitions, had been in love with the Little Captain for—oh, yes, ever since he could remember, while Betty—but Betty would never really admit anything, not even to herself.

Then there was Will Ford, Grace Ford's brother, who was not only devoted to his pretty sister, but, in spite of Amy's flushed protestations to the contrary, to Amy Blackford, also—although in quite a different manner!

Frank Haley was a high school chum of Will's, who from the time of his first meeting with Mollie Billette had seemed inclined to become her shadow, to the latter's secret gratification and outward indifference.

The last of the quartette was Roy Anderson, one of the Deepdale boys, who was chiefly distinguished by his very open admiration for Grace.

The boys had shared in many of the adventures of the Outdoor Girls, and of course had been among the very first to volunteer to help "lick the Boche" as they slangily but ardently put it. The girls had gloried in their patriotism, and it was their assignment to Camp Liberty that had first given Betty the idea of working in the Hostess House there.

They had been very happy, fired as they were by enthusiastic patriotism, until the fateful day

had come when the boys had entrained for Philadelphia and from there to the Great Adventure. Then for the first time the girls had had the real and terrible meaning of war brought home to them. And the boys, so merry and care-free when they had first entered the service, had seemed suddenly older, more important, more manly, only the fire of enthusiasm in their eyes showing their indomitable youth.

Several months had passed since that day of mingled tears and pride and heartache, and the girls had had time to get used to the separation a little—a very little. And now Betty had brought them the letters they were always hungry for, anxiously eager, yet always, at the very back of their hearts, a little haunting fear of what they might contain.

For several minutes they sat engrossed while occasionally one of them read a funny or characteristic extract over which they laughed happily.

“Listen to this,” chuckled Mollie, while the girls looked up expectantly. “Frank says that Roy is getting terribly fat in spite of all the exercise—”

“Horrors!” interjected Grace.

“And when he, Frank, ventured to remonstrate with him the other day and advised him to cut

down on his chow, Roy said: 'Nothing doing! I've got a definite end in view, old man. This khaki outfit has acquired so much terra firma it's beginning to stand alone, but if I get so fat I can't wear it they'll have to give me another one—see?' "

The girls laughed, but there was just a shade of wistfulness in their laughter, for they knew that the boys were only skirting the outer edge of the hardships they would be called upon to encounter later on.

Then suddenly Betty gave a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, girls," she cried when they looked up at her fearfully, "it's come! What we've been dreading so long! The boys have been ordered to the front!"

CHAPTER II

BAD NEWS

THE girls stared wide-eyed at Betty while slowly the color drained from their faces. It was true they had been dreading just this news for a long, long time, yet now that it had come they felt strangely quiet and numb. They had much the same feeling as one who had received a stunning blow. Until the paralysis had passed there could be no pain. That would come later.

"How do you know?" asked Mollie at last, in a voice that sounded strange even to herself. "Frank hasn't mentioned it."

"He will probably, toward the end," Betty explained, while slowly her heart contracted and the tears welled to her eyes. "Allen didn't—not till the last sentence. It's only a line, but th-that's enough. He says not to be alarmed if his letters are delayed—it may be hard to get them through."

"They are going to the front," Amy repeated dazedly, as if she found it hard to really believe. "When—did he say when, Betty?"

"No, he didn't," said Betty slowly. "But you know Allen. He wouldn't have said anything about it if the time hadn't been pretty close at hand."

"Why," cried Grace, catching her breath as though the thought had just occurred to her, "they may be in the front line trenches now! They may be—they may be—"

And while the girls gazed at her in tragic silence, imagining terrible, unbelievable things, a moment will be taken to sketch briefly for the benefit of new readers the various exciting or amusing adventures which had befallen the Outdoor Girls in the days before the grim shadow of war had spread itself over the land.

In the first volume of the series, entitled "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale," the girls had formed a camping and tramping club and had tramped for miles over the country, meeting with many interesting adventures on the way.

After this, one good time had followed hard on the heels of another, first at Rainbow Lake, then at a winter camp where they had novel and interesting experience on skates and ice-boats.

At Ocean View some time later the Outdoor Girls had cleared up a mystery centering about a strange box they had found in the sand. Then had followed that splendid summer at Pine Island,

when the girls had accidentally discovered a gypsy cave and had succeeded not only in rounding up the band of gypsies but in recovering several valuable articles that had been stolen from them. The four boys who were now facing the enemy in France had shared in their fun that summer, pitching camp near the bungalow of the girls.

Their next adventure found the girls and boys again at Pine Island, but under greatly altered circumstances. America had just entered the great war, and the four boys had responded eagerly to the bugle call. Later they were sent to Camp Liberty for training, to which the girls soon followed them to work in the Hostess House.

Will Ford, the brother of Grace, had caused the girls, and especially his sister, anxiety and uneasiness because of his failure to enlist with the other boys. In the end he justified himself, however, by delivering a German spy to justice and enlisting in the service of his country immediately afterward. The girls also recovered some valuable jewelry that the spy had stolen from them.

Then in the volume directly preceding this, entitled "The Outdoor Girls at the Hostess House," the girls had befriended an old woman who had

been knocked down by an unscrupulous motorcyclist. They later learned the secret tragedy in the life of their little old lady.

Now the girls had come home to Deepdale for a much needed rest, only to be confronted with the terrible, though, naturally, expected, news that the boys had been ordered to the front.

"Yes they may be, probably are, facing death at this minute," said Mollie slowly, finishing the broken sentence. "Perhaps at the very minute we were playing and singing and enjoying ourselves—"

"Mollie, don't!" cried Amy brokenly. "I don't feel as if I could ever enjoy myself again."

"Well, we've got to, whether we can or not," said Betty, striving to control her quivering lips and tilting her little chin at a brave angle. "We can't just lie down at the very first shot, you know."

"You talk as if we were on the firing line," said Grace hysterically.

"I suppose in a way we are," returned the Little Captain slowly, wishing desperately that those troublesome tears would stay where they belonged—her eyes were so misty she could hardly see Grace! "Only ours is a harder kind of battle, because it's made up mostly of waiting and working without any of the thrill and excite-

ment of the real fight to help us. But I'd like to know," and there was a little ring of pride and renewed courage in her voice, "what the real fighters would do without us anyway. We're just as much soldiers as they are, and if we don't do our share, they can't do theirs."

"Of course you are right, Betty dear, you always are!" cried Mollie, taking heart and even smiling a little. "We can't do anybody good by moping."

"No," added Grace with a philosophy unusual in her. "That's why we have the hardest share, I guess—because we have to keep gay and bright, no matter how we feel."

"And we still have our work at the Hostess House," Amy reminded them. "Maybe," she added, a little wistfully, "if we work hard enough we'll be able to forget—"

"What's all this about working and forgetting?" cried Mrs. Nelson, coming gayly into the room. "I thought you had come home for a vacation."

The girls explained, and Mrs. Nelson looked pityingly at their grave young faces.

"So that is it," she was beginning, when Mollie sprang to her feet with a cry. She was staring at the paper that Mrs. Nelson had carelessly thrown on the table.

“What is it?” they cried, as she snatched it up and read the glaring headlines.

“The Hostess House!” gasped Mollie. “Gone! Burnt up! Read this!”

Dazedly the girls obeyed, the big type seeming to strike them in the face as they read:

“Great Fire at Camp Liberty! Hostess House and Several Barracks Buildings Burned to the Ground!”

CHAPTER III

MAKING PLANS

"I CAN'T seem to get used to it," sighed Mollie several days later, as she ran up the steps of her porch and opened the screen door for the girls. "To think that no matter how much we want to go back to the Hostess House—"

"There is no Hostess House to go back to," finished Grace, sinking down in a luxurious porch swing and plumping the cushion behind her back. Grace always had a gift for finding the soft places. "It is rather discouraging."

"Just as we were going to work hard and forget how unhappy we were, too," added Amy plaintively.

"Goodness, but we're not going to be unhappy," put in Betty, rocking vigorously. "I thought we decided that three days ago."

"I know. But when we think—"

"But we musn't think," Betty interrupted quickly, adding with a little twinkle: "About being unhappy, that is. All we have to do is just hold on to the belief that the boys are coming

back a year from now, maybe less—coming back without a hair less than they had when they went away.”

“We didn’t count ’em,” said Mollie drolly. “The hairs, that is, so how can we tell?”

“Isn’t she funny?” drawled Grace, catching the pillow Mollie threw at her and depositing it calmly behind her back. “Thanks, old dear,” she said. “I just needed another one.”

“I thought we came to talk over the plans for our vacation,” Amy put in mildly, adding with a little laugh: “We have to take one now whether we want it or not.”

“But we haven’t the slightest idea what we’re going to do,” protested Grace. “I guess we’d just better stay at home and do nothing.”

“My, aren’t you encouraging?” cried Mollie, looking up indignantly from the pair of socks she was knitting. “You might at least suggest something.”

“Ooh, there you are!”

They turned suddenly to see a mischievous little face peeping at them from around the corner of the porch.

“Dodo, you little wretch, come here,” cried Mollie, trying to look severe and failing utterly.

“Now what mischief have you been up to?”

“No,” protested Dodo, shaking her curly head

vigorously, as she reluctantly abandoned her vantage point and came slowly toward Mollie. "No mischief 'tall. Me an' Paul jus' playin'."

This was Dora, nicknamed Dodo, and Paul, Mollie Billette's small brother and sister, who were nearly always getting into some sort of mischief from the time they stepped their little feet out of bed in the morning till the time they slipped the same little feet, tired out with getting into trouble, into bed at night.

"You darling!" cried Betty, catching the little figure to her and administering a bear's hug. "You're terribly bad, but we can't help loving you."

"Uh-uh," denied Dodo, wriggling free of Betty's embrace and looking at her earnestly. "Me's never bad—only Paul."

"Ooh, Dodo Billette!" cried Paul, bursting in upon them from no one could quite tell where. "You's a big story teller!"

"You's the big 'tory teller," cried Dodo, coming sturdily to the rescue of her reputation. "You just go 'way. Mol—lie, oh, Mollie, make him go 'way!"

"Oh, dear!" cried Mollie, half amused and half vexed as she put aside her knitting and took Dodo on her lap. "I thought you and Paul promised to play with the bunnies all the after-

noon and not bother sister. Can't you see she has company?"

"Yes," smiled the little girl, reaching up to pat Mollie's cheek ingratiatingly. "Me an' Paul got tired playin' wiv bunnies an' came to see you. We want," she added succinctly, "tandies!"

"Well, you won't get any, not this time," said Mollie definitely, trying not to smile, while the other girls were not even trying. It was always hard not to laugh at the twins, naughty as they often were.

"Why?" demanded Dodo severely.

"Never mind why," returned Mollie, putting the little girl down and taking up her knitting again. "Now run off, both of you, we want to talk."

"But we want tandies," repeated Dodo, looking surprised that Mollie had not understood the first time. "Dive Paul an' me tandies—lots of tandies—an' we'll go 'long. Shan't we, Paul? Ooh—" the question ended in an anguished wail as Dora's eyes rested on her faithless twin.

The latter had extracted Grace's half-filled candy box from under a cushion where she had hastily hidden it at the first threat of invasion by the insatiable twins and was at the moment busily engaged in devouring its contents. Grace had been too busy watching Dodo to notice him.

"Ooh, you bad boy! You bad boy!" wailed the little girl, making a dash for Paul, who deftly evaded her and took refuge behind Betty's chair. "Div me dos tandies—dive 'em to me."

"Can't," mumbled Paul, his mouth full, adding by way of explanation a convincing: "All gone."

"Paul Billette, come here this minute," commanded Mollie sternly, while Betty and Amy tried hard to check their rising mirth and Grace looked bereft. "Come here I say."

"Make Dodo go 'way then," bargained Paul, adding in an explanatory tone: "Last time she pulled my hair."

"An' me's goin' do it 'dain," declared Dodo vengefully, when Betty reached over suddenly and pulled the little girl into her lap.

"Stay here a minute, Honey," she coaxed, and as Dodo tried vainly to wriggle loose added: "Sister wants to speak to Paul."

"An' I," said Dodo soberly, "want to pull his hair."

Again the girls had to strangle their mirth while Mollie reiterated her command to Paul. The latter, after regarding the wriggling Dodo for a minute uncertainly, reluctantly left his refuge and stood before Mollie, head hanging.

"I'se sorry," he said in a small voice, trying to

forestall the scolding he knew was coming. "Me never do it any more!"

"That," said Mollie sternly, though the corners of her mouth twitched and there was a twinkle in her eye, "is just exactly what you say every time you're a bad naughty boy. Now, just to make you remember how naughty you were, you shan't have another piece of candy for a whole week."

Paul's protest was drowned in a wail from Dora.

"But me wants some tandies," she cried. "Me didn't take any."

"She would, if Paul hadn't seem them first," murmured Grace, but Mollie shot her a warning glance.

"No," she said, "and just for being such a good girl, sister's going to give you six big chocolates all for yourself."

Dodo gave a shout of glee and disengaging herself with one last frantic wriggle from Betty's embrace, precipitated herself upon Mollie like a young cyclone.

"Ooh dive 'em to me, dive 'em to me quick," she demanded, then as Mollie made good her promise the little girl turned upon the erring Paul a look of conscious virtue and said gravely: "If you were a dood boy I would div you one,

but now me's goin' eat 'em up, every one till dey's all gone."

Then she took to her heels, scurrying down the steps and around the corner of the house with Paul in hot pursuit.

"Dodo," they heard him crying plaintively, "I'll let you play wiv my best bunny if you will div me one candy, just one—"

"I wouldn't give much for his chances," chuckled Mollie, adding with a sigh that was a mixture of exasperation and amusement. "Aren't they perfectly terrible? There isn't a minute of the day when they're not in some mischief."

"No, they're adorable," cried Betty fondly. "I wouldn't give two cents for children that didn't get into mischief all the time."

"I don't care so much about the mischief," said Grace, eyeing her empty chocolate box ruefully, "if they would only leave my candies alone."

"Never mind, Gracie," replied Mollie, laughing at her, "you shall have a whole box of mine, so you shall."

"Fine," agreed Grace, adding with a chuckle as Mollie handed over the almost full box: "Since my candies were more than half gone, I don't call it such a bad bargain at that."

"I'll say it wasn't," dimpled Betty.

"Just the same," said Mollie, after a little pause,

“even though the twins are a great deal of trouble, Mother said she just wouldn’t have known what to do without them—especially after I went to Camp Liberty—the house would have been so frightfully dull.”

“I should think so,” said Grace, adding suddenly, as though she had thought of it for the first time: “Why she would have been all alone, wouldn’t she? How awful!” For Mollie had no father, he having died several years before.

“And the other day she said the strangest thing,” Mollie continued, suddenly earnest. “You know how she adores Paul. Well, I caught her looking at him with the most wistful expression, and when I asked her what the matter was she looked up at me and I saw there were tears in her eyes.

“‘It’s Paul,’ she said softly. ‘Of course I’m thankful he is so little that I can keep him safe at home with me, but sometimes when I think of my dear country and the terrible wrongs she has suffered, I almost wish that my little son were old enough to bring retribution upon those hideous Germans. Sometimes I feel cheated—yes, you needn’t stare—that I have not a son “over there”.’”

“Oh, Mollie!” cried the Little Captain softly, “what a wonderful thing to say. And yet I think

she would die if anything happened to either of the twins."

"That's just it," said Mollie, her eyes glowing with pride. "Loving them as she does, she almost wishes it were possible to make the supreme sacrifice for her country."

"It was that spirit," said Grace thoughtfully, "that won the battle of the Marne."

For a long time after that the girls worked quietly, each busy with her own thoughts. It was Amy who finally broke the silence.

"And here we are," she said plaintively, "letting another whole afternoon slip by without deciding what we are going to do on our vacation. Can't somebody suggest something?"

"I have already suggested half a dozen things, only to be laughed to scorn," said Mollie, adding decidedly: "I'm through."

"And nothing I can say seems to meet with approval," added Betty plaintively.

"Well," said Grace, stretching herself, sitting up in the swing, and looking important, "nobody asks me whether I have anything to suggest, adding as they turned a battery of surprised and eager glances her way: "I don't know whether I can be persuaded to tell you now or not."

"Tell us!" they cried, piling into the swing till the supporting ropes creaked with the strain.

"Can't we bribe you with candy?" pleaded Amy.

"No. I just made an advantageous trade in that article, you will remember," was the answer.

Anyway, we don't bribe, we command," put in Betty. "Grace, we refuse to be trifled with. What have you to suggest? Out with it!"

"You'd better hurry," added Mollie, raising her knitting needle threateningly, "before I spit thee like a pig!"

CHAPTER IV

GRACE SURPRISES HER CHUMS

"I'M not a pig," cried Grace, striving to look dignified, which is a rather difficult procedure when one is being hugged by three pairs of arms at once. "I don't care how many times you spit me, whatever that is, Mollie, but you shan't call me a pig."

"Of course she shan't," said Betty soothingly. "If she does it again, we'll try our hand at this spitting business—"

"Goodness, sounds like a cat fight," chuckled Grace, but Mollie uncerimoniously shook her into attention.

"Grace, behave and tell us," she ordered.

"What?" asked Grace aggravatingly, but added hastily as Mollie again raised the knitting needle at a threatening angle: "All right, if you'll just give me space enough to breathe I'll do any little thing you ask."

With that the three jumped from the swing so suddenly that Grace, the only occupant left,

bounced into the air and landed with a thump on the cushions.

They laughed and drew up three chairs in a semi-circle in front of her to make escape impossible. Then three pairs of merry eyes focused commandingly upon her.

"I didn't know it myself till last night," she said in response to the tacit order. "Then it was patriotic Aunt Mary who proposed it."

"Proposed what?" they cried.

"Well, that's what I'm going to tell you if you give me half a chance. She said she felt as if she owed something to us girls for having stood so loyally behind Uncle Sam, and had decided to offer us her cottage at Bluff Point to use as long as we wanted it."

"Bluff Point!" cried Betty, while her eyes began to sparkle. "Why Grace! isn't that the place you were telling us about—"

"Where the quaint little house stands on a bluff—" added Amy eagerly.

"Overlooking a sparkling white beach that leads down to the ocean?" went on Betty.

"The very same," nodded Grace, and they heaved a sigh of pure excitement and happiness.

"Isn't it wonderful," cried Mollie joyfully, "how somebody is always doing something to make us happy?"

"Yes, but when I said that to Aunt Mary last night she smiled and looked wise—you know how sweet she is—and said that that was the way happiness always came to us—by helping others to be happy."

"But we haven't done anything to make anybody happy—particularly that is," said Mollie wondering.

"I said that too," nodded Grace. "But she only went on smiling, and I realized she must have meant our work at the Hostess House."

"It's strange how everybody persists in calling it work and giving us so much credit when it was all such fun," said Betty. "But girls," she added, laughing breathlessly, "the great fact is that we are going to have another adventure in the open. The very thought of it makes me want to roll in the buttercups."

"Goodness, there's one open in the back meadow," suggested Mollie. "You can roll in it, if you want to."

"Well, I don't—I want a whole patch of them!" cried Betty, while the rest laughed at Mollie's picture. "My, I feel younger already."

"Well of course you need to," drawled Grace, adding with a fond glance at the glowing Little Captain: "You look so terribly like a dried-up ancient, dear."

"But when shall we start?" cried Mollie, coming back to the all-absorbing topic at hand. "Goodness, I'd like to throw a few clothes in a suitcase and start right away—quick—this minute—I can't wait!"

"Do you think it's catching?" asked Grace, anxiously.

"From the way I feel I should say it was already caught," twinkled Betty, adding eagerly: "How long do you suppose we will have to wait, Grace? Did your Aunt Mary say when we could have the cottage?"

"As soon as we want it," replied Grace, looking surprised. "Didn't I tell you?"

"No you didn't," mimicked Mollie, adding as she sprang to her feet impatiently: "I'd like to know what we're waiting for anyway! Why don't we get started?"

"Now I know she's crazy," cried Betty, seizing her chum and pulling her down upon the arm of her chair. "Why we haven't decided anything yet."

"What is there to decide?" cried Mollie, trying to be patient and looking like a martyr.

"Why we don't even know how we're going to get there yet," explained Betty soothingly.

"In the automobile, of course," cried Mollie, jumping up again.

"Oh, can we?" cried Grace, forgetting to be languid and bouncing eagerly in the swing. "Mollie, that would be wonderful."

"Why of course we'll go in the car!" it was Mollie's turn to look surprised. "What did you think we were going to do—walk?"

"There are railroads, you know," Grace reminded her, relapsing into irony. "And as to walking—well, we did that too before you got your car, Mollie."

"Yes, and got sore feet," added Mollie.

"Well, now that we've decided not to go on the railroad or walk," Amy broke in unexpectedly, "I really don't see what we are waiting for."

"My goodness, there's another lunatic," cried Grace, looking despairingly at the Little Captain, whose eyes twinkled merrily. "What do you expect us to do—go just as we are?"

"No, but we can throw some things into a suitcase—"

"How long do you suppose it will take us to get there?" asked the Little Captain, coming to Grace's rescue.

"Why, even in Mollie's car it will take two days," said Grace, turning to Betty with the relief of one who at last had a sane person to reckon with. "Mollie and Amy evidently expect to make it in a couple of hours."

"Oh well, I didn't know it was so far away," murmured Mollie, somewhat taken aback. "Of course, then, we can't go until to-morrow."

The girls laughed merrily, and Betty hugged her.

"We might," chuckled the latter, "even be forced to wait till day after to-morrow."

"I won't do it!" cried Mollie, jumping up again. "There's no reason in the world why we can't start to-morrow."

"But, Mollie dear," insisted Betty mildly, "we haven't even asked our folks whether we may go or not—"

"As if we didn't know what they will say," broke in Mollie, but Betty went on without heeding her.

"And we must have a chaperone, you know."

"Oh, I suppose so," sighed Mollie sinking down in her chair resignedly, "but it's horribly tiresome. I want to go now."

"You sound like Dodo with her candies," remarked Grace, aimably helping herself to a luscious milk chocolate filled with nuts. "Have one, Mollie—it may make you feel better."

"It won't, but I will," said Mollie rather enigmatically, reaching out a hand for the proffered sweet. "Thank you, dear."

"But whom shall we have for a chaperone?"

cried Amy impatiently. "I'm almost as bad as Mollie—I can hardly wait till to-morrow."

"Why," said Grace, nibbling daintily, "I thought maybe you girls wouldn't mind if I asked mother to go with us."

"Mind!" echoed Betty, while the others looked at her in surprise. "Why of course we'd love to have her! You know that. But I never imagined she would care to go, she is so interested in Red Cross work and her clubs—"

"That's just it," said Grace, sitting up quickly. "She's entirely worn out with work and worry about Will, and I thought a little vacation with us girls would help her out wonderfully. I'm not sure she will go—I haven't asked her yet."

"Well, let's," cried Betty impulsively, jumping to her feet. "She simply can't refuse if we all ask her at once."

"Now you're saying something!" cried Mollie fervently, albeit slangily, as she flung her arm about the Little Captain and dragged her down the steps. "Action is what we need—action, and plenty of it."

The girls fairly ran the short distance from Mollie's home to Grace's, and the people they met on the way, greeted them heartily, musing as he or she turned to go on: "There's probably something interesting in the air—the Outdoor Girls

always look like that when they have some new adventure in tow." For Deepdale was very proud and fond of its Outdoor Girls.

Mrs. Ford was just coming down the stairs dressed to go out when the quartette burst in upon her. She did look very tired and worn, as Grace had said, but the smile that lighted her face at sight of the girls made her appear ten years younger.

"Mother," said Grace, taking one of her mother's carefully gloved hands in her own and leading her gently but firmly into the library, "we have something very important to say to you."

"Will it take long?" queried Mrs. Ford, smiling at the other girls over her shoulder. "Because, if it will, I'm very much afraid I can't wait. I'm a little late now."

"That," said Grace decidedly, as her mother sank into a chair and the other girls grouped themselves about her, "is exactly what we have come to talk about. We think you need a little vacation."

"Vacation!" cried the lady, half rising from her chair. "Why, my dear! how can I take a vacation when my hands are so full of work now that I am—"

"You don't have to take it," Grace interrupted argumentatively, "we'll just give it to you."

Mrs. Ford laughed helplessly and regarded the eager young faces with amusement.

"Out with it, girls," she commanded. "I know you are plotting some terrible thing. What do you intend to do, kidnap me?"

"No, we're keeping that for a last resort," returned Betty, and Mrs. Ford laughed outright at the confession.

"We want," explained Grace, speaking fast for fear of being interrupted, "to have you go with us to Bluff Point. We need a chaperone, you know."

"I've no doubt of it," retorted her mother, laughing, adding, with another anxious glance at the clock: "But I'm afraid you will have to get someone else, Honey. If I were free, I should like nothing better, but you see how rushed I am—"

"But you're terribly tired, Mother, you know you are," said Grace with unusual gentleness, adding diplomatically: "What good will you be to the Red Cross or to anyone else, I'd like to know, if you let yourself get sick?"

"But I'm not sick," protested her mother, then added with a sudden longing as the wild solitude of Bluff Point rose before her eyes suggesting utter peace and quiet, a chance to rest tired nerves and gather strength for the last great drive:

"You're right, I am tired, terribly tired," and

the lines of weariness returning to her face. "I'd love it, girls, but there's my work!"

It took the girls about five minutes of the hardest work they had ever done in their lives. But they did what they had set out to do. At the end of that time Mrs. Ford consented to start with them whenever they were ready.

"Day after to-morrow?" asked Mollie, her eyes shining.

"I don't know why not," said Mrs. Ford, then sprang to her feet with a cry of dismay. "Girls, I completely forgot to telephone the Red Cross. What will they think of me?"

CHAPTER V

A PROBLEM SOLVED

"I WISH," said Mollie, sitting back to view approvingly the shining black hood of her car, "that we had another machine. I'm afraid by the time we've packed our bags and things into the tonneau we'll find it rather crowded. And for such a long trip we ought to have plenty of room."

"That's what I was thinking," agreed Amy, rubbing a bit of nickle to a gleaming polish, for the girls had gathered at Mollie's to help her put the car in shape for the anticipated trip to Bluff Point. And they had gone to their work with a will, rubbing and polishing the big machine as they would have groomed a well-loved horse. "We will have our trunks sent, of course, but we shall have to take our nighties and combs and brushes and such things. We might put 'em on the roof," she added hopefully.

"Yes, and we might wear 'em," said Grace scornfully. "That is a brilliant idea."

"Well, I have one worth two of that," said Betty, trying not to look mysterious.

"Betty, are you going to spring anything on us?" cried Mollie, while the other two paused with dust cloths uplifted.

"Not if you don't want me to," returned the Little Captain demurely.

"Betty, dear, I love you so," crooned Mollie, running around the car and putting a rather oily hand about Betty's waist. "You wouldn't want such an ardent admirer to drop dead at your feet, would you, now?"

"It would have the charm of novelty," chuckled Betty, only to add quickly as Mollie made a threatening gesture: "No, please don't kill me yet. Come over here on the steps and I'll tell you all about it."

"Yes, yes, go on," they cried, obediently ranging themselves on the steps of the back porch and fixing eager eyes upon her.

"Shoot!" Mollie commanded inelegantly.

"Well," said Betty speaking slowly to add to the effect of her announcement, "I have a car!"

"A car!" they echoed, and Grace added: "Now I know she's crazy!"

"When?" demanded Mollie, her eyes round and black, as they always were under excitement.

"If you mean, when did I get it," answered Betty, enjoying their surprise to the full, "I might tell you that up to six o'clock last evening I had

no more idea of owning a car than you did. However, at six-fifteen, I owned it," and her eyes danced with the pride of ownership.

Then the girls fell upon her, all demanding explanation of the miracle, till she raised her hand pleadingly.

"Give me a chance," she begged. "How can I tell you anything when you're making such a noise?"

The girls seemed impressed with the common sense of this. At any rate, they stopped talking for the space of a half a minute.

"It was last night at dinner," explained Betty hurriedly, seizing her opportunity. "Dad came in a little late, and as he sat down he laughingly asked us how we would like a racing car in the family."

"A racing car!" they echoed.

"Of course we thought he was joking," continued Betty, "but when we found he was very much in earnest of course we went wild with excitement."

"I should think so," breathed Amy.

"But, Betty darling, how—" Mollie was beginning when Betty cut her short by hurrying on with her story.

"That's what we wanted to know, of course," she said. "It seems that one of Dad's clients owed

him a good deal of money, and although he, the client, that is, had plenty of money, it was all tied up in such a way that he couldn't get hold of it right away, so he offered to give Dad his almost new racing car in exchange. And," here Betty came to the most wonderful part of her story, "since mother doesn't care for that type of car—he gave it to me!"

"Betty, how mar-ve-lous!" breathed Mollie, while Amy and Grace just stared.

"Can we see it? Have you got it at home?" asked Amy, after a few minutes during which the girls had been getting used to the wonderful idea of Betty with a machine, and a racing machine at that.

"Oh, Betty, lead us to it," added Mollie yearningly.

"I don't know whether it's come yet or not," explained the Little Captain, as the girls threw aside dust rags and gingham aprons preparatory to a concerted rush upon the new acquisition. "That's why I didn't tell you about it sooner. I was going to surprise you by taking you to it," she added, as they set off at a walk that was almost a run for the pretty Nelson house; "but when Mollie spoke about another car I just couldn't hold back any longer. Oh dear, I hope it has come!"

"Won't it be fun?" cried Mollie joyfully, executing a little irrepressible skip in her delight. "You can run it, Betty, of course, and take Grace or Amy with you while our car comes behind—"

"With the luggage," finished Betty wickedly.

"Well you needn't be so conceited," retorted Mollie, her nose in the air, while Betty looked innocent.

"Wasn't that what you were going to say?" she inquired.

However, there was no time for more conversation, for at that moment they turned a corner, bringing Betty's house to sight, and what should be going up the drive at that particular and ecstatic moment but the graceful, low-bodied racer itself!

With a shout the girls rushed forward. They overtook the driver as he slowed to a stop, and fairly danced with impatience while the man pushed up his goggles, took off his hat, wiped his perspiring forehead, and slowly turned to smile at them.

"This is where Mr. Nelson lives, isn't it?" he asked. "Mr. Todd asked me to bring the car around—"

"Yes, yes, we know all about it," interrupted Betty, then added with a smile, as the man looked surprised: "I suppose you think I'm terribly im-

patient, but, you see, the car is mine, and I can't wait to try it out."

The man whistled and descended with alacrity. The girls noticed rather absentmindedly that he was a rather good looking young fellow, probably one of the young men from Mr. Todd's office who had volunteered to run this errand for him.

"Well, I don't blame you a bit for being in a hurry," he said heartily, eyeing the beautiful lines of the car with approval. "She sure is a great little machine! You are Miss Nelson, I suppose?" he added, turning to Betty. "You see," with evident embarrassment, "I promised to deliver the car in person to Mr. Nelson—"

"Here he is, so there ought to be no difficulty about that," said a jovial voice, and they turned to find Mr. Nelson himself coming toward them. "Good afternoon, Mr. Jameson. How do you like my new acquisition? A beauty is it not?"

"I say so!" agreed the young fellow, and after a few moments of general conversation, Mr. Nelson led him off toward the house, leaving the girls to themselves. And that, as Mollie afterward remarked, "was just the most beautiful thing he could have done!"

Before they had turned the corner of the house, Betty had clambered in behind the steering wheel and was bidding the girls follow.

In their excitement they all tried to climb in, forgetting that a car designed to seat two people cannot by any stretch of imagination accommodate four. Then suddenly realizing what an absurd picture they must be making, they began to laugh.

"Well, now what are we going to do?" wailed Mollie. "We can't all go at once."

"Of course you can," cried Betty busily examining her treasure, touching a lever here, a button there, with loving fingers. "What, may I ask, is the matter with the running boards?"

"Betty, you don't mean—"

"Yes, I do," firmly.

"But we can't—"

"Well, then I'll have to take one at a time," decided Betty, tooting the horn experimentally.

"Come on—who goes first?"

"Oh, come on, we'll all go," cried Mollie dancing with impatience. "You get in beside Betty, Grace, since you're afraid of the running board, and Amy and I'll hang on somewhere. Come on, Amy. Be a sport, old girl."

Amy wavered for a moment, but the challenge was too much for her, and she nodded her head in assent.

"Thank goodness I can only die once," was her cheerful comment.

So Grace climbed in beside the Little Captain, while Amy and Mollie scrambled up on the running boards and clung to the sides of the car. Then Betty tooted the horn triumphantly and began slowly to back down the drive.

"I don't know about this," she remarked, as the car made rather zigzagging work of it. "I've driven mostly on a straight road, you know, and I'm not very expert, even if I do know all about a motor boat."

"So we see," commented Mollie wickedly, as Betty nearly backed into a flower bed at one side of the drive.

"Don't you think we'd better get off?" asked Amy. "Till you turn into the road, anyway, Betty?" she added.

"Don't you dare," cried Betty, giving the wheel a nervous little twist that caused Amy to groan and clutch the side of the car tighter. "If you make me stop now, I'll never get started again. There!" as the car slid into the roadway, hesitated a moment, then without a jar or a jerk, glided swiftly along the smooth road, gathering headway as it went. "Now we're all right."

"That was pretty work, Betty," complimented Mollie, who, as an old and experienced driver, felt capable of pronouncing judgment. "Now let's see what this little car will do."

"Not too fast," begged Amy, as Betty slid into high gear. "Remember we're not used to this kind of traveling, and we're apt to find ourselves sitting in the road if you're not careful."

"Have you chosen your spot?" asked Betty, her eyes twinkling.

"Just the same, it might have been a good idea to have brought some cushions along," said Mollie ruefully. "We might have strapped them on and used them the way you do life savers—in case of emergency."

"My, you must be having a wonderful time," drawled Grace. "Have some candy Mollie—it may help your courage."

"My courage doesn't need any help, thank you," snapped Mollie, adding wickedly: "Just for that we ought to make you ride out here."

"Goodness, don't!" cried Betty, as she swung the car around a corner and started once more toward home. "The punishment wouldn't fit the crime, Mollie. Besides, we'll be back in a few minutes. Girls, she runs like a dream!"

"She's a wonder," agreed Mollie. "I guess there's just about no limit to the speed she's capable of."

"Do you want me to let her out?" queried Betty wickedly, but both Amy and Mollie protested vehemently.

"Some other time," said Mollie, "when we're not hanging on by our eyelids!"

A few minutes more, and they were again turning into the Nelson drive, which, by the way, Betty took much more expertly this time. As the car slowed, Amy and Mollie dropped off and Amy opened the door for Lady Grace, who descended slowly.

"Well, how do you like it?" cried Betty, jumping out in her turn and regarding her new possession with shining eyes. "Do you think she'll do?"

"Do!" they cried, and Mollie added, patting the smooth side of the car with admiring fingers:

"She's a wonder, Betty—as Roy would say, 'a perfect pippin.' Good-bye," she added suddenly, starting down the drive.

"Where are you going?" cried Betty, as they looked after her surprised.

"Home," she answered, adding with a chuckle: "I've got to finish cleaning my old car. It's poor old nose must be terribly out of joint."

CHAPTER VI

LIFE AND DEATH

THE next morning Betty awoke to the sound of the telephone ringing imperatively in the hall. She got up, dragged the instrument from its stand and spoke drowsily into the receiver.

“Hello—who—why, Grace, how did you happen to wake up?— Why, Grace, what is the matter, dear?—You have heard what?—Will is wounded?—Oh, Honey, how awful! Is it serious?—Never mind, don’t try to tell me about it now. I’ll get dressed just as fast as I can and come right over—Yes, yes, in about five minutes.”

Mechanically Betty replaced the receiver on the hook and hurried back into her room. Then swiftly she began to dress.

Will! Dear old Will was wounded! That had been about all she had been able to gather from Grace’s sobbing message—but that was enough. He was the first of the boys to fall out there in the trenches, and who knew but what Allen might be the next!

And here only yesterday they had been so

happy, as happy as they could be with that shadow always hanging over them. This was the day, too—the incongruous thought struck Betty as she hastily pulled on her clothing—the day they had set for their trip to Bluff Point. Well, of course, it was all off now. Who wanted to go anyway?

These thoughts and many more raced through Betty's head as she put the finishing touches to her toilet and crushed a garden hat on her pretty soft hair. She was a very attractive picture as she ran down the stairs, but she neither knew it nor cared.

"Why, Betty dear, what is the meaning of the hat?" her mother inquired, smiling as her young daughter burst into the dining room. "You don't need it to eat breakfast in, you know. Who called on the 'phone?"

"I'm not going to eat breakfast, at least not right away. But there, of course, you don't know," answering her mother's look of surprise. "Grace called up and, oh, Mother, poor Will has been wounded! I don't want to c-cry," her chin quivered and she turned away for a moment to get control of the lump in her throat.

"I know, dear," said her mother, putting an understanding arm about her, "and so I'm not going to offer very much sympathy—just now. Were you going over to see Grace, poor child?"

Betty squeezed her mother's hand gratefully and nodded.

"I'll be back in a little while," she said finally, getting the better of that annoying lump. "I just want to find out all about it and give Grace my sympathy."

And the Little Captain found poor Grace in need of all the sympathy she could possibly give her. She was sitting in the darkest corner of the library, all crumpled up in a big chair, her eyes red with weeping and a damp ball of handkerchief clutched tightly in one hand.

At sight of Betty running toward her, she began to sob again, the tears running down her face unnoticed.

"Betty, Betty, I knew you'd come," she cried, as Betty knelt beside her and put two loving arms about her. "I'm so m-miserable I just don't want to live at all."

"But, Honey, it isn't nearly as bad as it might be," said Betty, trying to sooth while wanting desperately to know herself just how bad it was. "You said he was only wounded, didn't you?"

"That's what the telegram said," Grace answered, wiping her eyes drearily. "But how do we know but what he may be dead by this time?"

"We don't know, of course," returned Betty, recovering a little of her optimism while she unos-

tentatively handed Grace a fresh handkerchief, "but the chances are against it."

"But perhaps they said he was just wounded to let us down easy," cried Grace, evidently convinced that there was no bright side to look upon.

"The Government doesn't do that; it hasn't time," argued Betty. "It always lets you know the worst at once."

A gleam of hope came into Grace's eyes.

"Then you think there's a chance?" she queried, sitting up straight and beginning to look a little more interested in life. "Do you think he may get well?"

"Why, of course," said Betty, adding reasonably: "If you would tell me just what the telegram said, I'd have more to go on."

"That's all it said—what I told you," replied Grace, relaxing wearily. "Just said that he was wounded—nothing more. Dad is writing to Washington to try to get more news. Of course, he has a great deal of influence, being a lawyer with a good many friends in Washington, and he may be able to find out something. I don't know."

"Here come Mollie and Amy," said Betty, glancing through the window. "I guess," she added thoughtfully, "Amy probably feels pretty bad too."

"But she's not his sister," cried Grace, with a

sudden flare-up of jealousy that made Betty smile in spite of her heartache. She could not help wondering how Grace would have taken it if it had been Roy instead of Will who had been wounded.

But Grace's little fit of jealousy did not last long at sight of Amy's drawn, white face and the traces of tears in her eyes. Instead, she opened her arms to this other girl who was not Will's sister, yet loved him too, and for a moment they cried on each others shoulders.

Meanwhile Betty and Mollie wandered over to the window and stood looking thoughtfully out upon the lawn and not seeing any of it.

"Goodness!" said Mollie after a moment, shrugging her shoulders a little impatiently, "of course, it's terrible to have Will wounded, and I can imagine Grace being all cut up about it, but she—and Amy too—act as if he were dead."

"I know," said Betty softly, then added, looking a little quizzically at Mollie: "But you know I don't blame them so much when I try putting myself in their place. Of course we love Will, but suppose it had been Allen, for instance, or Frank."

Mollie started and uttered a little cry of protest.

"Oh, but that would be different," she said weakly, then catching Betty's eye, added soberly: "I see what you mean, of course. I suppose I

would act just the same, under different circumstances."

However, having had their cry out and feeling better and much more cheerful in consequence, Grace and Amy called to them and they crossed the room quickly.

"We've decided," said Amy then, "that, since we can't find out any more until Mr. Ford hears from Washington, we might as well make the best of it."

"And we want to talk about our trip," Grace added.

"Our trip?" echoed Mollie. "Why I thought of course we would give that up."

"I did too," explained Grace. "But when I spoke of it to Dad, he said we were to do nothing of the kind. He said we couldn't do poor Will"—in spite of all her resolution her voice broke on the name—"any good by staying at home and moping, and that he would let us know as soon as he had any authentic word from Washington. And he insists on mother's going too."

And so it happened that a few hours later a very sober group of Outdoor Girls started on what should have been a joyful trip, with heavy hearts and gloomy foreboding. Even the new racer did not serve to liven the party.

The only time they laughed was when they

found Dodo and Paul, the incorrigible twins, hidden away under some raincoats in Mollie's car.

"Oh, but we want to go 'long," Dodo protested vehemently when discovered.

"We just got to go 'long," Paul had added.

"No, you mustn't 'got to,'" Mollie contradicted them, while the others looked on amused. "Come, Dodo, honey, be a good girl for sister and come down. You too, Paul. We're in an awful hurry."

"But we not goin' to come down," Dodo insisted.

"'Less," Paul added diplomatically, "we get tandies."

"Lots of tandies," Dodo supplemented.

"Here, take these," Grace offered, holding out a box of sweets which, despite all her trouble, she had not forgotten.

"Don't give them the box—just take out a few," Mollie suggested, but Grace insisted, while her face clouded again.

"I don't want them, anyway. I don't know why I took them. Habit, I suppose."

However, hope and optimism did not consent to be kept long in the background on such a day as this when the sun shone its brightest and the birds sang their hardest and the very wind seemed to be whispering of happier times to come.

"Well," sighed Amy at last, for she and Mrs.

Ford were riding in Mollie's car, while Grace was with Betty in the racer, "it's plain to be seen that nature at least doesn't know that anything horrible or cruel is happening 'over there.' I don't think I ever saw a more wonderful day."

"Maybe it is a good omen," said Mollie, quick to seize her opportunity. "I feel it in my bones that it won't be long before we will hear good news of Will—and you know my prophetic bones never lie."

"I don't know anything of the sort," protested Amy, although the remark brought a reluctant smile to her lips. "I've known those same prophetic bones to slip up before this."

"Which reminds me," Mollie cried, apropos of nothing in particular, "that if we don't put on more speed we'll not reach our destination before dark. I wonder why Betty doesn't hurry," for Betty and Grace in the speedy little racer were taking the lead.

She signaled the latter with three long and three short toots of the horn. A moment later the racer slowed down and Betty turned around to see what was wanted.

"You're too slow," cried Mollie. "If you don't go a little faster, we'll have to run over you."

"Oh-ho, look who's talking!" gibed the Little Captain, adding wickedly: "We were afraid to

speed up for fear of leaving you too far behind.”

“Now I know we’ll have to run over you,” cried Mollie fiercely. “Toot, toot—out of my way!”

But Betty evidently had no intention of getting out of anybody’s way, for with a challenging blast of her horn she put the little car at high and it sprang forward gleefully.

Behind her, Mollie’s car, like a big cat after a mouse, gave exultant chase, fairly eating up the road. And yet Betty maintained the distance between them—even drew away a little.

“Goodness,” cried Mollie suddenly, her eyes sparkling, “I may be mistaken, but I think she wants a race!”

CHAPTER VII

THE RACE

THEN began some fun that was novel and exciting even to the Outdoor Girls, who thought they had tried just about every sport there was.

Mollie bent her straight little back over the steering wheel, gave her more power and the big car fairly flew ahead, lessening perceptibly the distance between it and the racer.

However, Betty, looking behind, seemed not in the least concerned. On the contrary, she waved her hand joyously as she recognized Mollie had taken her challenge. Then she too bent over the wheel with her eyes glued to the flying ribbon of road ahead.

"Betty, Betty, stop it!" cried Grace, holding frantically to her hat and the side of the car. "Suppose we should m-meet somebody—a wagon or a m-machine."

"So much the worse for it," retorted Betty gayly. "You keep your eye on Mollie, Gracie dear, and tell me whether she's gaining—that's a good girl."

"If you think I'm going to help you break our necks—" Grace sputtered, but Betty cut her short.

"Well, if you don't I will have to look for myself," she said, adding maliciously: "And then we will have a smash-up!"

Grace groaned and looked behind her.

"They're gaining," she cried, and then all at once the spirit of the thing caught her—the contest of speed was getting into her blood. "Oh, Betty, don't let 'em," she almost screamed, above the noise of the motor and the rushing wind. "They're not more than fifty feet behind now!"

Betty gave her a swift look, smiled to herself, and once more fixed her dancing eyes on the road ahead.

"All right," she crowed. "Just watch me run away from them. I wouldn't have had the heart," she added with a chuckle, "if Mollie hadn't brought it all on herself."

"But they're still gaining," insisted Grace nervously, trying to look behind, ahead, keep her seat, hat, and dignity all at the same time. "Look, Betty, they're only about thirty feet behind!"

"That's near enough," Betty decided, and leaning over suddenly, did something to the car that Grace never quite understood. Anyway, it had the desired effect. The little racer fairly leapt forward and, like a horse that has been given his

head for the first time, took the bit between its teeth and bolted.

Behind them Mollie looked her amazement. She was getting every bit of speed out of her machine of which it was capable, and then, just as victory was within sight, Betty was doing an inconceivable, unbelievable thing—she was winning the race!

Mrs. Ford and Amy had been enjoying the race tremendously, but now they leaned forward in surprise.

“Goodness, she’s beating us,” cried Amy.

“No!” snapped Mollie sarcastically. “Who would have supposed it?”

“Perhaps it is because Betty’s car is so much lighter,” suggested Mrs. Ford consolingly. “We have all the luggage and wraps, too.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t make so much difference,” denied Mollie, who was too good a sportsman to make excuses for herself. “Betty’s racer has the speed, that’s all.”

“Well, they’re just about out of sight now,” said Amy, leaning back resignedly. “I only hope Betty doesn’t run into anything and have a smash-up. She hasn’t driven a car as much as you, Mollie.”

“Oh, Betty’ll take care of herself,” said Mollie, though she was slightly mollified by this tribute to

her superior experience, if not superior speed. "I guess," she added, after a moment's reflection, "I'd better sell this old car and get a racer too."

Mrs. Ford laughed softly, the first time she had laughed or thought of laughing since receiving the news of Will's being wounded.

"Don't go back on an old friend for its first offence, Mollie," she chided, adding diplomatically: "A racing car is just fine for speed, but I think your automobile is much more sociable and comfy."

"Well, I'm glad there's something nice about it," said Mollie, for she had not yet recovered from her surprise and chagrin. "I hope," she added, as a sudden thought struck her, "that Betty doesn't get too far ahead. I don't know this part of the country very well and Betty has the map."

"That will be the next thing," said Amy, with a sigh, and Mollie looked at her sharply.

"What?" she demanded.

"Why, that we'll get lost," Amy explained. "Wasn't that what you meant?"

"Oh, I hope not," said Mrs. Ford, a little anxiously. "Perhaps we'll be able to see them when we round this curve, Mollie."

But they rounded several curves, and still no sign of Betty's car. Then happened what Mollie had secretly been fearing would happen. They

came to a crossroads and a sudden stop at one and the same moment.

"Now, what?" queried Amy, in the tone of resignation that never failed to rub Mollie the wrong way. "Something the matter with the engine?"

"No, the engine's all right," snapped Mollie, adding, irritably: "But everything else is all wrong."

"What, for instance?" queried Mrs. Ford soothingly. She knew that the first defeat Mollie had ever experienced would be bound to rankle and was prepared to make allowances. "If the engine is all right, why don't we go on?"

"Which way?" queried Mollie, spreading out her arms with a hopeless gesture. "There are two roads, one looks as good as the other, and we haven't the slightest idea in the world which to take."

"Oh!" gasped Amy.

Mrs. Ford gave a low whistle as she saw the fix they were in.

"Then if Betty doesn't realize our predicament and come back pretty soon, we'll either have to stay here indefinitely, or go back the way we came, is that it?"

"Yes," nodded Mollie, adding truthfully and more than a little anxiously: "Only I'm not quite

sure I know just how we came. As I said, this is unfamiliar country to me."

Amy groaned.

"Then we shall be lost for fair," she said. "Oh, why did Betty do such a foolish thing?"

Mollie was about to retort when a cloud of dust in the distance and a faint chug-chug made her swallow her words.

"What's that?" she cried. "It sounds like a motor. "I wonder—"

"Yes, it is!" cried Amy, straining her eyes to see through the cloud of dust. "It's only a little car, and it's coming at about ninety miles an hour."

At this reference to Betty's speed, Mollie winced a little but gave a relieved sigh nevertheless. For by this time the car was near enough to be identified beyond doubt. It was a racer, and there was a girl at the wheel.

A few moments later Betty herself, with a grin, hailed them,

"Hello," she cried, adding as the car slowed to a standstill: "This time the joke's on us. We were so busy running away from you that we took the wrong road. This one ends about two miles up in somebody's farm."

"It's lucky something stopped you," said Mollie dryly, adding as she cocked one eye at the sun:

"Well, let's be getting along. We'll have to hurry and make up for lost time."

"Do you still want to get ahead of us?" asked Betty, as a moment later she swung her car into the right road. "Because if you do—"

"Go on," cried Mollie, exasperated, yet beginning to laugh, for after all Mollie was a good loser. "Some way or other I'll get even with you, Betty Nelson. Meanwhile hustle!"

And Betty hustled, with Mollie keeping just far enough behind to avoid the cloud of dust the little car threw up. For an hour more the motors purred rhythmically, eating up mile after mile, until finally the girls were compelled by ravenous and healthy appetities to stop for lunch.

They had brought two big hampers, packed full with sandwiches, fruit and cake and also something to drink, and after the long ride in the open the very thought of these delicacies brought, as Grace said, "the tears of longing to their eyes."

As Mrs. Ford handed one of the baskets over the seat to Mollie in front, Betty and Grace tumbled out of their car and came running toward them.

"Are you going to get out and eat, in romantic fashion, by the wayside?" queried Grace, eyeing a pile of sandwiches hungrily. "Or are you going

to sit in state in the car and let us occupy the running board?"

"We'll give you one of the hampers," offered Mrs. Ford, but Mollie gasped in dismay.

"Oh, please don't," she begged. "Don't you see—there are only two of them to our three. And you want to give them half the lunch!"

They laughed at her, and Betty offered a solution.

Far be it from us to rob you, Honey," she said soothingly. "We'll sit right here on this rock—"

"Oh, goodness! who cares where we sit as long as we get something," groaned Grace. "Mollie, I'm dying."

"Well as long as you die out there it's all right," retorted Mollie unfeelingly. Nevertheless, she handed the sufferer a ham sandwich and a hard boiled egg, which the latter came as near to grabbing as her good breeding would permit.

However, when they had finished the lunch, burned up what odds and ends remained, and had once more started on their way, they found that the shadow of unhappiness which the excitement of the race had almost banished, was returning again.

In front with Betty, Grace sighed so dolefully that the Little Captain looked at her inquiringly,

an action which almost brought about a collision with a tree by the wayside.

"Betty, what are you doing?"

"Trying to kill us," replied Betty serenely. "And if you give any more sighs like that, I'll do it."

"I didn't know I sighed," said Grace gloomily. "But it wouldn't be any wonder if I did. I feel as if I were made up of them—sighs, I mean."

Betty was silent a moment, then she asked suddenly:

"When does your father expect to hear from Washington?"

"Not before the end of the week, anyway. And by that time," Grace paused to control the trembling of her lips, "nobody knows what may have happened. For all we know Will may be—dead."

CHAPTER VIII

RED RAGS

“WELL, we’ve been making pretty good speed for the last three hours,” said Mollie, taking first one hand, then the other, from the steering wheel and stretching her cramped fingers experimentally. “Now if nothing else happens—”

The sound of an explosion cut short the rest of the sentence, and she put on the brakes, at the same time tooting a signal to Betty. The latter stopped her car and came running back to see what had happened.

“Tire,” said Mollie laconically, forestalling the inevitable questions. “I knew our luck had been too good to be true. Well,” with the air of a martyr accepting the inevitable, “I suppose there’s nothing to do but get busy and fix it, though, of course, this spoils our chances of getting to Bensington to-night,” Bensington being the town midway between Deepdale and Bluff Point where they had planned to spend the night. It was also the only town for miles around that boasted a hotel.

"Oh, I don't know," said Betty in reply to Mollie's gloomy prediction. "It won't be the first time we've accomplished the impossible."

"But it will soon be dark."

"Goodness! it won't be dark for hours and hours," Betty laughed at her. "And this oughtn't to take us more than half an hour at the longest. Come on now, let's get busy."

Thus inspired, the girls "got busy," but they were tired with the long drive and everything seemed to go wrong. Their usually skillful fingers fumbled, the tire was "too big or too little or something," to quote Amy, and at the end of a quarter of an hour's useless struggle their tempers were worn to a frazzle and they were ready to cry.

"Well, I never had anything act like that before," cried Mollie irritably. "I'd like to give the person that wrote about the 'depravity of inanimate things' a medal. The old tire's got a mean disposition, that's all."

"Well, it isn't the only one," Grace was beginning, when Mollie turned and glared at her.

"If you mean me—"

"I meant all of us," Grace explained. "As long as we have been going together, this is the first time I can remember when all of us have been in the doleful dumps at once."

This brought a reluctant smile even to Mollie's gloomy countenance, and Betty laughed merrily.

"Perhaps it's just as well," said the Little Captain, adding with a chuckle: "It's the same way with onions— if everybody eats 'em, no one can notice the unpleasantness in the other fellow."

This brought a real laugh, and Mollie said fondly:

"I always knew you were a 'philosophiker,' Betty, dear. But," she added, vindictively kicking the tire that lay at her feet, "all the philosophy in the world won't put this tire on for us. And we can't very well get to Bensington on three wheels and a rim."

"No!" cried Grace, sarcastically. "Who would have guessed it?"

Mollie started to retort, but the threatened resumption of hostilities was cut short by the sound of a motor in the distance.

"Hark!" cried Mollie, a dramatic hand raised to a listening ear. "Do I hear the approach of an angel?"

"If you do, he has a pretty earthly means of transportation," laughed Betty. "To me, it sounds like a machine or a motorcycle."

"How can you?" cried Mollie, still dramatically poised. "It is an angel, I tell you, come to help us out of our predicament."

"It is a motorcycle," cried Amy excitedly. "The engine is making too much noise for an automobile."

"Well," suggested Mrs. Ford quietly, "whoever it is, I think it might be a good idea to get out of the middle of the road."

"But if we do," Grace protested, "he'll go right past us."

"And if we don't we'll get run over," added Mrs. Ford.

The girls looked at each other helplessly.

"I tell you," cried Betty suddenly, her eyes sparkling with a new idea. "Give me that old red rag we use for a duster, Mollie, and I'll go and signal your angel."

"Betty, you'll do no such thing," cried Amy, shocked, while Mollie dug under the seat for the improvised signal flag. "Think of signaling a strange man!"

"But you forget he's an angel in disguise," laughed Betty, snatching the dust cloth Mollie held out to her. "Anyway," she added, over her shoulder, "desperate cases require desperate remedies," and was off round the turn of the road.

There wasn't much time to spare either, for when she had clambered up on a rock by the side of the road, the motorcyclist was only a few hundred feet away.

At the unexpected sight of a red rag wildly waved by a very graceful little figure in a gray traveling suit, he looked surprised but promptly put on his brakes. He leapt from his machine and came running toward her while Betty descended from her perch just in time to meet him at the foot of the rock.

"Is there anything the matter?" he asked, in a nice voice that Betty immediately liked. In fact, she liked nearly everything about him, from his sunburned face and merry blue eyes to his trim leather boots and puttees. So she gave him a friendly little smile that showed all her dimples, much to his secret admiration.

"Why, yes, there is," she answered, adding with a chuckle: "If there hadn't been, I shouldn't have been perched on that old rock, waving a ridiculous red dust rag!"

Then, as they made their way around the turn in the road toward the car where Mrs. Ford and the girls were waiting for them, she explained the situation, adding with another smile: "You see, I had to stop you some way, so I chose the very first method I could think of."

"It certainly was effective," he answered, smiling.

Then after mutual introductions, by which the girls learned that their new friend's name was

Joe Barnes and that he had been on his way to Deeming, a village about five miles away when Betty's red flag had brought him to so sudden a stop, the youth went to work with a will at the tire while the girls alternately watched him and helped by handing him the tools he needed.

In what seemed no time at all to the girls he had finished his task and had pulled out a handkerchief and was wiping his begrimed hands with it.

"My, you did do that in a hurry!" sighed Mollie, patting the new tire happily. "You did in fifteen minutes what five of us couldn't do in half an hour."

"You were probably tired," he answered, glancing at the car, which gave unmistakable evidence of the many miles they had come that day. "Are you, have you—" he hesitated, evidently not knowing whether his question would be taken in good part or not. "Are you going very much farther?"

"Only about a hundred miles," laughed Betty, then added in answer to his startled glance: "Not to-night, though. We are just going as far as Bensington."

"But Bensington is about fifteen miles away," he protested, adding as he glanced up at a lowering gray cloud overhead: "And if I know any-

thing about weather signs, you will have to use some speed to get there before the storm."

"The storm!" they cried simultaneously, following his glance, while Mollie added petulantly:

"Goodness, haven't we had enough troubles for one day without getting a drenching into the bargain?"

"But we haven't got the drenching yet," Mrs. Ford reminded her, adding, with a cordial smile as she held out her hand to Joe Barnes: "We don't know how to thank you Mr. Barnes, for taking all this trouble for us."

"Please don't," he begged, flashing his nice smile upon them. "I am only too glad to have been of assistance. And now, if I might suggest—"

Another glance at the ominous cloud which had grown bigger and blacker even in these few minutes, sent the girls scrambling unceremoniously to their seats while Joe Barnes lifted his hat and stood waiting for them to start. Once his eyes rested upon Betty, and there was so much undisguised admiration in them that she flushed prettily and threw in the clutch with a jerk that was not at all skillful.

"Good-bye," they called, and "good-bye," he answered, as the two cars sprang forward in a cloud of dust. Not until they were out of sight

did Joe Barnes turn away and retrace his steps toward his deserted motorcycle.

"Joie, my boy," he communed with himself, shaking his head over the memory of Betty's dimples, "that little Miss Nelson is one girl in a million. I wonder now," slowly mounting his machine and looking reflectively at the road in front of it, "why I didn't ask if I might call." Then the absurdity of the idea made him laugh at himself. "What nonsense to think of taking advantage of an accident— Where was it they said they were stopping for the night? Oh, yes, Bensington. Well, he might go there and take a chance on seeing them—her. Fate might even be kind to him and burst some more tires!" Then he laughed at himself again and started his motor.

Meanwhile Grace, who had noticed Joe Barnes' expressive glance in Betty's direction and the latter's subsequent confusion, commented upon the coincidence.

"Goodness, Betty," she drawled lightly, "I always knew you were a heart breaker, but I never saw you make a conquest in so short a time. Half an hour and—poof—it's all over but the shouting."

Betty gave an annoyed little laugh.

"Don't be foolish, Gracie," she commanded,

adding reflectively as she skillfully avoided a rock in the road: "He was awfully nice looking though, and pleasant."

"Of course!"

"But I couldn't help wondering," Betty went on, as though talking to herself, "why he was here at all when his country needs him."

"Um—yes, that was rather strange," mused Grace. "One isn't used to seeing a young, good-looking and apparently healthy boy on this side of the water these days, unless he's in khaki. I wonder if our knight by the wayside is by any chance one of those insects we term—"

"Slackers?" finished Betty, adding in quick defense: "No, I'm quite sure he isn't that kind. You know we have had a good chance to study both types, and he doesn't look like a slacker."

"Granted," agreed Grace, adding with a quick change of mood: "Just the same, it makes me feel desperate to see any young fellow running at his own free will about the country, evidently enjoying life, while our boys are giving up everything—"

"But, if Joe Barnes isn't a slacker," Betty reminded her gently, "he is probably passionately envying our boys the right to 'give up everything'."

"Perhaps," replied Grace, eyes fixed moodily

upon the flying landscape. "But when I think of Will—"

For a long time there was silence. Then Betty gave a little start and regarded with disfavor a big drop that rested on the third finger of her right hand. She immediately resigned the guidance of the car to her left hand while she held up the right for Grace's inspection.

"What's the matter with it?" queried the latter, who had been engrossed in her not too happy meditations.

"Rain," cried Betty succinctly, adding with a whimsical little smile: "I don't know whether Joe Barnes is a slacker or not, but I do know he's a good prophet. We surely shall have to put on some speed if we want to reach Bensington before the storm!"

CHAPTER IX

THUNDER AND MUD

"You don't mean it's raining!" cried Grace, holding out a hand to see for herself. "Oh, dear, and we have several miles to go before we even reach the outskirts of Bensington. What shall we do now?"

"I don't know," answered Betty, while a worried frown wrinkled her pretty forehead. "I don't know just how far out we are. Oh, there's a signboard. What does it say, Gracie? You can read it better than I."

"Ten miles to Bensington," Grace read, leaning far out of the car. "Oh Betty, we can't possibly make it! Listen to that!"

"That" was an ominous rumble of thunder, and Betty's pretty forehead puckered still more.

"Well, we can at least put the top up," she said practically. "That will keep the worst of it off anyway, and if we hurry we may have a chance of beating it yet."

Betty brought the car to a stop, jumped out on the road with Grace at her heels, and waited for

Mollie to come up. They had not long to wait, for a moment later Mollie stopped her car with a grinding of brakes and came running up to her chums.

"I was wondering how long you were going to ignore the warnings of nature," she said, with a little grimace. "That cloud has been growing with horrible rapidity for the last five minutes. What are your plans, Captain?" and she favored Betty with a true military salute.

"I wish I had some," said the latter, cocking a still more anxious eye at the threatening cloud. "And all I've been able to think of so far is the very original idea of putting up the top."

"And side curtains," supplemented Mollie, with a chuckle. "Strange as it may seem, even I have been favored with that inspiration."

"Well, let's get busy," suggested Amy, with practical, though slangy, emphasis. "We're apt to get drowned while we stand here talking."

It was easy to see by the way they went to work that the girls agreed with her. Even Mrs. Ford gave willing, though inexperienced, aid, and in a very short time they had lifted the tops, adjusted the side curtains and made all snug for the expected downpour.

Nor did they have very much time to spare. While they had been working, the thunder had

grown louder and more insistent and now the rain began to fall in earnest.

"Duck!" cried Betty inelegantly, and they ran for shelter.

"Well," said Betty, as she pressed the self-starter and the engine purred evenly, "it's bad, but it might be a good deal worse. We can't get wet unless it's an unusually heavy downpour."

"Oh, it isn't getting wet that bothers me so much," said Grace, and Betty looked at her in surprise. "It's the roads," she added by way of explanation. "I've heard Aunt Mary say that they have terribly heavy storms in this part of the country, and sometimes in half an hour the roads get almost impassable. Many a machine has been known to sink three or four inches in mud, and sometimes they get in so deep they have to be hauled out."

"What a cheerful prospect!" cried Betty, dismayed, adding, as the rain beat against the windshield in steady, driving sheets: "Especially as this storm bids fair to be a record breaker. Look how muddy the roads are already."

"And we haven't passed more than two or three wagons all the way out," wailed Grace. "And they didn't look strong enough to pull a toy machine out. Oh, Betty, look out!"

The admonition was occasioned by a seemingly

sudden wild desire on the part of the car to stand on two wheels while it waded the other two spinningly in the air.

Betty, though undeniably frightened, succeeded in persuading the erring wheels to the muddy road again. Then she slackened her speed and began to laugh hysterically.

"I don't see anything to laugh about," protested Grace, still breathless with apprehension.

"Neither do I," admitted Betty, adding whimsically. "But I had either to laugh or cry, so I decided to laugh. After all, you must admit, it was a wonderful skid."

"The best of its kind," admitted Grace dryly. "But please don't try it again, Honey, it has a wearing effect on my nerves!"

They were silent for a while after that, while Betty regarded the increasingly muddy road ahead of her with anxious eyes. She had been forced to slacken her speed more and more until now they were barely crawling along.

"I'm afraid we're in an awfully tight fix," she said at last. "We're just plowing through this mud, and if it's hard on us, what must it be for Mollie, whose car is twice as heavy as this. Look behind, will you, Gracie, and see how she's coming along?"

"She is just coming, and that's all," reported

Grace, after a prolonged scrutiny through the rain-glazed window. "Goodness, we've been out in storms before, but I never saw anything like this. And listen to that thunder—o-oh!"

A terrific clap of thunder caused Grace to clap her hands over her ears with a little moan, while even steady-nerved Betty jumped in her seat and took a tighter grip of the steering wheel.

"Oh, what shall we do!" cried Grace, for she hated a thunderstorm worse than she hated anything else on earth. "We can't go on this way, Betty. We're likely to get struck any moment."

"Well, I don't see that we'll be any less likely to get struck if we stand still," retorted Betty, a little sharply, for the situation was becoming wearing, to say the least. "If you can suggest any way that we can get out of this fix—" the sentence was cut short by a still louder and more terrifying clap of thunder.

Grace huddled in her seat, miserably trying not to die of fright.

"Is Mollie still following us?" asked Betty, after an interval of weird flashes, crashing thunder, and rain beating relentlessly against the glass in front and turning the road to a sea of mud. "If she should get stuck I don't know what we would do."

"Yes, she's still struggling," replied Grace.

"But it's getting so dark I can't more than just make out the lines of the car. Oh, Betty, don't you suppose we must be pretty close to Bensington?"

"No, I don't," Betty replied wearily. "You see how we've been traveling—not more than a snail's pace, and it won't be very long before we shall have to stop altogether. I'm surprised that Mollie has been able to keep going so long. You will have to keep your eye on her all the time, now, Grace, since it is getting so dark. We don't want to lose her."

"But," Grace suggested hesitantly, "I don't see that we could do them very much good by staying here with them, if they do get stuck. Wouldn't it be better to go on and try to make Bensington? Then we could send help back to them."

"I've thought of that," said Betty simply, "and it would work all right provided we did manage to reach Bensington. But the probability is that we would be forced to stop a little further on, and I must say I don't exactly enjoy the prospect of spending the night alone on this deserted road."

Grace shivered, but answered with a nervous little laugh: "I don't know but what we would be safe enough at that. If we can't get through, probably nobody else could."

"Just the same," said Betty decidedly, "I think I would rather cling to the old theory that there is safety in numbers. Besides, probably your mother would rather decide that for us. Are they still coming, Grace?"

"Goodness, you remind me of Bluebeard's wife," Grace laughed hysterically. "I thought you were going to say, 'Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see a man?'"

"Well, I see something better than a man," cried Betty suddenly, straining her eyes through the darkness and the streaming windshield. "Grace honey, do my eyes deceive me, or is that a light?"

"A light!" cried Grace excitedly. "Oh, Betty, where—wait—yes, I see it! It is a light! And there's another! Two lighted windows! Betty, honey, we're saved!"

"It's a house!" cried Betty jubilantly, while the hand that held the steering wheel shook with relief. "You darling, wonderful house. Gracie, dear, I think it showed on the horizon just in the nick of time. Look behind once more."

"Yes, they're still coming. Oh, if they only don't get stuck in front of the door!"

"Don't be a goose, Gracie," chided Betty, feeling in hilarious spirits now that the end of their trouble was in sight. "You ought to get down

on your knees in thankfulness that there is a front door to get stuck in front of!"

"Oh, is that so?" mocked Grace, her own spirits reviving at the prospect of relief. "Well, I'm thankful enough, but I certainly don't intend to get down on my knees about it. There isn't room in here and you can see it's too muddy outside!"

Two minutes later Betty swung the little car from the, by this time, almost impassable road on to a gloriously graveled driveway that led up to the hospitably lighted house.

"Now, if whoever lives here will only let us in," she sighed, as she stopped the car and glanced behind to be sure Mollie was following them, "we'll have nothing left to ask for."

"Except something to eat," amended Grace hungrily. "I thought I had eaten enough lunch to last me a week, but I see I'm muchly mistaken. What shall we do, Betty?" as the latter started to open the curtain and closed it quickly again as the rain beat in upon them. "We are apt to get soaked just running that little distance to the porch."

"And the umbrellas are all wrapped up in the back of Mollie's car," lamented Betty, then added, with sudden decision: "I guess unless we want to sit here all night we'd better chance it. I for one



GRACE AND BETTY MADE A QUICK DASH FOR SHELTER.

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am so hungry I'd be willing to brave more than a rain for the sake of something to eat."

"I'd say so!" groaned Grace, again reminded of her own state of starvation. "You get out your side Betty and I'll get out mine and we'll make a quick dash for it."

So they lifted the curtains and slipped out, thankful for the gravel walk that, while it was wet and slippery, was still a delightful contrast to the muddy sea of road they had left. They ran head down against the blinding rain, and gained the bottom step of the porch at the same time.

A moment more, and they had climbed to the shelter of the porch itself, out of breath but jubilant.

"Thank goodness!" cried Grace.

"And here come your mother and Mollie and 'Amy,'" chuckled Betty as the trio followed their example and raced for the porch. "I guess none of them ever knew she could run so fast in her life before. Hello, folks. Beautiful weather, isn't it?" she inquired gayly, as the three scrambled, panting, up on the porch. "You seem in a terrible hurry to get somewhere."

"Speak for yourself, John," gasped Mollie, shaking out her wet skirts and trying to regain some of her dignity by putting her hat on straight. "If you could know what I've been through for

the last hour, just coaxing the car along an inch at a time—”

“Well,” laughed Betty, as she turned to the front door and pushed the bell, “I’ve been through a little bit of everything, myself, for the last few hours, except a good square meal. And, judging from the delightful aroma that hovers about this place,” she added sniffing hungrily, “I shouldn’t wonder if that oversight wouldn’t be swiftly remedied!”

Then the door opened and a tall, gray-haired lady stood in the lighted doorway.

CHAPTER X

THE KNIGHT OF THE WAYSIDE

THE lady stared at the bedraggled party in amazed silence for a moment. Then Mrs. Ford stepped impulsively forward.

"I don't wonder you look surprised," she said in her sweetly modulated voice, "for this is rather an unheard of calling hour. But you see we were caught in this awful downpour and had to seek your house for refuge."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" exclaimed the lady, opening the door wider and motioning them into the cheerfully lighted living room. "I didn't mean," she added with a smile, as they most willingly accepted her invitation, "that I was sorry you came, but that you were forced to come by such conditions. Won't you take off your things? But you are wet!" she exclaimed, as the girls started to remove their dripping wraps.

"And we got it all," said Mrs. Ford with a wry smile, "just running about twenty feet from our cars to your porch."

"Your cars!" the hostess repeated. "Then you

motored down. If I had known that I shouldn't have been so surprised at seeing you. Pedestrians are rather rare on a night like this."

"Yes, and motorists, too, if they have any sense," said Mollie dryly, at which they all laughed and their hostess looked still more interested.

"Please sit down and dry out a little," said the lady, indicating a grate fire which had evidently only recently been lighted on account of the chill in the air. "I'm glad I had the fire made. I must have known," she added with a gracious smile, "that you were coming to-night."

Then she excused herself, and the girls held out eager hands to the fire.

"This is bliss," sighed Amy.

"Well, this is some contrast to about five minutes ago," chuckled Grace. "I thought we were in for a night in the mud at least."

"I'll never say we aren't lucky again," agreed Betty, leaning an arm on the mantel and getting her wet skirt as close to the fire as she could, "We were just wondering," she added, addressing Mrs. Ford, "whether, if Mollie's car got stuck, you would rather have Grace and me struggle on to Bensington and get some help or stay and keep you company. Although," she added ruefully, "if we couldn't pull through that mud,

I don't know what we could find in Bensington to do it."

"Probably the only gasoline vehicles they have in the place are jitneys," agreed Mollie, with a chuckle.

"I wonder," Amy broke in, apropos of nothing, "who our charming hostess is. She seems so lovely. It seems odd to meet a person like her and a house like this out in the wilderness."

"Yes, one does rather expect a farmer's wife and a rambling old farmhouse so far out in the country," agreed Mrs. Ford.

"Well, maybe her husband is a scientific farmer," suggested Mollie, adding wickedly as she turned a merry eye on Grace: "The kind Roy once said he'd like to be. Remember, Grace?"

"Yes, I remember," Grace answered in a tone that indicated the memory was not a pleasant one. "And I told him he had better drop that idea in a hurry if he expected me—I mean—any girl—" she floundered, while they laughed mockingly at her, "to have anything to do with him," she finished rather weakly, while the girls giggled exasperatingly.

"Well, I don't know," remarked Betty, in an altruistic effort to pour oil upon the troubled waters, "that I would particularly mind marrying a scientific farmer if they all have houses like this

and acres of ground with orchards and cows and chickens—”

“And potato bugs,” finished Grace, while the girls laughed merrily.

“Well,” remarked Mollie, with a desperate gleam in her eye, “I’d marry just about anybody who would give me a square meal.”

“Goodness,” remarked Betty, twinkling, “it’s mighty lucky for Frank that there aren’t any young men of marriageable age on the horizon just now.”

The next moment she regretted her innocent little speech, for she could see that the mention of the boys had brought more vividly to Grace and Mrs. Ford and Amy the thought of Will—dear, bright, merry Will—lying wounded in some far-away hospital, how badly wounded they could not know, and dared not think.

The silence that fell upon them was broken by the sound of their hostess’ voice, evidently issuing a command to some one in the kitchen. Then the lady herself swept into the room.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting so long,” she apologized, “but I have had to help the maid get dinner on the table. She is a new one, and, oh, so utterly helpless. Then, too, I was hoping my son would come home, but since everything is ready and I know you must be starving, we

won't delay dinner any longer. If you will come, please—"

"But this is imposing upon good nature," protested Mrs. Ford, as the lady held back the portiers and disclosed an inviting table set for seven, elaborate with shining crystal and silver. "To drop down upon you from a clear—or rather, a cloudy sky—"

They laughed, and their hostess dismissed the protest with a little wave of her hand.

"It is a pleasure," she said, adding, as they took their places: "I am only thankful that a lucky chance enabled me to entertain you well to-night, I was expecting guests from the nearest farm, but since our next door neighbors are five miles down the road, they hesitated to make the trip because of the threatening weather. I guess it is just as well for them they did not come," and she paused to listen to the rain which was still pouring down in torrents.

Mrs. Ford made an appropriate answer, and the two ladies entered into a little confidential chat that left the girls pretty much to their own devices. And they were trying their best not to disgrace themselves and to pay decorous attention to what their hostess was saying, while their hearty young appetites were crying their protests aloud.

At last came the new maid whom their hostess had described as 'so utterly helpless,' looking to the famished girls an angelic being, bearing about her an aroma of tomato soup and fried chicken, more tempting than ambrosia.

Without any perceptible hesitation, the girls immediately began to eat and continued the agreeable occupation without interruption to the end of the meal, save for an answer to a question or two asked by their hostess.

The helpless maid was just bringing in an enormous layer cake to the accompaniment of admiring glances from the girls when the sound of a latch key in the door made the lady of the house look up with a start.

"It must be my son!" she said, rising hastily, "if you will excuse me a moment—"

Then came the sound of a hearty greeting in a masculine voice, followed by a slithery sound of wet clothing. Evidently the newcomer was divesting himself of some uncomfortably damp apparel. They could hear his mother speaking in a low voice—probably she was preparing him to meet the unexpected guests.

"By Jove! did you say two cars?" they heard him exclaim, and it suddenly seemed to them there was something familiar about his voice. "Now I wonder—all right, Mother. Just give me a

minute to get some dry clothes on and I'll be right with you. Gosh, but I'm starved!"

The girls smiled sympathetically, for was it only half an hour ago they had been in that identically uncomfortable state.

"I bet he's nice," said Mollie to Betty, in a whisper just before their hostess once more entered the room. "Anybody with an appetite like that, has to be."

"Oh, you shouldn't have waited for me," said the lady, noting that the ice cream that had followed hard on the heels of the chocolate cake had begun to melt. "I don't know what to do with that boy," she added, smiling with a mixture of irritation and fond indulgence. "When he gets out on his motorcycle, miles mean nothing to him and time means less. He is always late to dinner."

"I shouldn't think he would have found the riding very pleasant to-night," said Betty smiling. "In fact, it is a wonder he could ride at all—the roads are almost impassable."

"Quite impassable, you mean," put in Mollie.

"Oh, he has conquered that difficulty," their hostess explained, her eyes once more lighting with pride in her son. "He has a sort of path through the woods, which, while it perhaps lacks the comforts of a state road, at least is not inches

deep in mud. He did get caught that way once and was several hours coming a few miles."

"She said he rode a motorcycle," remarked Grace to Mollie with apparent irrelevance as the lady turned to speak to Mrs. Ford.

"Well, what about it?" inquired Mollie, as she proceeded with wonderful concentration to spear one last small but delicious piece of chocolate on the end of her fork.

"Doesn't that convey anything to your benighted mind?" Grace was drawling sarcastically when Betty leaned toward her eagerly.

"I thought his voice sounded familiar," she said. "Of course we know who he is now."

"Good evening, everybody," said the familiar voice, and they turned to find its owner strolling toward them across the room.

"Mr. Joe Barnes!" cried Mollie impulsively, then checked herself and slowly grew red.

"That's who," sang out Joe Barnes slangily, and in the laughter and greetings that followed Mollie forgot her embarrassment.

Only Joe Barnes' mother looked completely surprised and taken aback.

"You know each other, then," she rather stated than asked as there was a lull in the conversation.

"I had no idea—"

"Of course you hadn't," agreed her son, as he

took the vacant seat beside her and turned upon her a pair of very handsome laughing eyes. "I didn't either until a few minutes ago, and we haven't been acquainted more than a few hours."

"Your son did us the favor of helping us out of a difficulty this afternoon," Mrs. Ford explained, taking pity on the lady's bewilderment. "To be explicit, he performed the very disagreeable operation of putting a new tire on the front wheel of our car."

"Oh, so that's it," laughed Mrs. Barnes.

"Mother, what do you say to cutting out ceremony and getting down to brass tacks?" put in Joe Barnes, eyeing hungrily the plate of steaming soup the maid had set before him.

"We don't serve them," said his mother demurely. "But I shouldn't wonder if what we have would prove more digestible."

So Joe Barnes entertained them with fun and jokes while he devoured the different courses with a thoroughness that awoke the admiration of the girls.

But no matter how conscientiously Joe did justice to the good things set before him, there was not a moment when he was not conscious of Betty—Betty on the other side of the table, dimpling and sending him back sally for sally with ready wit. What lucky chance had prompted

nature to send a thunderstorm that afternoon? The jolly old lady was certainly on his side!

Then when Joe had decided that nothing remained to devour, the party adjourned to the living room, where the former put some records on the phonograph.

The Barnes had a collection of very wonderful records, and for more than an hour the girls sat entranced as, one by one, Joe produced for their enjoyment, the greatest artists of the musical world.

Finally some one suggested that Betty play some of the songs they had loved in those service-filled days at the Hostess House. As the girlish voices rang out in one patriotic song after another, Joe Barnes, who was seated on the edge of a table with one foot swinging idly, fidgeted uneasily, while over his face came a sober, almost sullen expression.

"Gee, I wish they wouldn't!" he murmured to himself.

CHAPTER XI

MYSTERY

BETTY presently broke into the opening strains of "There's a long, long road awinding," and the girlish voices took it up eagerly. They put into the melody all the pathos and longing of their hearts. They forgot where they were, the pleasant room faded away, and they saw only a sinister gray line of trenches, trenches that were death traps for the flowering youth of America. They were singing to the boys, their boys, and as she listened Mrs. Ford's eyes filled with tears.

Nor was she the only one of that little audience who could not listen to the song unmoved. Joe Barnes felt a great, unaccustomed lump rising in his throat, and as the hot tears stung his eyes he rose hastily and stood staring at, though not seeing, a great picture of some illustrious ancestor that hung over the mantel.

And Mrs. Barnes, looking at her son, pressed a hand over her heart, as though to still a hurt, while in her eyes grew a look of yearning.

"My poor, poor boy!" she murmured over and over to herself.

And the girls, all unaware of the emotions they had awakened, drew the last sweet note to a lingering close and stood quiet for a moment while Betty's fingers rested on the keys. Then—

"That was very beautiful," said Mrs. Barnes, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone. "You girls sing wonderfully together."

"We ought to," said Betty, forcing a lightness she did not feel, for as usual she was the first to sense the tense quality in the atmosphere, "for we have certainly had practice enough. We used to sing for the soldier boys at the Hostess House almost every night."

"Yes, but it was sometimes very hard to make *them* sing," added Amy. "Often they didn't want to at first. But they always joined in toward the end, and the gloomiest of them went away with a smile on his lips."

"They could afford to laugh," said Joe Barnes bitterly. He had left the picture of his illustrious ancestor and had dropped down in his old position on the edge of the table, leg swinging idly. But his expression had changed. It was grim and hard.

Betty, looking at him, suddenly remembered, and she could see by the expressions on the faces

of her chums that they also had awakened to the situation.

With horrible lack of tact, they had offended their kind host and hostess. That they had not done so deliberately, helped their self-condemnation not at all.

They had sung patriotic songs, they had spoken of their work at the Hostess House and of the soldier boys, while Joe Barnes, of military age and seemingly in perfect health, did not wear a uniform. Even though he were a slacker, it was terribly bad taste to tell him so in his own home, while accepting his, or his mother's, hospitality.

And something deep down in their hearts, intuition, perhaps, perhaps a sort of sixth sense born of their wide experience of boys of all ages, told them that he was not a slacker. There must be some reason, some real excuse for his behavior.

"Won't you sing some more?" asked their hostess in an attempt to relieve the situation, while she kept one eye anxiously on her son. "Surely you haven't finished."

"I'm afraid we have," said Betty, with a gay little laugh, "for the very good reason that we don't know any more songs to sing."

"And we want to hear some more real music,"

added Mollie, gamely following her lead. "That is, if you are not tired."

"Oh, no, music never tires us," returned Mrs. Barnes, adding, with a little entreating glance at her son: "Will you put on another record, dear—something light and merry this time?"

"How about some dance music?" queried Joe pleasantly. He was very much ashamed of his weakness and ill temper, and was determined to make up for it. "That's about the lightest and merriest we have."

The girls assented eagerly, and in a few minutes the unpleasant episode was forgotten—or apparently forgotten. At least, for the time being it was relegated to the background, and it was not till some time later that Joe unexpectedly broached it to Betty.

The drenching downpour had changed to a sort of dismal drizzle and Mrs. Ford, upon remarking this fact had made the suggestion that they get into the machines again and try to make Bensington. But Mrs. Barnes had so promptly and emphatically negatived this that there was really no room left for argument.

"Why, even with dry roads it would take you two hours or more to get there, for at all times the road is bad between here and Bensington, but such a thing is simply out of the question with

roads that are two feet deep in mud. No, you must stay for the night. I have plenty of room and am more than delighted to have you. No, please don't object, for I will not hear of your doing otherwise."

And so it had been settled, much to everybody's satisfaction.

However, Betty was very much surprised when, in the midst of a beautiful dance with Joe Barnes—for Joe was a rather wonderful dancer—the latter whirled her off toward a window seat in one corner of the room and placed her, a little breathless, upon it.

"Well," she said, that unconquerable imp of mischief dancing in her eyes, "have you any adequate excuse to offer for the spoiling of an exceptionally good dance?"

"Is it spoiled?" he asked reproachfully, as he sank down beside her. "I thought perhaps I was improving—the occasion."

She made a little face at him, incidentally showing all her dimples.

"I suppose, if I were a coquette," she said, flushing a little under the very open admiration of his eyes, "which I am not—"

"I'm not so sure," he murmured but she pretended not to hear the interruption.

"I should deny that you had spoiled the dance.

As it is," she flashed him a pretty smile that robbed her words of all sting, "I'm telling you the truth."

"And I," he countered, "am telling you the truth when I say that if it were possible to talk with you and dance at the same time, I should not have brought you here. As it is, I choose the greater of the two blessings."

"It must be very important—this that you have to say to me," replied Betty, adding demurely: "Perhaps if you would tell me all about it, we could dance again."

"In other words, 'get the agony over'," said Joe, with a grimace. He waited a moment, while the girls, who had danced to the end of the record, turned it over, put in a new needle and started off all over again.

"I don't know whether it will seem important to you or not," he said at last, turning slowly toward her. "But what I have to tell you is just about the most important thing in life to me."

The tone as well as the words sobered Betty, and she turned to him earnestly.

"I shall be very glad to hear it then," she said simply.

"I—you—it's rather hard to begin," he stammered, then straightened up and faced her frankly.

"The truth is, I can't help knowing that you

wondered when you first saw me and am wondering now—as any one has a right to wonder these days when they see a fellow like me in civilian clothes—”

Betty started and the color rushed to her face.

“No, I haven’t—” she began, then stopped confused, remembering that she had been wondering just that thing only a few minutes, yes, only a minute before. “I mean I thought—”

“Yes, it’s easy to guess what you thought,” he interrupted, misinterpreting her sentence while the bitter look crept once more into his eyes. “It’s easy enough to guess what everybody thinks. But,” he straightened his shoulders and threw back his head, “I don’t think anybody will have a right to think that very much longer. You see,” he added, turning to her again and speaking more calmly, “I tried to enlist at the beginning of the war, but they told me there was something wrong here,” he touched his chest, “with my lungs.”

Betty gave an involuntary exclamation of pity.

“The doctor said it was just beginning,” he went on slowly, “and he said—he was a good old scout, that doctor—that if I got out of the city where I could get fresh air, eggs, and milk—you know, the same old stuff—that I might suc-

ceed in curing myself up in a hurry and get in the game in time to bring in my share of helmets after all."

"Oh, so that's why you and your mother are away out here!" cried Betty eagerly, laying an impulsive little hand on his. "And you are well, aren't you? Why, you must be! You look the very picture of health."

Joe gulped a little, looked at the friendly little hand on his, tried to speak once or twice and failed, then—

"I feel just fine," he said, striving to make his voice sound natural. "I never cough any more, and I've got the appetite of a wolf—you saw how I ate to-night—" a faint smile lighted his eyes and found an answering one in Betty's. "Yet, I've been holding off for more than three weeks for fear—just for fear—everything isn't all right. You see, they've made a coward of me. I'm afraid of being refused twice."

"Oh, but you won't be!" cried Betty, with honest conviction in her voice. "I'm not much of a doctor, although I've met so many of them at Camp Liberty and heard them talk so much about different diseases that I feel I ought at least to qualify as an assistant," she paused to smile at herself and he thought he had never seen anything so pretty in his life, "and I would say

that whatever your trouble has been, it is cured now. I'm sure of it."

"Hold on, hold on," he entreated a little huskily. "If I could only believe that—"

"Say, you two over there," Mollie's voice broke in upon them gayly, "we've been trying hard to be polite and not interrupt, but the clock has just struck twelve and we have a long ride before us to-morrow—or rather, to-day!"

Betty replied laughingly, but before she could rejoin the others, Joe had whispered another question.

"You really meant what you said?" he asked.

"With all my heart," she answered earnestly.

CHAPTER XII

NEARLY AN ACCIDENT

"LOOK at the sun! Look at the sun!" cried Betty, sitting up in bed and gazing joyfully out at the sun-drenched landscape. "Girls, for goodness sake, wake up. How can you sleep, Grace?"

Grace groaned and opened one eye.

"House afire?" she asked sleepily.

"Of course not, Silly. But the world is."

Betty was evidently in high spirits, thought Grace, as she rolled over and regarded her critically.

"What do you mean—"the world *is*'?" she inquired grumpily, managing with great difficulty, to open the other eye. "Can't you talk sense?"

"Not on a morning like this," retorted Betty, running to the window and thrusting her head far out into the balmy air. "Look, Lazybones, the roads are pretty nearly dry and we couldn't ask for a more wonderful day."

"What time is it?" queried Grace, without enthusiasm. She was always unenthusiastic be-

fore breakfast in the morning, especially if she happened to get to bed rather late the night before.

"Half-past six," replied Betty, turning from the window and beginning hurriedly to gather her things together. "And we all agreed last night to get up at six. I wonder if I'm the only one stirring."

As if in answer to her question, there came a soft tap on the door and their hostess' voice speaking to them.

"Breakfast is almost ready," she said. "I had it prepared early especially for you."

"That was dear of you," replied Betty, adding with the greatest of optimism, considering that three of them were not yet out of bed: "We'll be down in ten minutes."

Although the ten minutes stretched into fifteen, it is a tribute to Betty's excellent generalship that the dressing of the other three girls was managed in that time.

But perhaps the aroma of bacon floating temptingly up to them had something to do with it after all, for they all four boasted youthfully unimpaired appetites.

However that may be, the fact remains that in fifteen minutes from the time Mrs. Barnes stopped at the door, four very pretty and very

hungry young girls gathered in the dining room, ready and eager for the day's adventure. Mrs. Ford was already there.

Joe was there too, looking even more bronzed and attractive in the morning light, and Betty, glancing at him, could scarcely believe that what the boy had told her the night before had not been a dream. That splendid specimen of young manhood refused the right to serve his country because he had lung trouble! She could not even bring herself to think that other word, that horrible word, consumption.

But there was one thing certain—she had not been mistaken in her judgment of the night before. He might once have been the victim of disease, but he surely was not now.

Perhaps something of what she was thinking was reflected in her eyes as she looked at him, for he returned the glance with so much admiration in his own that she hastily looked away and became absorbed in the bacon on her plate.

It was a very merry breakfast and a very good one, and when the time came at last for taking leave of their lovely hostess, they found themselves unexpectedly reluctant to do so.

"I wish you were coming with us," said Mrs. Ford, after the lady had waved aside her thanks for the good time they had had. "I am sure you

would enjoy the trip almost as much as we would enjoy having you with us."

"I wish it were possible for me to go," Mrs. Barnes replied rather wistfully, as they started down the steps to the waiting automobiles. "It is rather lonesome out here," then, catching a glance from her son, who was trying to carry three handbags at once, she added hastily: "But of course I love it and would miss it awfully. Joe, be careful, dear, you nearly dropped that bag in the dirt."

"I always thought I'd make good in the juggling profession," replied Joe ruefully, as he skillfully recovered the bag in question, "but I guess I was mistaken. Where do these go, Miss Billette—anywhere?" he asked, turning to Mollie.

"Yes, just throw them in," replied Mollie, carelessly, absorbed in testing out her engine. "Only leave room for Mrs. Ford, that's all."

Then, as Amy stopped to speak to Grace, Joe escorted Betty to her little racer and helped her into the driver's seat, though little help Betty needed or asked of anyone.

"It's rather a rough deal, isn't it?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" inquired Betty, surprised.

"Fate introduces us one minute, then snatches

you away in the next, before I've had time for more than a word with you."

"Why, I remember several words we've had together," laughed Betty as she settled herself more comfortably in her seat. "Is there anything particular you want to say to me?"

Joe started to speak, evidently thought better of it, and looked up at her soberly.

"I've already told you more than I ever expected to tell any one," he said, and she stretched out an eager, sympathetic little hand to him.

"I know, and I have felt very proud of that confidence," she said earnestly.

"Then you will let me write to you and tell you how things are with me?"

"Oh, I should be so glad!" she said, and there was no doubting her sincerity.

He had no more than time to flash her a grateful glance when Grace came up and put an end to the conversation.

Amid expressions of friendship on both sides and laughing farewells, the two cars slid backwards along the drive and out on to the road. Then with a purring of engines, the little racer leaped ahead with Mollie in close pursuit. They were off once more.

It was as Betty had said. The long clear night and the bright morning sunshine had done much

toward drying the roads and though they were still rather sticky and slippery, the girls had no difficulty in keeping up a good rate of speed.

"This is something like," cried Grace, as she stretched both arms above her head and breathed deep of the balmy air. "I could be completely happy if it weren't for one thing."

Betty had no need to ask what that one thing was, and at mention of it her thought turned involuntarily to Allen. Was he safe or had he too—she shuddered at the thought.

"Wasn't it strange?" she said, seeking to change the conversation and the trend of her own thoughts at the same time, "that Joe Barnes proved to be Mrs. Barnes' son?" It was not at all what she had intended to say, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Grace turn and look at her curiously.

"No, I can't see that it's so very strange," Grace said dryly. "At least I have seen stranger things."

"Well, you know what I mean," retorted Betty, still absently. "He is awfully nice, isn't he?"

"That's what he seemed to think of you," returned Grace slyly.

"Of course he did! Why shouldn't he?" challenged Betty, coming out of her abstraction and smiling gayly. "I like me, myself."

"That's the worst of it," sighed Grace, turning for consolation to her inevitable box of chocolates. "No matter how awful you are, we have to love you just the same. Look out, Betty," as the car took a curve on three wheels. "Goodness! you're getting to be a more expert skidder than Mollie."

"Thanks," returned Betty, executing a bow whose grace was somewhat impaired by the proximity of the steering wheel. "Willst hand me a candy, Gracie, honey? Thanks. That's a good girl!"

For a long time after that they were quiet, enjoying the swift motion, the warm wind upon their faces, the fragrance of flowers and of moist sweet earth flung to them from the depths of the woodland.

Before they knew it, they had reached the outskirts of Bensington, then Bensington itself, and were speeding through the queer little town without a thought of stopping when a warning signal from Mollie's horn brought them to an abrupt stop. Betty jumped out and ran back.

"We'll need some provisions," Mollie called to her. "Unless you and Grace think we can reach the next town by noon."

"That's what we planned to do," Betty answered. "Grace and I thought it would save time

not to stop here—and we haven't any time to waste, you know."

"All right," Mrs. Ford decided. "Perhaps it will be just as well, for we shall have to put on all speed in order to reach Bluff Point before night."

So Betty raced back to her machine and in a moment more they were off again, fairly eating up the miles. As the roads grew dryer and dryer beneath the scorching heat of the sun they made even better time until a little past twelve o'clock they entered the little village of Hill Crest.

The place boasted nothing so magnificent as a hotel, but they managed to find a little bake shop where the rosy-cheeked country woman who worked there made them up some delicious sandwiches, supplied them with tempting rolls and cake, and, wonder of wonders, set upon the table a pitcher of fresh milk.

When they had finished this rural but eminently satisfying repast, they hurried over to the one big general store to buy a few supplies that they would need that night. It was necessary to lay in only a limited amount, as Grace's aunt Mary had thoughtfully left her cottage well stocked and had informed them that eggs, chickens and vegetables of all kinds could be had fresh from the farmers round about.

Then they were off again, eyes upon that ribbon of road in front, intent upon reaching their destination before nightfall.

It was not till about four o'clock that they met with their first setback.

Betty had just rounded a turn in the road, horn honking for all it was worth, when she found herself almost on top of a huge farm wagon.

She yelled to the driver and put on her brakes hard, hoping desperately that Mollie would not run into her from behind. Grace shrieked and covered her face with her hands.

It was a narrow escape, for when the car had finally stopped there was not more than about an inch between it and the wagon in front. Luckily Mollie had been warned by the noise of the horn, and had stopped her machine just around the turn of the road. She and Mrs. Ford and Amy came running to see what the matter was.

Meanwhile Betty had recovered herself and was smiling apologetically up at the frightened driver. His horses, startled by the noise and shouting had tried to bolt, and he had had all he could do to hold them in. The result was a slightly heated condition on the part of his temper.

"I'm sorry," Betty was saying, her voice still

tremulous from the sudden fright she had received. "I thought—"

"Yes, an' I thought too," he interrupted, in a gruff, rude tone that whipped the color to her face. "It would be a heap better if some folks'd think before they done things. Durned old gasoline wagons."

And, still muttering, the angry man turned and whipped up his team while the girls stared after him dumbly.

CHAPTER XIII

OUTWITTING A CRANK

"OLD grouch," cried Mollie, shaking a vindictive little fist after the departing farmer. "If it hadn't been that you would have killed yourself too, Betty, I almost wish you had hit him."

"Well, I don't," said Grace ruefully. "Nobody ever thinks of poor me."

"I guess we had better be a little more careful in the future," said Mrs. Ford, a worried line between her brows. "Better to be a little longer reaching Bluff Point than to endanger our lives and perhaps the lives of others."

"It almost looks as if we shouldn't have any choice," said Mollie, and they looked at her in surprise.

"Well, we can't hope to pass that wagon," she explained, indicating the vehicle that was now some hundred feet in front and was waddling along at a snail's pace. "There isn't room, with the ditch on one side and the drop on the other."

"It will be easy enough if he moves to one side of the road," suggested Amy.

"He'll move over if we toot at him," added Grace.

But Mollie shook her head doubtfully.

"I'm not so sure," she said. "It would be just like him to try to get even with us by blocking the road."

"Get even with us?" repeated Betty indignantly. "I might just as well say I want to get even with him for being in the road when I wanted to pass. How ridiculous."

"Of course it's ridiculous. That's probably the reason he would think of it," insisted Mollie. "I know these farmers," she added, nodding darkly.

They laughed at her, and Betty cried gayly: "Well, we won't get anywhere by standing here in the road. I move we follow the old fellow and see what he's up to. And if he gets too ridiculous," she added, as she climbed back into the car, "I know how I'll fix him."

"How?" they asked.

"I'll bump him," she responded ferociously, and amid more fun and laughter they climbed back into the cars and started on again.

"You know, even his back looks stubborn," remarked Grace, when, coming close to the wagon and tooting the horn vigorously, the driver refused to budge from the middle of the road. "I

guess perhaps you will have to carry out your threat, Betty."

"Well, I declare if I won't," exclaimed the Little Captain, her cheeks flushing and her eyes blazing at the stubborn insolence of the man. "It would give me great pleasure to bump him clear down the side of the mountain."

"It's getting late, too," worried Grace. "Can't you do something, Betty?"

"Will you please suggest something?" cried Betty, exasperated. "There's nothing in the rules for driving a machine that covers this difficulty. I don't know what to do, unless— Did you bring the pistol?"

Grace started.

"Goodness! you're not going to kill him are you?"

"Not unless I have to," replied Betty, and at her expression, Grace laughed weakly.

"Yes, I brought the pistol," she said. "But it's down in the bottom of the bag that is underneath all the other bags in the tonneau of Mollie's car."

Betty groaned.

"And it isn't even loaded," added Grace, as an afterthought. "Mother said it made her feel safer to have it along since there aren't going to be any men with us, but she wouldn't have it loaded."

"What good is it then?" queried Betty.

"Just to scare people with."

"Well, that's what I want to do to that—man," cried Betty, trying to think of something bad enough to call the cranky farmer, who still urged his team along squarely in the middle of the road and refused to give an inch. "Only I'd like to scare him to death. My conscience wouldn't even hurt."

"It would be murder just the same," Grace suggested, with a little hysterical laugh, "whether you shot him or scared him to death."

Betty was silent for a minute or two, crawling along behind the wagon while her blood boiled and her anger surged. For Betty came from a race of fighting ancestors who were not in the habit of submitting to indignities.

"Grace, I've got to do something!" she burst out at last, gripping the wheel so tightly her knuckles showed white. "It isn't so much the valuable time we're losing, but it's an absolute necessity to show that fellow where he—"

"Where he gets off," Grace finished slangily. "I know dear, but how?"

Betty shook her head helplessly and just glared.

Then suddenly Grace uttered a little cry and sat up straight in her seat.

"I have it!" she cried. "I know what we can do."

"Tell me," demanded Betty.

"Why, I know this road pretty well," Grace explained, speaking quickly. "We're not much more than ten miles from Bluff Point."

"Yes, yes," cried Betty impatiently.

"Well, there is a short detour road that juts off from the main road just a little further on, and after running parallel to the road for half a mile or so, crosses it again."

"Yes," cried Betty again, beginning to understand the plot.

"So we'll take the detour," Grace finished triumphantly, "and come out, in front of the farmer."

"And then—" said Betty with a chuckle and a gleam in her eye.

"The rest will be up to us," finished Grace. "Shall we know what to do then?"

"I'll say we shall," chortled Betty, adding with a glance over her shoulder at Mollie's car that was creeping along some twenty feet behind them: "Of course the next thing will be to tell Mollie. Will you run back Grace?"

For once Grace did not object, and without waiting for Betty to stop the car, and indeed it was hardly necessary at the rate they were go-

ing, jumped out and ran back, waving an excited hand at Mollie.

Betty heard a whoop of delight from the rear, and in a minute Grace was back in her place.

"How far is it from here?" asked Betty, scanning the road ahead eagerly. "I hope," she added, as a horrid fear assailed her, "that he doesn't turn off on to the other road, too."

"Heavens, I hope not! Oh, there it is!" she cried a moment later, as a turn in the winding road brought the crossroads to view. "Now, if he only doesn't turn down it!"

Eagerly they watched and drew a sigh of relief as the driver jogged steadily on down the main road.

"Now's our chance," exulted Betty, as she changed gears with a challenging roar and slipped off merrily down the detour road.

Sullenly the driver watched them go and then with a shrug of his shoulders, turned once more to his team.

Gayly the two cars sped along the road, bearing four Outdoor Girls bent upon revenge. The going was rough and bumpy, far worse than the main road, but the girls never noticed it.

"That was one time Grace had a good idea," Mollie was exulting as they flew along. "I never thought she was particularly brilliant before, but

I have changed my mind." Then catching Mrs. Ford's eye, she added with a little laugh: "You see that's the way Grace and I talk about each other. Only," plaintively, "she says much worse things about me!"

"It will be fun," cried Amy, her eyes shining with anticipation, "to get in front of him and give that old crank a taste of his own medicine."

"He certainly deserves it," agreed Mrs. Ford, for she was as indignant as the girls at the man's insolence. "Didn't Grace say something about pretending we were stalled?"

"She did," cried Mollie gleefully. "And as luck, I mean bad luck, will have it, the mean old engine will choose the very center of the road to do it's stalling in. Bless it's little old heart," and even Mrs. Ford chuckled with her.

As Grace had said, the detour was not over half a mile long, and they soon came out on the main road again. Then they backed the cars several hundred feet down the road so as to effectually block all passage.

Betty tooted gleefully to Mollie, and Mollie tooted gleefully back again. Then they jumped from the machines and met in the middle of the road for a consultation.

"He will be coming in sight any minute now,"

Betty explained hurriedly, "so we must decide on some definite plan of action."

"That's easy," said Mollie. "One of us will get down underneath the machine and pretend to be tinkering—"

"Goodness, that lets me out," said Grace in dismay. "I wouldn't get down in the dirt for fifty idiotic wagon drivers."

"Well, nobody's asking you to," cried Mollie impatiently. "I fully intend to put on my overalls and do it myself."

"Better hurry up," cried Amy, who had been glancing uneasily down the road. "He may come along any minute now and we don't want him to catch us here."

So amid much hilarity and giggling Mollie got into the begrimed overalls and proceeded to wriggle her small self beneath the car.

"I hope he hurries," she cried in a muffled voice. "It isn't exactly what you might call comfortable down here. Betty, get off my foot," as Grace wickedly stepped on her toes.

"Just hear her," cried Betty plaintively. "Everything just naturally gets blamed on me."

"Well, if you didn't, who did?" queried Mollie fiercely. "Tell me her name—"

"Betty, Betty, don't give me away," pleaded

Grace, at which the girls laughed while a satisfied chuckle came from under the car.

"I knew I'd find the guilty one," Mollie was beginning when Betty cut her short with a warning cry.

"He's coming," she said, adding, as she vainly tried to straighten the corners of her mischievous mouth: "And please remember, girls, this is a very solemn occasion!"

CHAPTER XIV

BLUFF POINT AT LAST

VERY anxious the Outdoor Girls looked as the grouchy old farmer came toward them. Mollie was making all sorts of noises under the car, apparently tinkering with its mechanism, while the girls kept up a running fire of questions.

"What is the matter, Mollie?"

"Can't you find the trouble?"

"Better let me get under and take a look."

"If we don't get started pretty soon, we'll not get to Bluff Point before dark."

These and other remarks like them met the suspicious ears of the driver as he jerked his team to a standstill.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" he hailed them. "Have you got to stand right in the middle of the road? Can't you move over some?"

At this Mollie wriggled out from under the car and stood up, facing him. Her face was flushed from restrained mirth, but it might well have been the flush of indignation.

"If we could don't you suppose we would?" she

queried, rather incoherently. "Do you think I'm doing this for fun?" Then she abruptly disappeared from sight again. The abruptness was caused by the terrible fear that if she stood looking at that sour old visage another moment she would have to spoil everything by laughing.

As for the other girls, they were slowly turning purple in an effort to maintain the solemnity demanded by the occasion. A strange noise from beneath the car, promptly followed by a choked cough, didn't help them any, and they were relieved when their victim turned his suspicious gaze from them to the shallow ditch at the side of the road which was still muddy from the rain of the night before. The only hope he had of getting around them was to drive through this mud.

Without a word or a glance in their direction, he whipped up his team and started for the ditch. This was something the girls had not foreseen, and they were of no mind to let him get ahead of them again.

Grace and Amy flashed a distress signal to Betty, who stooped over Mollie's feet, the feet being all that could be seen of her, and cried with a peculiar inflection:

"I think you must have found the trouble by this time, Mollie, haven't you?"

Mollie took the hint and scrambled hurriedly to her feet.

"I think so," she said, then as her eyes swiftly took in the situation—the grim old man already struggling through the ditch intent on getting ahead of them—she jumped to her seat and started the engine. "All right," she cried gayly. "Come on, girls, jump in."

The girls jumped in with alacrity and Betty and Grace ran to the car in front. Then while the man whipped up his horses and called to them in terms far from gentle, the two cars sprang forward and were off down the road.

They turned once, to find the man urging his team to the road and shaking his fist after the "gasoline wagons." The girls waved to him merrily, before the turn in the road shut him from sight.

"I guess that will teach him a lesson," said Grace, settling back comfortably.

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Betty absently, adding with a rueful little smile. "It was great fun, of course, but I hope we shan't meet many more of his kind, or we'll never get to Bluff Point."

"We're almost there now," said Grace. "All this part of the country is almost as familiar to me as Deepdale. When I was a little kiddie, I used almost to live with Aunt Mary."

"It's wonderful how little children love the woods and brooks and all wild things," mused Betty, adding, as the picture of Dodo and Paul, hiding in the machines and begging to be taken along, came back to her: "I almost wish we could have brought the twins with us. They would have so loved it."

"And we would have spent all our time trying to keep them from falling into the ocean," added Grace dryly. "Besides," she added, "I don't believe Mrs. Billette would have let them come. They are such little mischiefs, and she is always afraid something will happen to them."

"Yes, and they're good company for her," agreed Betty thoughtfully; "especially when Mollie is away."

After a few minutes of silence Grace suddenly clutched Betty's arm, making the Little Captain jump.

"Betty," cried the former excitedly, "we're almost there. Just around that curve—"

"Well, you needn't scare me to death," protested Betty, taking one hand from the wheel to rub the arm Grace had clutched.

"But I love it so," Grace cried, standing up only to be jerked back into her seat as Betty swung round the curve. "It's such a wonderful place!"

"Is that it up on the hill?"

"Yes," answered Grace, standing up in earnest now. "Turn up the drive—it leads to the garage at the back. And, Betty, the house stands on a little bluff looking out over the ocean. Do you hear it—the ocean I mean, not the house, Silly!"

The road that they had traveled from Deepdale to Bluff Point had led across country, Deepdale being in the interior, so that the girls had scarcely realized how close they were coming to the coast.

Now, as Betty stopped the car at the back of the quaint little cottage, that sound of romance and mystery, the soft lapping of water with the deeper undertone of waves against rock came up to her and she threw back her head with a little bubbling laugh.

"I don't wonder you love it, Gracie dear," she said. "I do already. It's glorious."

They jumped out and ran back to meet Mollie's car, which was puffing like an old man up the steep grade.

"The ocean! The ocean!" cried Betty ecstatically, as she opened the doors and the girls tumbled out. "Do you smell it? Do you hear it? Oh, girls, hurry up, I can't wait to feel it!"

"Goodness, are you going to commit suicide?"

cried Mollie. "If that's what you want, I don't see why you bothered to come away up here."

"Mother, Mother, give me the key, quick," demanded Grace, as they ran around the side of the house and Betty made a face at Mollie. "You haven't forgotten it, have you?"

"No, I tied it on a ribbon around my neck," said Mrs. Ford, with a smile. "I had no intention of forgetting it. Here it is."

"Thank you."

Grace fitted the key in the lock and opened the door, but when she turned, expecting to find the girls at her back, she found that they had deserted her.

They were standing, gazing out over a gleaming white stretch of sand to the shimmering water beyond, absolutely oblivious to everything but the beauty of the scene.

The bluff on which they stood sloped gently down to the beach below. Once down there, the girls knew they would feel as though they were isolated from all the rest of the world, for the beach was in the form of a semi-circle, surrounded on three sides by rocky bluffs and blocked off in front by the ocean.

"How beautiful!" breathed Betty, as Grace stole up and joined them. "We've seen a great many wonderful views, but I never saw one to

equal this. Just look at the reflection of the sun out there."

"Blood red," murmured Mollie. "That looks like a hot day to-morrow."

"All the more excuse for taking a swim," put in Amy, adding longingly: "I wish it weren't too late now."

"I'm afraid it is," said Mrs. Ford, seizing her opportunity. "We still have to put the cars away and get our provisions and cook supper—"

"Who said 'supper'?" Mollie demanded hungrily. "Mrs. Ford," she added, as they started for the house, "won't you please make Betty make some biscuits?"

"But you make as good biscuits as I do," protested Betty.

"No, I don't, Darling," denied Mollie, putting an arm about her chum. "And, anyway," she added convincingly, "I can eat more when I don't have to make them!"

The girls were almost as pleased with the interior of the house as they had been with its surroundings. There were odd little passages and unexpected window seats such as Betty had dreamed of having in her own little home some day.

The thought brought back the picture of Allen as he had gone away, gallant, hopeful, brave—

oh, so brave—and involuntarily she uttered a little sigh.

“Please don’t do that,” said Grace, as they entered the room they were to have together. “I’m trying my best not to be as gloomy as I feel. But if you begin to sigh, I’ll just have to give up and spoil the party.”

“I won’t,” said Betty, trying a little smile before the mirror and doing it pretty successfully. “I didn’t mean to that time, only, I was—just thinking.”

“I know,” said Grace a little petulantly, as she pulled off her hat and threw it on the bed. “It seems to me that’s all I’m ever doing—‘just thinking.’ If I could only really do something! Some time I’ll scream aloud!”

“Well, don’t you think we’re all pretty much in the same fix?” suggested Betty gently, coming over and putting an arm about her.

“I suppose so,” she answered, eyes fixed moodily on the floor. “Only the rest of you have only one to worry about, while I—” she stopped, flushed, and began letting down her thick hair. “If I could only cry!”

“I imagine that might help us all,” said Betty wistfully, adding, with a touch of her old gayety: “Perhaps I can arrange it after supper.”

“What?” asked Grace.

"A cry party," she answered, and the absurdity of it made them both laugh.

In spite of the shadow hanging over them, dinner that night was a great success. Everybody pitched in, and, having acquired ravenous appetites on their long ride, did the cooking in record time, and of course everything tasted ambrosial.

After dinner they wandered out on the veranda, which was almost as big as the rest of the house put together. It was a wonderful night, with the moon so bright that it shed a magic silver radiance over everything while the lapping of the water came softly up to them.

Suddenly Mollie's hand slipped into Betty's where they stood together looking out.

"On such a night as this," breathed Mollie, scarcely above a whisper, "there should be nothing but peace in the world."

"Should be—yes," agreed Betty, a little bitterly. "But things are not always as they should be!"

CHAPTER XV

THE TELEGRAM

THE morning dawned gloriously bright, and at the first ray of the sun the girls were up and dressed and ready for the fun of the day.

"I don't know what I'll do if our trunks don't come," worried Amy, as she took a rather creased white skirt and waist from her suitcase. "I brought only one change and a bathing suit."

"Well, as long as you brought the bathing suit, it's all right," returned Mollie, sticking one last pin in her hair. "I intend to live in mine to-day."

"And, anyway, we can't possibly expect the trunks till this afternoon," put in Grace; "so I don't see any use in worrying about them now."

"If they don't come to-day, either Mollie or I will go down to the station and see about them," offered Betty, who was looking as sweet and fresh as the morning itself. "We'll probably have to go down and get them anyway, since we expressed them through by train and came by motor ourselves."

"Oh, well, who cares," cried Mollie, stretching

her arms above her head and breathing deep of the salt-laden air. "When we get down on that wonderful beach, that looks too good to be true, we'll be away from all the rest of the world and we won't need any clothes but a bathing suit."

"Mother's up," cried Grace, as they stepped out into the hall and smelled the welcome aroma of coffee. "I thought I heard somebody go downstairs a little while ago."

"But we shouldn't have let her get the breakfast," cried Betty. "We brought her up here for a rest, not to wait on us."

"She probably didn't sleep very well," said Grace, thinking of Will. "It really isn't any wonder."

However, Mrs. Ford greeted the girls with a bright smile when they entered the kitchen, and when they remonstrated with her for getting up so early she merely laughed at them.

"Why, I haven't cooked for so long, it's just fun for me," she said lightly, but Grace's loving eyes saw how pale she looked and how sad her eyes were when she was not smiling.

"Game little mother," she whispered to herself.

However, after they had cleared the remains of a remarkably good breakfast away, they asked Mrs. Ford to put on her own bathing suit and take a dip with them.

After a minute's hesitation she agreed, and they ran upstairs eagerly to get ready. They all had black suits, and all but Grace wore snug-fitting rubber caps, designed more for use than looks. Grace wore a rakish little Scottish cap affair that was immensely becoming but not at all comfortable to swim in.

"How do I look?" she demanded complacently, when she turned from a prolonged survey of herself in the mirror and pirouetted slowly before them.

"Beautiful, but foolish," Mollie commented succinctly.

"Do you really expect to swim in it, dear?" asked Amy mildly.

"The effect would be altogether stunning," suggested Betty judiciously, her head on one side, "if you cocked it just a little further over one eye so as to obscure the sight completely."

There was a ripple of laughter.

"Oh, you're all jealous," remarked Grace, not at all disturbed as she turned back to the mirror once more to pull a curl a little more fetchingly over her ear. "I might have known you would be."

"Goodness, anybody would think she was at Palm Beach or some other show place," cried Mollie, pulling her own plain little cap a trifle

lower over her ears. "If you expect an audience, Gracie, I'm afraid you will be disappointed."

"Here I am, trying to give you something good to look at—"

But they would hear no more and hustled her with scant ceremony away from the mirror and out of the door.

"Come on!" cried Betty, taking the stairs two at a time. "Let's see who gets to the water first. I'm betting nine to one on myself."

"Goodness, she's as conceited as you are, Gracie," gasped Mollie, following hard on Betty's footsteps. "Here's my chance to take some of it out of her!"

Grace and Amy, following at not quite such breakneck speed, came out on the porch in time to see two slender, black-clad figures with vivid red and green caps scrambling down the side of the bluff that led to the beach.

As they started after them Mrs. Ford joined them and they ran together to the edge of the bluff. The slope was not quite so gentle as they had thought on the night before, and Mollie and Betty were puffing considerably when they reached the bottom—which they did at almost the same minute.

Then, fleet-footed, they sped across the sand toward the inviting water beyond, while Mrs.

Ford, Grace, and Amy clambered down the bluff in their turn.

At the bottom they turned, saw Betty and Mollie reach the water's edge at the same instant—or so it seemed to them—and dash into the green depths. A moment more and the two black figures were lost to sight and only two vivid caps bobbed on the surface of the water.

“Do you suppose it's quite safe?” asked Mrs. Ford. “I wish the girls hadn't been in such a hurry.”

“Oh you needn't worry about them,” Grace assured her. “Betty and Mollie are regular fish in the water, and you know there aren't any mean currents around here. The beach slopes gradually down so that they can't get caught in water holes either, so don't worry, Mother,” and she slipped an affectionate hand into her mother's and received an answering smile in return.

And, oh, how good that water did feel!

As they waded into it up to their waists, Mollie and Betty came swimming back, shaking the water from their eyes and cleaving the big combers with long, powerful strokes.

“Well, who won?” Amy challenged them, as they came within shouting distance.

“Tell the truth,” added Grace.

“Both of us,” yelled Mollie.

"Or neither," Betty answered, getting to her feet and walking the rest of the way in toward them. "We couldn't have done better team work if we had tried. Oh, isn't it glorious?"

"We don't know yet—we're not even all wet," returned Mollie, adding, as a great comber came rushing toward them: "Come on, Gracie, here's a good one. Let's get under it."

And "get under it" they did, cleaving the water prettily, and in another minute were up on the other side of the big wave. They shook the water from their eyes and struck out merrily.

"Don't go too far," Mrs. Ford called after them, and two bare gleaming arms waved back at her.

The hours that followed were just one long delight, and the girls looked surprised and a little abused when Mrs. Ford reluctantly called them in.

"Why, it can't be more than eleven," protested Grace.

"And we haven't seen the water for, oh, ages," added Mollie.

"Please, can't we have half an hour more?" Amy added.

Mrs. Ford looked smilingly from one to the other and then at Betty.

"Well, haven't you any petition to make?" she asked of the latter.

"I was thinking," said Betty squinting up at the sun, "that Grace was wrong when she said it wasn't more than eleven. It seems to me to be after twelve."

"It is," said Mrs. Ford firmly. "Quarter past."

"Well, let's go!" cried Betty, starting toward the bluff. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving to death."

"But we'll want to swim again after lunch, won't we?" protested Mollie.

"Of course."

"Well, then," she argued reasonably, "we don't want to change our clothes just for lunch, and we can't very well go up to the house in dripping bathing suits."

The girls groaned.

"Then we'll have to wait for lunch until we've sat here for hours and dried off," wailed Grace.

"And she hasn't even a box of chocolates!" Betty mocked her. "It is a desperate case, Grace."

With another groan Grace sank into the soft, warm sand while the others followed suit, looking so mournful that Mrs. Ford was moved to take pity on them.

"I dried off long ago," she said, adding, as they looked at her hopefully: "I tell you what I'll do. I'll go up and open a couple of cans of tongue and make some sandwiches and bring down the cake

we bought yesterday. And we can have some milk to drink, for I had the boy leave a couple of extra quarts this morning. How will that do?"

"Do!" the girls echoed, while Grace hugged her mother with vigor. The eyes of the girls followed her gratefully as Mrs. Ford started off on her work of rescue—at least, that is the way the hungry girls regarded it.

"You know, I have a better appetite than I've had in weeks," announced Mollie, as she dug her toes into the warm sand. "I haven't been eating much lately."

"I hadn't noticed it," commented Grace dryly.

"Well, mother did," returned Mollie spiritedly. "She said she was glad I was going away because she thought the change would do me good, I really should have stayed at home, I suppose, and helped mother take care of the twins," she added thoughtfully. "I never saw two children with such an absolute genius for getting into mischief. But when they're caught, they're so cunning and dear and say such quaint things that it is almost impossible to get angry with them."

"They're adorable," agreed Betty, while all the girls smiled fondly at thought of the twins.

"Just the same," remarked Grace, "although I love them, I'm glad I'm not their sister, for I'd

never be able to eat a candy in comfort," and the girls laughed at her.

"It seems so wonderful and peaceful here," said Amy, after a short pause, "and we seem so awfully far away from the rest of the world. It almost makes one believe that the war 'over there' is a dream—"

"Or a nightmare," interpolated Mollie.

"Well, it isn't," said Grace, adding, as she dug her toes more deeply into the yielding sand: "And if we don't hear more news of Will pretty soon, I'll just die, that's all. I can't stand it!"

"There's your mother," cried Betty suddenly, glad of an excuse to change the subject. "I think she's calling us, too. Come on, let's go."

Nothing loath, they got to their feet, shook the sand from their suits, and hurried to the bluff where Mrs. Ford stood awaiting them.

As they clambered up toward her they noticed that she looked excited and was holding a yellow envelope in her hand.

"The trunks have come," she said, as they ran up to her. "A big lumbering red-haired fellow brought them from the station a few minutes ago. He also brought this," indicating the envelope in her hand.

"What is it?" they cried, a strange premonition of evil tightening about their hearts.

"A telegram for Mollie!"

Mollie turned a little pale under her tan and took the yellow envelope gingerly, as though it had been poisoned, or contained some T. N. T. explosive.

"Who on earth—" she began, then interrupted herself, and with trembling fingers tore the envelope open. The girls watched her, wide-eyed and tense.

"It's from mother," she cried, then crushed the paper in her hands and looked around at the sympathetic faces with eyes grown dark with fear. "Girls," she said, "I—I'm afraid to read it—I—"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHADOW OF DISASTER

BETTY put a steadying arm about Mollie and asked gently:

“Would it make it any easier if I were to read it, dear?”

“No, oh, no!” cried Mollie, then smoothed out the crushed paper and read the telegram through while her face grew whiter and her lips closed in a tense line. With a queer little sound in her throat she turned away and handed it to Betty.

“Read it,” she commanded in a choked voice.

Mrs. Ford put an arm about Mollie while Betty read aloud and the girls crowded closer.

It was a brief, paralyzing message the telegram contained.

“Twins are gone. Were not home last night, and am wild with anxiety. No need your coming home. Am doing everything possible to find them.
MOTHER.”

“The twins!” gasped Amy.

"Gone!" added Grace, stupefied. "Oh, Betty, are you sure you read it aright?"

For answer, Betty handed her the telegram and turned to comfort Mollie, who was sobbing bitterly.

"I knew I shouldn't have gone away," she was saying over and over again. "I knew I should have stayed at home."

"But your staying at home probably wouldn't have made any difference," argued Betty soothingly.

"And by this time they may have been found, anyway," added Mrs. Ford, gently leading Mollie toward the house, Betty at her side, while Grace and Amy followed, mute with sympathy.

"Yes; or by this time they may be dead!" sobbed Mollie, refusing to be comforted. "They must have met with some accident or they wouldn't have stayed away all n-night."

"Maybe they ran away," suggested Grace, trying hard to think of something cheering to say. "They've done it before, you know."

"Yes," agreed Mollie, sinking into a porch chair and searching desperately for a handkerchief in her pocketless bathing suit. "But they always came home before night. I know it must be something awfully serious to keep them away over night."

Mrs. Ford was very much worried and disturbed, but she nevertheless managed a bright smile.

"As you say, they probably ran away," she said. "Only this time they have wandered too far and haven't been able to find their way back. But if your mother has notified the police, as she surely has by this time, they are sure to be found. And now," she added, rising briskly and making for the door, "since everything seems a good deal worse than it is on an empty stomach, I'm going to give you some lunch and we'll decide what to do afterward."

Left alone, the girls gazed helplessly at each other. Mollie had stopped sobbing and was staring moodily out at the ocean, her eyes and nose swollen with weeping.

"I'll have to go home, of course," she said suddenly, breaking a silence filled with unhappy thoughts. "I don't know that I'll be any good, but I can at least comfort mother. I'm sorry," she gave them a wistful, apologetic little glance that went straight to their hearts and brought the tears to their eyes, "to break up the party."

"You darling," cried Betty, trying to laugh and not making a very great success of it, "do you think we care a rap about our old party? Only," she added thoughtfully, "as you say yourself, I

don't see that you can do very much good by going home."

"I could comfort mother," repeated Mollie, in a flat tone, as though she were repeating a lesson.

"But she said not to come," suggested Grace. "She said she was doing everything possible—"

"I know," interrupted Mollie, wearily. "Of course she would say not to come. And I suppose," she added, dabbing impatiently at her eyes, "all I'd do would be to weep anyway, and make things about ten times worse."

"Do you want your lunch inside or out here?" Mrs. Ford asked from the doorway and the girls jumped to their feet.

"Here we are, letting you do all the work again," cried Betty self-reproachfully. "I guess we'd rather have it out here, but we'll bring it out ourselves. Please go over there, get into the swing, and don't stir until we say you may." Betty had a pretty manner, half of deference, half of *camaraderie*, with older people that made them love her. Mrs. Ford patted her cheek with a little smile and obeyed her command while the three girls ran into the kitchen to bring out the sandwiches and cake that she had already prepared.

And all the time Mollie sat motionless, staring out over the ocean, apparently unconscious of everything that was going on around her.

"Little Dodo and Paul," she said over and over to herself. "What has happened to them? Oh, I must go home, I must!"

"Come to your lunch," called Betty.

After lunch Mollie began to take a less gloomy view of the situation and hope, which in youth can never long be forced into the background, began to revive.

"In the first place," Betty argued, as she began to clear away the dishes and Amy rose to help her, "it couldn't have been an accident, or your mother would have read about it in the papers. The children are old enough to tell their names and where they live."

"I know," said Mollie, while the troublesome tears welled to her eyes again. "But it's possible they may have been unconscious, and then they wouldn't be able to tell anything."

"But there would have been at least an announcement describing the children," Amy argued in support of Betty.

"And, anyway, pretty nearly everybody in Deepdale knows the twins," Grace added.

"Well, then, there are only two or three things left that might have happened," said Mollie, her lips quivering. "It's barely possible they may have wandered off into the woods and gotten lost. In that case somebody will have to hurry up and

find them or they will just stay there and s-starve! And that's almost worse than being run over."

"Well, with everybody in Deepdale, civilians as well as police, searching for them," said Betty confidently, "I don't think there is very much chance of their starving to death. If that's the solution, I shouldn't wonder but that they are safe at home now with everybody rejoicing."

Mollie's face brightened a little at this picture, but almost immediately clouded over again.

"But we don't know that," she said. "And until we do, I'm not going to let myself get too happy.

"I wonder," she said suddenly, after the girls had cleared away the lunch and had perched themselves on the porch railing, "just what I ought to do first. Send a telegram to mother, I suppose," answering her own question.

"Yes, I think I would," said Betty, adding, as Mollie got up with characteristic impulsiveness and started for the house: "Do you mind telling us what you are going to say in it—about going home, I mean?"

Mollie paused uncertainly.

"I—I don't just know," she admitted. "One minute I think there's no question but what I ought to go, and the next, I wonder if I wouldn't only be in the way."

"There's another thing to consider," Mrs. Ford put in. "It is almost a certainty that the children will be found in a day or two, perhaps are found already, and in that case you would have all your trip for nothing. I don't like to advise—"

"Oh, please do," Mollie begged, adding with a pathetic little smile: "I feel so awfully lonesome, trying to decide everything all by myself."

"You poor little girl," said the woman tenderly, then fearing lest sympathy would only make the girl feel worse, added hurriedly: "In that case I should most strongly advise that you wait a day or two at least and give things a chance to straighten out. At the end of that time, if they haven't been found and you still think you ought to go, we'll pack up everything and go along with you, of course."

"That's what I'll do then," agreed Mollie, relieved to have the question settled for her. "And now," she added, making for the door once more, "I'm going to get into my street things and wiz down to that station in record time. Who wants to come with me?"

It seemed everybody did, and in a very short time the girls had changed from their bathing suits to their street clothes and were ready for the dash to the station, which was about two miles from their house.

They all climbed into Mollie's car, and the big machine started slowly backward down the steep incline.

"Better hold on," Mollie warned them. "I've never done quite so steep a hill as this backward, and the old boy may balk. Take your time, old man," addressing the car, as it showed a tendency to pick up speed too rapidly. "Of course we're in a hurry, but we don't want to land on our ears. That's the way—gently now. All right—we're off!" as they reached the foot of the hill in safety and swung around into the road. "Now let's see how long it will take you to reach that station."

As a matter of fact, it took scarcely any time at all, for the demon of speed seemed to have taken possession of Mollie, and she drove so recklessly that even the girls, who were used to her daring, were startled.

Yet something about the young driver's straight little back and tightly compressed lips kept them from protesting.

However, the wild ride came to an end without accident, and the girls tumbled out of the machine and on to the station platform. They looked about them, but the only person in sight was an unpromising looking person with a bald head—though he could not have been over thirty-five—beaked nose, and small red-rimmed eyes.

This decidedly unattractive individual lounged against the door of the waiting room and eyed the girls with insolent admiration.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked, as he saw that they hesitated. "Always willing to oblige the ladies," he added.

The girls exchanged a glance, then Betty approached the lounge who had the grace to straighten up as she addressed him.

"We want to send a telegram," she explained coldly. "We understood we could send one from here."

"Sure! That's me," he responded with alacrity. "Right this way, ladies."

The girls followed him reluctantly into a little square booth-like place, and Mollie scribbled a telegram on the blank he gave her. Then they hurried out to the machine again. A little way down the road Amy turned and looked back. The fellow had resumed his lounging position and was looking after them with his little red-rimmed eyes.

"Ugh! wasn't he awful?" said Betty, as Mollie rounded a turn in the road on two wheels. "I'm glad we don't have to see him often, he'd give me the nightmare."

But Mollie did not answer. Her mind was once more on the twins, and she was repeating over and over the same old question.

“What has happened—what has happened? What could have happened?”

“Betty,” she said aloud, so suddenly that Betty started, “there’s just one thing we didn’t think of as being a solution. It’s strange, too, for it is the most probable solution of all.”

“What?” asked Betty anxiously.

“Suppose—” said Mollie, her voice so low that Betty had to bend forward to catch the words. “Suppose they have been kidnapped!”

CHAPTER XVII

JOE BARNES AGAIN

"WELL, we've got to do something. There's no use sitting around looking at each other!"

The girls started and looked reproachfully at Mollie.

It was several days after the telegram had come which had so upset them and their plans, and they were sitting dejectedly on the sand at the foot of the bluff trying to read. The attempt had proved a failure, however, and one after another the books had dropped to their laps while they stared disconsolately out over the water.

"What would you suggest?" asked Grace listlessly, in response to Mollie's statement.

"Can't we go in swimming again?" asked Amy mildly.

"No!" Mollie was very positive. "The boy will be coming with the provisions and letters in a little while, and there may be a telegram or something from mother. If there isn't pretty soon, I'll go mad."

"Let's take a walk then," suggested Betty.

But again Mollie would have none of it.

"Too warm," she said.

"Well, I thought you were the one who wanted to do something," said Grace, getting up and shaking the sand from her dress. "I guess the trouble is," she added, "that you don't know what you want."

"Yes I do," said Mollie, while the tears rose to her eyes and she shook them away impatiently. "Only the one thing I want more than anything else I can't get."

"Maybe you forget," said Grace, while her own voice trembled a little, "that I'm very nearly in the same fix."

"No, we don't," cried Betty quickly. "But the only way we can hope to bear the horrible things that are happening to us is to get busy at something and try to occupy our minds."

"It's all very well for you to talk," Mollie retorted, in her nervous state saying something she never would have thought of saying under normal conditions, "but nothing terrible has happened to you yet. Wait till it does. Then maybe it won't be so easy to get your mind off it."

The thoughtless speech stung, and Betty turned away to hide the hurt in her eyes.

"Perhaps you're right," she said quietly. "Nothing very terrible has happened to me yet,

personally. But perhaps you forget that we girls always share each other's troubles—"

But Mollie would not let her finish. She was down on her knees beside her chum, penitent arms about her shoulders and was pouring out an apology.

"I ought to be tarred and feathered," she cried breathlessly. "I don't know what made me say such a thing, Honey."

"I know," said Betty gently, "and that's why it didn't go very deep—what you said."

"You're a darling!" cried Mollie. She gave the Little Captain another bear's hug, then sat down in the sand again with her arms clasped about her knees. "It's this everlasting uncertainty and the feeling of helplessness that gets on one's nerves so. I always did hate to wait for anything—especially with my imagination."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Amy, surprised.

"Why, it—the imagination, I mean—just goes running around in circles, thinking up all the horrible things that might have happened until I almost go crazy. If I only didn't have to think!"

"You never used to have any trouble that way," said Grace, with a weak attempt at a joke that ended in dismal failure.

"Isn't that the boy with the mail?" asked Betty

after a minute, as the rumble of an antiquated vehicle and a masculine voice addressing in no uncertain tones a pair of invisible mules came to their ears. "Perhaps he's bringing good news to us. Come on, we'll meet him half way."

Relieved at the prospect of action, the girls sprang to their feet, dusted off the clinging sand, and scrambled up the bluff. A minute more and they were running down the hill pell mell toward the oncoming team.

They had scarcely reached the bottom of the hill when the long-eared and long-suffering animals rounded a turn in the road and ambled slowly toward them.

The driver, the same gauky, red-headed country lad who had brought them their trunks, drew rein as the fleet-footed girls reached him and swept off his crownless hat with a gallantry that left nothing to be desired.

"I'm bringing your provisions," he began, adding loquaciously, for he loved to talk and seldom got the opportunity: "Sorry I couldn't get 'em to you yesterday, but Abe up to the store took sick and he says to me, 'Jake,' he says, 'guess mebber you'll have to be storekeeper an' delivery boy both to-day. Shake a leg,' he says, 'an' I might mebber give you a dollar extry. You never can't tell,' he says. He's that generous like, Abe is," the boy

shook his head sadly at the thought of Abe's generosity, "that he'd give a whole chicken to a kid dyin' of hunger, pervided he knowed the chicken had the pip."

The girls chuckled at this last sentence, uttered with a sort of ferocious sarcasm, even though they had been standing on one foot with impatience during the rest of his long speech.

Now, seeing that he was about to begin again, Betty cut in quickly.

"It didn't bother us a bit, you're not coming yesterday," she said, adding, as she leaned forward eagerly: "What we do want to know is—did you bring any mail?"

"Sure," he said, good-naturedly, reaching behind him for a small package of letters which Betty took eagerly. "An' there was a telegram too, came yesterday—"

"Yesterday!" Mollie interrupted with a groan. "And I'm just getting it to-day!"

"But I was telling you," he started all over again patiently, "as how Abe took sick and says to me: 'Jake—'"

"Yes, yes, we know," interrupted Mollie, reaching impatiently for the crumpled yellow envelope which he took from his pocket, smoothed out carefully, and handed to her with maddening deliberation. "Oh, if anything terrible has hap-

pened I'll never forgive myself for not going to the station yesterday!"

"But it was raining so hard, and we expected the boy any minute." Amy thus tried to console her but it is doubtful if Mollie even heard her. She had torn open the envelope and was devouring the message whole while the girls looked at her anxiously.

The red-headed orator, seeing that his presence was no longer in demand, clucked to his team and jogged off reluctantly. A telegram is rather a rarity in Bluff Point and they might have taken pity on a fellow and given him at least a hint of its contents. But there, he didn't want to know anyway—wouldn't if he could! Still, these outlanders were mighty mean, close-mouthed folks!

"Nothing," said Mollie, in response to the unspoken question of the girls. "They haven't found a trace of either of them yet, but the police are confident that it is a case of kidnapping and that they will be able to round up the criminals in a short time. Poor little Dodo! Poor little Paul! If nothing worse happens to them they will be scared to death. Oh, if I could only get hold of those kidnapers I'd—I'd kill 'em!" She clenched her hands passionately and her lips shut in a straight, grim little line.

"I guess we'd all be glad to," said mild little

Amy, with a look in her eyes that showed she meant it.

As they started back down the road Betty suddenly remembered the packet of letters in her hands. The excitement about the telegram had put them completely out of her mind.

"To think I could forget letters!" she marveled, as she distributed them to their rightful owners. "Here's one for you, Amy, and two for you, Grace. One for Mrs. Ford and one for Mollie and—and—two for me—"

She looked so surprised that they paused in the act of opening their own letters to look at her.

"What's the matter?" Grace asked.

"Why here's one addressed to me in a perfectly strange hand," she answered, turning the letter over and over in her hand. "I can't imagine—"

"What's the postmark?" asked Amy.

Betty looked and then colored prettily as she realized who her unknown correspondent was.

"Why—why," she stammered, amazed at her own confusion, "it's sent from Bensington, but—"

"Bensington!" Grace echoed, then her eyes twinkled as the truth came to her. "So it's as bad as that, is it?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Betty, trying to look dignified and failing utterly, while Mollie and Amy continued to stare their amaze-

ment. They had forgotten completely that night spent under the hospitable roof of Mrs. Barnes, and even her son's engaging personality had faded from their minds. There had been so many things to think about and worry about. So now they both said together:

"What in the world are you two talking of?"

"Do you mean to say you really don't know?" queried Grace in a superior tone. "Have you so soon forgotten our knight of the wayside, Joe Barnes?"

"Joe Barnes," they repeated weakly, then turned their astonished gaze on Betty.

"Well, I can't help it," retorted Betty, feeling vaguely the need of defense. "I didn't ask him to."

"But how did he get your address?" asked Mollie, still staring. "Who gave it to him?"

"I told him where we were going," cried Betty desperately, driven into a corner. "But I had no idea he was going to write to me until—until—" hesitating as a picture of Joe Barnes, standing beside her car and asking if he might tell her "how things were with him" came vividly before her eyes.

"Yes. Until?" they baited her, forgetting for a moment the dark shadows hanging over them in the fun of this unexpected discovery.

"Until the morning we came away," Betty answered, seeing that she could not get away from these pitiless inquisitors until she had satisfied their curiosity.

"Did he ask to write to you then?" probed Mollie relentlessly.

"I don't see what right—" Betty was beginning spiritedly when she caught Mollie's eye and ended in a little helpless laugh. "I suppose I'll have to tell you all about it or you'll turn a simple little molehill into a mountain."

"Quite right," said Grace cheerfully, and even Betty had to laugh at her.

"Make a clean breast of it," ordered Mollie.

"But there really isn't anything to make a clean breast of," protested Betty. "He simply asked me if he might write and tell me how he—how he—"

"How he what?" they queried.

"But I don't know whether I ought to tell you about that or not." Betty was really in earnest. "You see, what he told me was sort of in confidence."

"In confidence!" repeated Grace, adding wickedly: "Now we know it's a serious case."

"Nonsense," said Betty, almost crossly. "He simply said he hadn't been allowed to get into the army because of ill health, but now that he felt

well again he was going to try once more. It was that he wanted to write and tell me about. And because I was really interested, I said he might. That's all."

"How romantic!" cried Mollie irrepressibly. "For goodness sake, hurry up and read it, Betty, and relieve our curiosity."

"I'll read it," said Betty firmly, "when I get good and ready, and not one minute before!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SERIOUSLY WOUNDED

THEY walked the rest of the distance to the house in absorbed silence, reading as they went. Then suddenly Betty gave a little cry of amazement.

"I thought this was for me," she said, holding up a letter. "But it isn't. It's for your mother, Grace. I don't see how I could have made such a mistake!"

But Grace only heard the first part of Betty's speech. The last of it passed right over her head.

"A letter for mother?" she cried. "Oh, give it to me, Betty. It may be from dad. Oh, it is! It is!" she exclaimed, as she saw her father's familiar writing. "He must have heard about Will. Mother! Mother—" she broke away from the girls and took the porch steps two at a time, waving the letter wildly as she went.

"Oh, if it's only good news, if it's only good news!" Betty found herself saying over and over again as she, with Mollie, followed Grace into the house.

They found Mrs. Ford in the living room, pale and trembling a little, holding the envelope in her hand as though she dared not open it. Grace had collapsed in a chair and was gazing up at her mother with such agonized pleading in her eyes that the girls could not look at her.

Then very slowly Mrs. Ford tore open the envelope. At the same moment the girls seemed to sense that they might be in some manner intruding, and with one accord they moved over to the window and stood looking out.

After a wait that seemed interminable they heard Grace say in a strained, far-away little voice:

“Mother, what is it? Can’t you tell me? I think I’ll die if I have to wait any longer.”

“Read it,” they heard Mrs. Ford say in a choked voice, as a rustle of paper told that she had handed the letter to Grace. “I can’t tell you dear. Oh, my boy, my boy!” And she sank down in a chair and covered her face with her hands.

The girls turned from the window and started to leave the room, for they felt that the moment was too sacred for even them who were so intensely interested, to share.

Just as they reached the door they paused, arrested by a cry from Grace.

"Seriously wounded!" she read in a muffled voice. "Oh, Mother, for all we know, that may mean Will is—dead!"

They were startled by a muffled sob, and turned in time to see Amy rush from the room. Poor little Amy! In the excitement and grief of the moment they had forgotten that she might also be affected by this news of Will!

Betty and Mollie ran upstairs after her, leaving Grace and her mother together.

"And I was so hoping," said Betty as she closed the door softly and Mollie flung herself on the bed, "that it would be good news."

"Yes," said Mollie, staring moodily out the window, "it does seem that everything terrible that can happen to us is happening all at once. I wonder what's next."

"There isn't going to be any next," said Betty, but in her heart she was not so sure. Almost everyone in the world was suffering, one way or another, and it was only to be expected that they would get their full share.

And as she thought of Allen a hot wave of fear went over her, leaving her faint and sick. Out there in the very thickest of the fight, it would be a miracle if he should be saved to come back to her.

But he must come back, he *must* come back,

her heart cried over and over again. Hadn't he said he would? And Allen always kept his word.

Then she shook herself, and with an effort brought her wandering thought back to this new trouble—or rather, confirmation of an old one.

From the time Mr. Ford had received the telegram telling of Will's wound, they had hoped against hope that it had been a mistake, or that at least, the wound had not been serious.

But this new report from Washington seemed to put an end to that hope, and there was nothing to do but to face the terrible reality. Will was seriously wounded in some hospital in France, and, as Grace had said, that might mean that even now he was in a critical condition, perhaps, for all they knew, he had died out there away from all his dear ones and the friends that loved him.

"I don't suppose there is any use acting as though he were dead already," said Mollie, breaking in upon her unhappy reverie. "There have been several thousand wounded soldiers over there who have recovered."

"Yes, only to be sent back again to the firing line and have it done all over," said Betty bitterly, for, for a time at least, her staunch optimism had deserted her and she was ready to see the blackest side of everything.

"Yes, it does seem that once a soldier has gone down to the very gates of death, he should be exempted," sighed Mollie, adding dispiritedly: "But I suppose if they made that a rule they wouldn't have any armies left after awhile."

"And the boys themselves don't want to be exempted," said Betty, feeling a little thrill of pride in spite of her heartache. "Their one biggest reason for getting well is to be able to get another 'whack at the Hun.'

"Shall we go and see if we can cheer up Amy?" she asked after an interval filled with gloomy meditation. "She is so brave and quiet about everything that you never have a chance to guess how hard she is taking her trouble. Poor girl!"

"I do feel awfully sorry for her," agreed Mollie, shifting unhappily, "but I must say I don't feel very capable of cheering anybody up myself. I never felt so horribly discouraged in my life."

"Well, it doesn't do any good to think about it," said Betty. "Maybe if we try to make poor Amy feel better we'll help ourselves at the same time."

"I suppose it won't do any harm to try," agreed Mollie, rising wearily. "But I wish somebody would lend me a smile for a little while till I get mine back again. I might be able to play the role of merry little sunshine better."

She gave Betty a wry little smile, and arm in arm they started down the hall to Amy's room.

They found the door shut, and tapped lightly upon it. When there was no response they rapped again, then tried the knob and found the door was locked.

"Whatever in the world—" Mollie was beginning apprehensively, when a plaintive voice in the room behind the closed door interrupted her.

"Who is it?"

"It's we, Dear—Mollie and Betty," answered Betty quickly. "Can't you let us in?"

"I—I'd rather not," replied the voice falteringly. "I'm all right, and I'll be out in a minute. Please don't worry about me. You ought to be used to my making a goose of myself by this time." This last accompanied by a pitiful little attempt at a laugh.

"All right, Honey," Betty spoke sympathetically, for she had often seen the time when even her best friend would have been in the way. "We only wanted to help, that's all. When you want us we'll be in my room."

Amy murmured something in reply, and they slipped back again into the other room and closed the door.

"I guess she feels it even worse than we thought

she did," said Mollie pityingly. "When Amy cries she is pretty well cut up."

"Well, I guess all we can do now is just sit still and wait till somebody wants us," said Betty, sitting down irresolutely and folding her hands. It was this last action that reminded her of the letter from Joe Barnes which she had not yet read. Although she had been holding it in her hand all the while, she had completely forgotten there was such a person as the writer.

At her exclamation Mollie looked up rather listlessly.

"That's so," she said. "You never did find out whether or not Joe Barnes had been accepted. Tell me about it. I'd welcome a diversion—a cyclone or a tidal wave or anything—if it would only get my mind off our troubles."

"I'll guarantee it would be effective," returned Betty absently, as she took up the closely written pages. "It would be like burning yourself to make you forget you have a toothache."

There was silence for a long while, broken only by the sound of the waves breaking on the shore and the crackling of the paper as Betty turned page after page.

It was a long letter, filled with youthful enthusiasm. In it the youth spoke his pleasure in meeting her and his hope that she would not only

answer this letter but would allow him to write to her often.

But over and above all the great fact stood out that he had been accepted! The doctors had looked him over and declared him fit in every respect to serve his country.

As Betty read the last glowing sentence a sob broke from her and she buried her head in her arms. Mollie went over to her quickly.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously, putting an arm about the Little Captain. "You haven't had bad news too, have you, Betty?"

"N-no," sobbed Betty, raising eyes that were shining through her tears. "I just love them so—all those splendid boys that are so crazy to give their lives for their country, that my heart gets too full sometimes, that's all."

"Then I take it that Joe Barnes has been accepted," Mollie rather stated than asked.

"Yes," said Betty, feeling for a handkerchief. "And he is simply wild with joy, Mollie," she added, while the color flooded her face. "The Germans simply can't last long with that spirit against them. It makes our boys indomitable!"

CHAPTER XIX

BETTY CONFESSES

BETTY woke up the next morning with a sense of deadly depression weighing her down. For a few moments she lay staring up at the ceiling trying to collect her thoughts. Then the events of the day before came back to her and she frowned unhappily.

The whereabouts of poor little Dodo and Paul was still a mystery, and Will Ford, whom she had come to regard almost as a brother, was terribly wounded somewhere in France. She probably would never see him again.

And there was Allen too, to worry about every minute of the day and night. She had not heard from him in—oh, ages. Yes, it must be every bit of two weeks since she had read his last letter. For all she knew, he might be worse off than poor Will.

“Oh, well,” she sighed, and, turning on her side, looked out of the window.

There was no relief there from the gloom of her thoughts, for the sky was leaden and overcast,

looking as if it, too, were mourning for the troubles of the world, and the surf beat loud and threateningly on the shore.

"Guess it's going to rain and make things still more cheerful," she said, and at the sound Grace opened heavy eyes and turned over restlessly.

"What are you mumbling about?" she asked sleepily, closing her eyes again and sighing a little.

"Nothing but the weather," replied Betty, adding, with unusual gentleness: "It's early, so you can turn over and get forty winks."

"What has happened to you?" asked Grace, opening her eyes again in surprise at this unheard of advice. Then as the full force of her trouble came home to her she turned over noisily and burrowed her head into the pillow.

"Guess I will," she said in a muffled voice. "Don't any one dare wake me up till they have some good news to tell me. I'm going to be another Rip Van Winkle."

"Goodness, I hope it won't be that long before we have any good news," said Betty, trying to speak lightly. This would never do, she thought. They simply had to find some way out of this terrible slough of despondency before it mastered them completely.

"I'm going to get up," she announced briskly,

jumping out of bed. "I've got to find something to keep me busy till that good news of ours feels like coming along. I'm getting absolutely morbid just sitting around and thinking."

"Well, what is there to do?" asked Grace, rolling over and regarding her listlessly.

"There's the house to be put in order," Betty pointed out, recovering a little of her old spirits, now that she had decided on a definite plan of action. "And we never have really unpacked our trunks because Mollie has been undecided about staying."

"Yes, I know. And my clothes are a perfect wreck. I haven't a thing to put on that doesn't look as if it had been through the wars," Grace agreed. "Not that it really matters," she added indifferently.

"Of course it makes a difference," returned Betty sharply. She was determined to rouse Grace out of her lethargy, no matter what means she had to take. "Don't you know that when you are dressed neatly and becomingly everything seems brighter and more hopeful? And, anyway," she added, watching Grace out of the corner of her eye, "it isn't like you to be careless about your dress."

"Well, it isn't like me either to go moping around as if I had one foot in the grave and the

other was slipping," retorted Grace, with a spirit that showed the experiment had worked. "I don't think it's nice for you to make remarks like that when you know how I'm feeling and the excuse I have."

"Nobody has any excuse for giving up and acting as if everything were lost when it isn't," said Betty decidedly. "If our soldiers did that the first time they had to retreat, how long do you suppose our army would last?"

"But Will isn't your brother," insisted Grace stubbornly. "If he were, maybe you would feel differently."

There was a moment's pause.

"No he isn't my brother," returned Betty, knowing she was going to hurt her friend but believing that the result would justify the means. "But if he were I would try to behave so that when he came back he would have a right to be proud of me."

"Betty Nelson!" Grace sprang out of bed with her eyes blazing, "do you know what you are saying? Do you mean that if Will should come back, he wouldn't be proud of me?"

"Not if you keep on taking your trouble lying down," said Betty, sticking gamely to her guns, though she was a little frightened at the success of her experiment.

"I may," she thought to herself, "have done not wisely, but too well."

However, after one outraged and enraged stare at Betty, Grace pointedly turned her back and began hastily to pull on her clothes. She finished dressing before Betty, and without a word left the room.

"Now you have done it, Betty, my dear," said Betty making a little face at her pretty reflection in the mirror. "I shouldn't wonder if Grace would never speak to you again. Poor Gracie, perhaps I shouldn't have said what I did, but I simply had to start something."

On her way downstairs she tapped at Mollie's door and found that she and Amy were both up and dressing.

"Come in," called Mollie; "I need your help. Amy's eyes are so swollen," she explained, as Betty obeyed, "that she can't see to do me up. Just the middle one, Betty. That's a dear."

As Betty obligingly did the "middle one" she stole a glance at Amy, who was absently doing up her hair without looking in the mirror.

"Look out!" she cried suddenly, making both the girls jump. "You nearly stuck that hairpin in your eye, Amy," she explained, as they looked at her reproachfully, "and that isn't the place for it you know."

Amy smiled a crooked little smile and put the unruly hairpin in the right place.

"I'm apt to do anything to-day," she said, with a sigh that seemed to come from her toes. "If any of you want to live, you had just better keep out of my way, that's all."

"Isn't it just wonderful weather?" said Mollie sarcastically, gazing out at the leaden landscape. "Just the kind of a day to put the J into Joy."

"If something doesn't happen pretty soon," put in Amy, with another deep sigh, "I'll just naturally pass away. I wonder," she added, looking really interested in the subject, "if anybody ever did die of the blues."

"I don't believe so—but there's always hope," said Betty dryly, adding with sudden spirit: "Now look here, girls, something's got to be done about this. We really will make ourselves sick if we don't try to look on the hopeful side of things. It won't do anybody, least of all, ourselves, any good to sit here and mope all day. We've just got to fight against depression and cheer up."

"That's all very well for you, Betty," Amy voiced almost the same sentiment as Grace had only a few moments ago, "but you are the only one of us who hasn't been hurt personally. Suppose it were Allen. Would you feel the same

way then—about cheering up and taking it bravely?”

Betty flushed angrily, at the same time feeling a wild desire to go away and cry.

“I hope I would,” she said steadily. “And if I didn’t, I would surely feel ashamed of myself. It isn’t,” she paused at the door and looked back at them, “as though Will or the twins were dead. We have hope in both cases, so I don’t see any use of giving up. You talk,” she choked back a sob, “as though I didn’t sympathize, as if I were an outsider just because nothing has happened to—Allen—yet—” her voice choked in a real sob this time and she fled from the room.

The girls gazed after her unhappily.

“Did you ever!” gasped Mollie.

“I didn’t mean to make her feel bad. Betty, of all people!” said Amy, conscience stricken. “And of course she’s right about our trying to cheer up. Only, I don’t want to, someway.”

“Betty’s a darling,” said Mollie thoughtfully. “But of course she can’t quite realize how badly we feel. If it were her little brother and sister, now—”

And so gradually Betty came to feel herself more or less of an outsider with these girls who were so close to her. And it was all because they misunderstood her effort to cheer them up and

thought she could not feel for them because nothing terrible had happened to her yet.

"I'll show them," she told herself fiercely, "if anything should happen to Allen—" But she shivered and turned away shudderingly from the thought. Allen—if only she could see him for five minutes—just five minutes—

Some way the days dragged through until a week passed, then part of another. Still there had been no clue to the whereabouts of the twins, nor any further news of Will.

"And this is the wonderful vacation we planned!" said Grace with a wry smile, breaking one of the long silences that had become common with the Outdoor Girls these days.

They were, as usual, sitting on the sand and trying to occupy their minds with sewing or reading, yet always with an eye to the road in readiness to rush to their red-headed combination of delivery boy and postman whenever he saw fit to put in an appearance.

Betty opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. She had learned that any suggestion she might make would be wrongly interpreted by the girls who were engrossed in their own troubles, and so she had wisely decided to say nothing.

"I haven't heard from Frank for ever so long,"

said Mollie, as if the fact had just occurred to her. "I wonder if anything can have happened to him?"

"I didn't see any name we knew in the casualty list last night," ventured Betty.

"Betty, is that what you read so carefully every night?" asked Mollie, wide-eyed. "Oh, I don't see how you ever have the courage!" as Betty nodded. "If I saw the name of anybody I—I—cared for in that dreadful list, I don't know what I'd do."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the Little Captain, while a wistful light grew in her eyes and her lips quivered. "When I don't find—what I'm afraid to find—I feel like a criminal who has been reprieved, and it gives me courage to face another day."

Then suddenly the girls saw Betty in her true light. Why, she was suffering too! Think of her reading that awful list every night with fear in her heart! And in the light of this revelation, her brave efforts to cheer them seemed suddenly heroic.

"Betty dear," Mollie moved over toward her friend and put an arm about her. "Do you care that much?"

A little sob of pent-up misery broke from Betty and she dropped her head on Mollie's shoulder.

"Oh, so much!" she whispered brokenly.

Then everybody cried a little and the girls called themselves all sorts of awful names for being "brutes" to their adored Little Captain, and when the storm cleared up everything seemed brighter and they could even smile a little.

Then that night, when the little god of hope seemed about to take his accustomed place in the hearts of the Outdoor Girls, there came another blow, even more staggering than the ones that had gone before.

As Betty was scanning the casualty list with terrified, yet eager, eyes, she gave a little cry, half gasp and half sob that brought the girls running to her.

Her face was ashen pale, and she pointed with a trembling finger to a name half-way down in the column.

"Oh, girls, it's come—it's come! Allen! Allen! It can't be true!" and she dropped her head upon her arms, crumpling the paper in her hand.

CHAPTER XX

MISSING

MOLLIE took the paper from Betty's unresisting hand, smoothed it out, traced her finger down the column and finally came to the name she sought.

"Sergeant Allen Washburn," she read in a small, awed voice, while the other girls crowded close to look over her shoulder.

"Dead?" queried Grace breathlessly.

"No," Mollie shook her head. "He's among the missing."

"That means," said Betty, lifting a face so still and white that it startled the girls, "that he is either dead or worse than dead. I would a thousand times rather he were dead than have him taken prisoner by the Germans."

"But we don't know that he has been captured—"

"That's what missing almost always means," insisted Betty, still in that strange, lifeless voice. "That," she added, as though speaking to herself, "was the column I always read first, because I

was most afraid of it. I think," she got up unsteadily, and Mollie ran around to her, "that if you don't mind, I'll go upstairs a little while."

She started for the door while the girls watched her dumbly, not knowing what to do or say. Then suddenly Grace ran after her.

"Betty, darling!" she cried, her own grief forgotten in her pity for her chum, "let me come too, won't you? I don't suppose I'd be any good to you just now, but I'd do my best."

"Let us all come, won't you, Dear?" begged Mollie, while Amy's eyes silently pleaded.

But Betty only shook her head, smiling a pitiful little white smile at them.

"Not just now—please," she said. "After a while I'll—I'll call you."

They watched her run upstairs and heard her door close quietly, oh, so quietly, behind her.

Left behind, the girls looked at one another with wide frightened eyes.

"Girls, she worries me," said Mollie, speaking in a whisper, almost as if there were death in the house. "She is so quiet and still. And when one knows Betty—"

"If she could only cry a little," said Grace, speaking in the same tone. "It makes things so much worse when you keep them bottled up that way."

"Betty's so proud and so brave," said Amy gently, as she sank into a chair and looked up, wide-eyed, at the other two. "Only this afternoon she let us see how terribly she cared."

"And no wonder," said Grace, for there was real grief in her heart. "There never was a finer fellow than Allen. He made us all love him."

"But there we go again, speaking as if he were dead," protested Mollie. "There is always hope, since his name is only among the missing."

"Yes, of course; but it is generally as Betty said," returned Grace. "Nine-tenths of the men reported missing are either dead or have fallen into the hands of the Germans."

Mollie shuddered.

"Poor little Betty," she said. "The very thought of it is enough to drive her crazy."

"If she would only let us comfort her," sighed Amy.

"I—I really think that if she doesn't call us in a few minutes, we'd better go up anyway," said Grace nervously. "She looked so terribly queer and unlike herself that I'm worried to death. Hark! Did you hear something?"

The girls listened, but all they could hear was the sighing of the wind about the house. Then, far off in the distance, came a soft rumble of thunder.

“Oh, I hope it doesn't storm,” cried Amy, shivering. “That would be about the last straw.”

And upstairs, in the room that Betty shared with Grace, grief and fear and horror stalked about unfettered and gazed upon the little figure on the bed.

So still and white and rigid it was that the girls would have been still more frightened could they have seen it. For, propped on her elbows, with grim, set face supported by her clenched fists, Betty was gazing unseeingly out at the darkness beyond the square of window pane.

“Somewhere he's out there,” she kept saying over and over to herself. “If he's dead, there's the mud and grime—” she shuddered “—and blood too—rivers of it. But if he's captured—Oh, I can't think—I mustn't think—”

And then she would begin all over again—

“Allen is lying out there—” over and over again, till her brain whirled and her head ached and she felt faint and sick. Still she could not cry.

Her heart was frozen—that was it. And how could one cry when one's heart was frozen? Oh, Allen! Allen! How could she go on living without him? If she could only cry—if she could only cry!

What was that? Thunder. The artillery of

heaven! Did they have war in heaven, she wondered. With a queer little laugh she got up and walked to the window.

A flash of lightning greeted her, illumining the world outside, flashing into bold relief the familiar objects of the little room. She knelt down by the window, regardless of danger, and lifted her face to the rising wind.

She welcomed the storm. It seemed, in some mysterious way, to quiet the tumult within her. She stretched out her arms to it and cried aloud her misery.

"Allen, my Allen, you will come back to me, won't you, dear? You promised. Oh, Allen, if you're alive are you thinking of me now? Are you thinking of Betty?"

A sharper clap of thunder seemed to answer her, and then quite suddenly the ice melted from about her heart. Her head went down upon her arms and great sobs shook her from head to foot.

It was so the girls found her a few minutes later, and with cries of pity lifted her to her feet and half-led, half-carried her back to the bed.

"We didn't know whether to come up or not," Mollie said hesitatingly. "But we thought maybe you would need us, Dear. If you would rather be alone—"

But Betty shook her head and reached out an unsteady little hand which Mollie instantly took in her warm clasp.

"No, I want you to stay," she said, trying desperately to choke back her sobs. "If some one will—just please—give me a—h—handkerchief."

Amy slipped one into her hand, and Betty dabbed fiercely at the tears which still would come.

"Don't try not to cry, Honey," whispered Mollie, putting an understanding arm about the Little Captain's shoulders and holding her close. "Tears are just the very best things in the world to help one through a crisis."

"Yes," added Grace, gently smoothing the hair back from Betty's hot forehead, while Amy sprinkled some toilet water on a fresh handkerchief and slipped it unobtrusively into Betty's other hand, "we'll just sit here and wait till you're all through."

"Then we're going to take you down and give you some hot tea and toast and love you a little," finished Amy.

All of which loving sympathy very nearly caused a fresh outburst on Betty's part. However, she finally got the better of the storm within her and even managed a little smile for the benefit of the girls.

Then she wiped away the last tear, sighed, and walked over to the window.

"The storm didn't amount to much after all," she said, after a while, very quietly. "Perhaps," and her voice was very wistful, "it's a good omen. We'll all hope so, anyway."

"Betty, Betty, you're so wonderful," cried Mollie adoringly. "I never saw any one so brave. You make me ashamed of myself."

"Oh, but I'm not brave," denied Betty, turning back to them. "I'm not the least little bit brave. I—I went all to pieces a few minutes ago. But he isn't reported dead," she added, drawing herself up, while two defiant spots of color burned in her face. "And until he is, I'm going to hold on to the hope that he is coming back. Nobody can take that from me, anyway!"

"Now, you're making me ashamed of myself," said Grace in a small voice, while the tears glistened in her eyes. "Here I've been imagining the very worst, while you— Oh, Betty, forgive me, won't you, Dear?"

Betty looked at her in real surprise.

"I haven't anything to forgive," she said.

CHAPTER XXI

A NARROW ESCAPE

THE next day dawned gloriously bright, and the girls chose to take it as a good omen. Following Betty's example, they stopped moping about and imagining the worst, and, although there was not a minute of the day when their hearts were not aching, they managed to smile when the others were looking and to speak hopefully of the future. Under Betty's gallant leadership, they had set up hope in their hearts and refused to give despair a foothold.

"What do you say to a swim?" Mollie suggested, looking out over the sparkling white sand to the inviting water beyond. "We've only been in swimming twice since we've been here."

"That is a terrible record for Outdoor Girls," Betty agreed. She was bustling busily about the cheerful kitchen making a tempting blueberry pie. There were circles under her eyes and she looked very pale for Betty, but her voice was bright and cheery.

"Can't you stop making pies for a few

minutes?" asked Mollie, turning to look at her. "It's too nice outdoors to waste time in cooking."

"I imagine you wouldn't say that to-night," retorted Betty, fluting the edges of her pie crust. "I notice you generally like the results of my labor."

"Who wouldn't?" returned Mollie. "I only know of one person who can make better pies."

"And that's yourself, of course." Betty made a little face at her and slipped the pie into the oven. "Just for that you can have only one piece to-night!"

"I don't care, if you'll only stop working and come along," insisted Mollie. "If I stay in the house much longer I'll start thinking again—and you know what that means."

Betty gave her a quick side-glance, hastily dusted the flour from her hands and took off her apron.

"I'm all ready," she announced. "Where are the other girls?"

"In the living room, reading and eating candy—or at least Grace is doing the candy part. Amy has sworn off, you know."

The girls agreed eagerly to the proposed swim, and in a few minutes had donned their suits and caps and pronounced themselves ready.

"I ought to get a letter from mother to-day,"

said Mollie, as her feet sank in the soft sand. "She said yesterday that the detectives had picked up a clue and thought they were on the right trail at last."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Betty demanded.

"Oh, I don't know," Mollie replied wearily. "I didn't think there was any use telling you until I had something really definite. You know the chief business of a detective is nosing out false clues," she finished scornfully.

"Well, I know once we met a perfectly capable detective," remarked Betty. By this time they had reached the water and she put one toe into it experimentally.

"Ouch—it's cold," she said.

"When did we meet a capable detective?" queried Mollie, looking interested.

"Just after we went to Camp Liberty when Will traced the German spy," Betty reminded her. "Did you ever see prettier detective work in your life?"

"Yes, it was splendid," Mollie admitted, but the reference proved to be an unfortunate one. It brought back vividly the picture of Will as he had been then, at the height of his triumph over the apprehension of the spy—in which the Outdoor Girls had also played an important part—and jubilant at the prospect of being able to join

the colors at last and fight in the army of democracy.

Try as they would, they could not enter into the fun as they would have done a few weeks before. They swam about languidly and found to their surprise that they became quickly and easily tired.

"I never knew before how much influence mind has over matter," said Mollie, after they had come out on the beach again. "I declare, even my muscles feel depressed!"

"As Outdoor Girls we're getting to be marvelous failures," remarked Grace, as she wrung the water from her skirt and plumped down in the sand. "I feel as weak as a rag."

"I guess it isn't much use trying to enjoy ourselves," sighed Betty plaintively. "I've done my best, but all the time I feel as if I were just trying to kid myself, in the vulgar vernacular."

"For goodness sake, don't you give up, Betty!" cried Grace, in alarm. "If you get discouraged, then I don't know what we shall do."

"I'm not really discouraged—" Betty began, when a terrified cry cut her short and the girls sprang to their feet bewildered.

"Where is it?" cried Mollie, but Betty caught her arm and pointed with shaking fingers to

an orange-colored cap bobbing on the water several hundred feet from shore.

"It's Amy!" she gasped. "Something must have happened. Come on, girls! Who's going with me?"

Without waiting for an answer, she was off like a shot with Mollie and Grace close behind.

They had not missed quiet little Amy, and if they had, would probably have thought she had gone for an unusually long swim. And now had come her frantic cry for help.

"What is the matter?" Betty cried over and over to herself, as she put all her strength into the long, powerful strokes. Amy was a splendid swimmer, almost as good as Betty herself.

For one terrible moment the thought of sharks flashed into Betty's mind and she shuddered. But the next minute reason reasserted itself and she realized that sharks had never been seen on this coast. Baby ones, perhaps, but not the man-eating variety.

She raised her head from the water and gazed in the direction of the vivid cap. Yes, there it was! Thank heaven there was still time.

"Amy! Amy!" she called, "I'm coming. Just hold on for a minute, Honey. I'm almost to you."

No answer came back to her, and when she

looked again for the cap she found to her horror that it was gone.

“Oh,” she moaned, “I’m too late. I’m too late. Oh, Amy, Amy, just another minute—just a little minute—” she redoubled her efforts and suddenly gave a shout of joy.

There was the cap again, almost under her hand. In her frenzy of haste she had covered the distance with almost unbelievable speed.

Her shout seemed to rouse Amy, who had been struggling feebly to keep her head above the water, and the girl turned a terror-stricken face to her.

“Can you put a hand on my shoulder?” gasped Betty, beginning to feel the tremendous effort she had made. “Hang on to me, Honey, and we’ll get out of this all right.”

Amy clutched her shoulder, and slowly the Little Captain turned about, saving her strength for the long swim back. She could not be too long about it either, she thought desperately. Amy was almost exhausted and had all she could do to keep her head above the water.

It all depended on her, Betty. If she could get to shore, carrying the double weight before Amy’s strength left her and she gave up altogether, all well and good. But if she could not—she groaned and set herself grimly to her task.



TWO OTHER BOBBING CAPS WERE COMING RAPIDLY NEARER.
The Outdoor Girls at Bluff Point.

She had covered about an eighth of the distance back when her heart leapt suddenly and she gave a sigh of relief. There were two other bobbing caps on the water coming rapidly nearer—and those two caps could belong to nobody but Mollie and Grace.

That meant help—and, oh, she did need help! She was putting forth all her strength, but to her agonized fancy she was not going forward at all. Amy's almost dead weight dragging at her shoulder seemed a nightmare. Yet she dreaded beyond anything else to be relieved of the weight for that would mean—. She refused to put the awful thought into words, merely driving herself on more desperately. And all the time she was gasping out words of hope and courage to the poor girl she supported.

Amy seemed beyond words, for she made no answer, merely clutching Betty's shoulder more tightly and holding on with a grimness born of terror.

Then just as the gallant Little Captain felt her strength going and knew she could not hold out much longer, Mollie came abreast of her with Grace a few feet behind.

Mollie shook the water from her eyes, gave one glance at Betty's face, then gave peremptory orders.

"Give her to me, Betty," she directed. "I guess you're about all in. That's it, Amy; grasp my shoulder with your other hand. Get a good grip before you let go of Betty. That's the way. Now we're all right. Between us we'll have you in in a jiffy. All right, Betty? Do you need help yourself?"

But Betty shook her head, her long steady strokes keeping her even with Mollie. In a moment Grace came up to them and directed Amy to put her free hand on her shoulder, and in this fashion they finally reached shallow water.

They found that they were not a moment too soon, for as they got to their feet and stooped to lift Amy, they found that she had fainted.

"Thank heaven that didn't happen out there," cried Betty, with a shuddering glance out over the treacherous water.

Between them, fatigued though they were with the ordeal they had just gone through, they got Amy to the shore and began to work over her.

It did not take very long to bring her back to consciousness, for Amy had a wonderful constitution and strong vitality. However, it seemed ages to the anxious girls who worked over her, and when at last she opened her eyes they were ready to cry with relief.

"H-how do you feel?" asked Betty tremulously,

for she was beginning to feel the reaction. "Are you all right?"

"Don't try to get up," commanded Mollie, as Amy tried weakly to raise herself on her elbow.

"Just lie still and you'll feel better in a minute," Grace added, while Amy looked from one to the other of them with wide, bewildered eyes.

"What happened," she asked, then, as memory came sweeping back to her, she gave a little cry and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, girls," she cried, "I thought I was going to die!"

"Yes, yes, we know," said Betty soothingly, as though she were talking to a little child, "but you're all right now, dear."

"Don't try to tell us about it unless you want to," added Mollie.

"I swam out farther than I meant to," Amy went on, as though they had not spoken. "And when I tried to get back I found that something was wrong with my right leg." She was shivering with exhaustion and the memory of the awful experience she had gone through, but when the girls tried to stop her she would not listen and hurried on feverishly.

"It was a cramp I guess, and the harder I tried to get rid of it the worse it got till finally I got panic-stricken. I called to you girls, but you

didn't seem to hear me. Then—" she paused, and the girls held their breath as she looked around at them. "Then—I went down. I came up again and called, and—and—I saw you, Betty. Oh, it was terrible!"

"Then," cried Betty, her voice trembling, "when you went down that last time—"

"I didn't go down," Amy contradicted her. "I struggled so hard that I succeeded in getting my head above water and—that was when you reached me—Betty—"

"Thank Heaven," said Betty, with a little sob, "that I was there!"

CHAPTER XXII

DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN

“WELL,” said Mollie, with a sigh, “I fancy there isn’t very much use of our sitting around here in our bathing suits. I, for one, don’t feel like swimming any more to-day.”

“Nor I,” agreed Grace.

“And I,” said Amy, turning away with a shudder from the water where she had so closely come to death, “feel as if I never wanted to see the water again.”

“Oh, but you will get over that,” Betty assured her quickly. “I don’t blame you a bit for feeling that way now—I do myself—but after a while you will be just as crazy about it as ever.”

“I don’t know,” said Amy slowly. “When you have once come face to face with death like that, you are not anxious to do it again in a hurry.”

“But you have never had a cramp before,” reasoned Mollie, “and you probably never will have one again.”

“But I am not sure of that,” insisted Amy.

“There’s no reason why you can’t be sure of it

after a while," Betty pointed out. "You see, we girls are pretty well out of practice. It's a long time since we did any swimming to amount to anything, and our muscles are weak and flabby. Why, we all got tired out to-day twice as quickly as we ordinarily would."

"And you tried to swim too far," added Mollie. "That's the reason your poor old muscles protested."

"It might have happened to any one of us," Grace agreed. "All we need is a little practice to swim as well as ever again."

"Oh, do you think so?" asked Amy eagerly, while the color came back into her pale cheeks. "If I could only be sure of that!"

Betty was about to reply, but at that minute a voice hailed them from the direction of the house and they jumped up to see what was wanted.

"It's mother," said Grace. "And she seems to be waiving something at us."

"It's an envelope," cried Mollie. "It maybe a letter from mother."

She started running toward the house, with Grace, thinking of Will, at her heels, while Betty helped Amy to her feet.

"Are you feeling stronger now?" she asked. "Or would you rather rest a little longer?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Amy assured her, though

for a minute she had to cling to Betty for support.

They made their way rather slowly after the others. Before they had reached the foot of the bluff Mollie came scrambling down again and ran toward them wildly.

"What do you think has happened now?" she cried, taking Amy's other arm and helping her along.

"Oh, Mollie," cried Amy, standing stock still to gaze at her, "what—"

"The twins haven't been found?" Betty questioned eagerly, but Mollie shook her head.

"No such luck," she returned. "But we have found out one thing. Those blessed little twins are alive, anyway."

"How do you know?" they queried breathlessly.

By this time they had reached the top of the bluff and were all, Mrs. Ford included, hurrying toward the house.

"They received a letter," Mollie explained, sinking down on a step of the porch while the others crowded about her eagerly, "from some old rascal—oh, if I could only get my hands on him!" she paused to glare about her ferociously, but they impatiently hurried her on.

"Yes! But the letter!" Betty urged.

"It was from a man who demanded twenty

thousand dollars—” she paused again, while the girls gasped and crowded closer, “for the return of the twins.”

“Then they were kidnapped!” cried Grace.

“Yes. But they ran away first,” explained Mollie, almost beside herself with anger and excitement. “And this old—brute! found them, and, I suppose because they were well dressed, thought he saw a way to make some easy money. Oh, my poor darlings! My poor little Paul and Dodo! Girls, we’ve just got to find them, that’s all. I can’t sit here and do nothing a minute longer.”

“But the police—” Amy suggested.

“Oh, the police! Of course they are on the job—or think they are,” interrupted Mollie scornfully. “But I don’t believe they will be able to find our babies in a thousand years. And every time I think of them, frightened to death! Oh, our precious babies!”

“I wonder how he found out where they lived,” broke in Grace, who had been following her own train of thought.

“They told him, of course,” said Mollie. “Poor little trusting angels, of course they would think any grown person was their friend. Oh, if they had only fallen in with some respectable person instead of that—that—” she could think of noth-

ing bad enough to call the man who had stolen the twins.

"Of course," said Mrs. Ford—it was the first time she had spoken—"your mother showed the letter to the police."

"Of course," Mollie agreed, two angry spots of color in her cheeks. "And equally of course they have promised to do all in their power to apprehend the villain. But it makes me wild to just sit here and do nothing!"

"But I don't see what there is to do," said Amy.

"Neither do I," cried Mollie, jumping to her feet and beginning to pace restlessly up and down the porch. "That's the worst of it. I feel so absolutely helpless. And all the time I have no way of knowing what horrible thing may be happening—"

"Oh, the man is probably treating them pretty decently," said Betty, adding, reasonably: "If he hopes to get all that money from your mother he isn't going to take a chance on losing it by harming the twins."

"I know," cried Mollie, stopping in her restless promenade to regard Betty. "But how in the world is mother going to raise any such sum of money? Twenty thousand dollars—why, we haven't that much ready cash in the world!"

"But he doesn't know that," Grace pointed out. "And as long as he keeps on hoping—"

"But how long is he going to keep on hoping?" cried Mollie, turning on her. "He knows mighty well that if mother had that much money she would move heaven and earth to get it together and get the twins back. And the very fact that she hasn't—"

"Oh, but that doesn't always follow," Betty broke in eagerly. "There are a great many people who, even if they had the money, would try to bring the rascal to justice before they submitted to blackmail."

"But not my mother," Mollie insisted.

"But the kidnapper doesn't know that," Grace put in. "And he will probably lie mighty low for a few weeks, knowing that the police are hunting for him."

"For the next few weeks, yes," admitted Mollie. "But he isn't going to wait forever, and when he finds out that mother can't raise the money what would be the natural thing for him to do? Get the twins out of the way, of course," she said, answering her own question.

"But there is always the chance—yes even the probability—" insisted Betty, "that before very long the police will be able to find the fellow and recover the twins."

"Yes," Grace added, "that kind of criminal is never very clever, you know. They are bound to leave something undone that will incriminate them."

Mollie groaned and sank into a chair.

"And in the meantime," she said, "all I have to do is just to sit here and wait and act as if nothing had happened. Oh, I can't! I've simply got to do something!"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know how a girl can do anything that the police can't," sighed Grace, adding wistfully: "Goodness, wouldn't I like a chance to be happy again!"

"I guess we all would," said Mollie moodily.

They were silent for a long time after that, each one busy with her own unhappy thoughts and no one noticed that the sun had gone under a cloud and that the wind was rising.

It was the increasing thunder of the waves on the rocks that finally startled them into a realization of the present.

"There's a fearful storm coming up!" cried Grace, springing to her feet. "Look at those banks of clouds."

"And I'm getting cold," added Amy, shivering, and then they suddenly realized that they still had on their bathing suits.

"I guess we're going crazy—and no wonder,"

said Grace, as they started indoors to change their things.

"Has any one any idea what time it is?" asked Mollie. "I'm sure I haven't."

"It must be after twelve, for I'm beginning to feel hungry," Betty answered.

"And I'm feeling faint," Amy added. "I shouldn't wonder if a cup of tea would go awfully well."

"You poor little thing," said Betty, putting an arm about her. "No wonder you feel faint. We should have given you something to strengthen you long ago. I don't know what we've been thinking of!"

"It's all my fault," said Mollie contritely, noticing suddenly how white Amy's face was and how dark were the circles under her eyes. "I let my own affairs make me forget everything else. Why didn't you say something, Amy?"

"I didn't think of it myself," Amy answered truthfully, "until Betty spoke of being hungry. Girls," she paused outside her door to sniff inquiringly, "do I smell something, or am I dreaming?"

"I'll say you smell something," Grace answered, sniffing hungrily in her turn. "It's mother getting lunch, of course. I don't know what we ever would have done without her."

While the girls were dressing the threatened storm was coming nearer, and toward the end they had to put on the light to see to fix their hair.

Even had the sun been shining brightly, they would have felt depressed, what with Amy's accident and the bad news Mollie had received; but with the wind wailing dolefully and black darkness in the middle of the day, they felt themselves growing utterly discouraged.

Grace had heard no further news of Will, and the one straw of hope that she clutched so desperately was that he had not died, or surely her father would have heard. In this case, no news was good news to a certain extent.

And as for Betty, brave as she had tried to be since that terrible night when she had read Allen's name among the missing, even she felt her courage slipping—slipping, and began to wonder if after all, hoping did any good.

To-day, as she stood before the mirror, mechanically putting up her hair and looking through and past her own reflection, her eyes suddenly lost their preoccupied stare and became focused upon herself. For the first time in days she was seeing herself without the mask of cheerfulness she had so determinedly assumed. And as she looked, her eyes suddenly filled with tears—tears almost of self-pity.

For the mirror told her, what she had scarcely realized, just how much she had suffered. Her eyes, usually so bright and merry, were dark and brooding. Her face looked thin and drawn, and her lips—those lips that had always seemed to smile even when her eyes were grave—had a pathetic, wistful droop, and there were lines, yes, actually lines, about them.

“If Allen should see you,” she told herself tremulously, “he probably wouldn’t know you, Betty.”

Yet all the while she knew that if it were possible for Allen to see her or for her to see Allen, the face in the mirror would disappear as if by magic and the old Betty would return, for joy would have taken its place in her heart.

With a little sob she turned from the mirror and switched off the light. The noise of the surf beating against the rocks came to her menacingly and the wind wailed shrilly around the house.

“Oh, Allen, Allen!” she cried, stretching out her arms in an agony of entreaty. “Somewhere you must hear me calling you. Allen, come back to me, dear!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHADOW LIFTS

"I WONDER if it is going to rain forever," cried Mollie petulantly, beating a restless tattoo on the window pane. "As if we weren't forlorn enough without the old weather making things a hundred times worse."

"They say troubles never come singly, and I guess they're right," sighed Amy. She was sitting near the window in the brightest spot she could find—which was not very bright at that—knitting and trying her best not to think of Will. The result was that he was never for a minute out of her mind.

"What's the matter, Grace—I mean more than usual?" Betty laid aside her book and looked over at Grace questioningly. "I don't believe you've said three consecutive words all day long."

"And left to myself I wouldn't say that much," returned Grace moodily, adding, as they turned to stare at her: "It seems as if I never open my mouth these days but what I say something unpleasant, so I made up my mind last night that I

wouldn't talk till I had something cheerful to talk about."

"Then you're apt to be dumb till doomsday," retorted Mollie, with such a depth of pessimism that the girls had to smile at her.

"What an awful thing to happen to a girl," said Betty, with a wry little smile.

"I'm glad you didn't say what girl," retorted Grace, and therewith subsided into her gloomy meditation again.

Betty took up her book and Amy went on with her knitting while the rain came down in torrents and the surf thundered and roared.

Mollie turned from the window and looked at them, and the whole situation suddenly appealed to her rather hysterical sense of humor. She began to laugh, and the longer she laughed the harder she laughed till she sank into a chair and shook with mirth.

The other girls first looked surprised, then alarmed.

Betty threw down her book and went over to her.

"For goodness sake, Mollie, what's the joke?" she asked, as Mollie looked up at her with red face and watery eyes.

"If it's as funny as all that I think you might share it with us," added Grace.

"Oh, it isn't funny," gasped Mollie, "it's h-horrible."

Then as suddenly as she had begun to laugh, she began to cry with great sobs that tore themselves from her and seemed utterly beyond her control.

Alarmed, the girls soothed and patted and comforted her till finally the storm had passed and she became more quiet.

"You must think I'm a p-perfect idiot," she sputtered, raising swollen eyes to them. "I don't know what in the w-world g-got into me. I just went all to pieces."

"So we see," said Betty, while she gently wiped Mollie's eyes with a clean handkerchief. "But please don't do it again," she added whimsically. "I don't believe we could survive another one."

"But it's made me feel better," said Mollie, a minute later, as though the discovery surprised her. "It's made me feel lots better," she added.

"I wonder if we couldn't all try it," suggested Amy.

"Yes, how do you get that way," added Grace, with interest. "I'm willing to try anything once."

"It—it isn't pleasant while it lasts," said Mollie, adding with a suggestion of a smile: "And I doubt if I could give you the recipe."

"I wonder," Amy suggested shyly after a little while, "if perhaps a little music wouldn't help out. Won't you play for us, Betty?"

"Oh, Betty, please!" Grace took up the suggestion eagerly. "It would take our minds off ourselves."

"Yes, do, Betty. You know you never refuse," urged Mollie, jumping up and escorting the Little Captain to the piano.

Betty obediently sat down to the piano, but her fingers wandered over the keys uncertainly. She did not want to play. Music, good music, always roused in her a feeling of exquisite sadness, a pain that was akin to joy, and in her present mood she was afraid to play.

But the girls had asked her to, and if it would make them feel any better—

She struck a chord of exquisite harmony, and every fibre in her seemed yearningly to respond. She had meant to play something bright and cheerful, but almost against her will her fingers wandered into Grieg's "To Spring."

The elusive, plaintive melody floated throbbingly out into the room, while the girls sat motionless, fascinated. They had never heard Betty play just this way before, and instinctively they knew that she was showing them her heart.

She played it through to the last whispering

note, then dropped her head upon her arms and sobbed as though her heart would break.

"You shouldn't have asked me," she said, when they tried to comfort her. "I knew I couldn't play without making a fool of myself. It was the one—Allen loved best—" the last words so low that they had to bend close to hear them.

"Poor little Betty!" cried Mollie, stroking her hair gently. "It was selfish of us to ask you, but you did play it wonderfully," she added with a sudden little burst of enthusiasm. "You had us all hypnotized."

"And then I had to go and spoil everything by making a baby of myself," Betty lamented. "Goodness, I've cried more in the last week than in all the rest of my life before."

"Well, you have had plenty of company," said Grace dryly. "Though what comfort that is, I never could see."

Betty sat up, dabbed a last tear from her eyes, and looked about her with a weak little attempt at a smile.

"Well," she said, "now that Mollie and I have entertained the company, I wonder who's next?"

"I'll recite that little ditty entitled, 'The Face On the Barroom Floor,'" Amy volunteered. "Some kind person wished it upon me when I was too young to object."

"Don't you dare," said Grace, alarmed. "If you do I'm going out, rain or no rain—"

"And get drowned."

"Well, there are worse things."

"No there aren't," denied Amy, with a shiver. "I know, because I tried it."

At that moment came an interruption in the shape of a sharp rapping at the kitchen door.

The girls looked at one another questioningly.

"Mercy, I wonder who's calling upon us in this weather?" said Mollie.

"It might be a good idea to look and see," Betty returned dryly, and ran to the kitchen, followed closely by the others.

She flung open the door, letting in a gust of wind and a flood of rain as she did so, and a tall figure in a rubber coat almost fell into the room.

"Why, it's our delivery-boy-mail-carrier!" cried Betty, as the young giant recovered himself and pulled off his dripping hat.

"Yes'm," he replied, with a good-natured grin that stretched from ear to ear. "The very same, an' at your service."

"But how did you manage to get here?" cried Betty, too astonished even to offer the unexpected visitor a seat. "You never could drive through that awful mud."

"No'm, I reckon mos' likely I couldn't," he

answered amiably, adding with a return of the loquacity that was his most marked failing: "I remember one year we had a storm near's bad as this, an' Luke Bailey, he got kind of short o' provisions—campin' in the woods he was—an' he tried to drive his team into town—"

"But you said you didn't drive out!" Grace interrupted. "And if you didn't drive, you must have walked all the way."

"Yes'm, reckon I did. Well, Luke he got jest about as fur—"

"But why did you come?" broke in Mollie, unable to bear the suspense any longer.

"I got this here package of letters," he replied, seeming suddenly to remember the cause of his errand. "Some o' them came a couple o' days ago, but I said to myself I might jest as well wait an' see if the weather didn't clear up—"

"And so when it didn't, you walked away up here in all the rain," Betty finished for him, real gratitude in her voice. "It was most awfully kind of you."

"Oh, that ain't nothin'," he denied, fidgeting uneasily, while Mollie hastily sorted the letters. "I ain't never finished tellin' you what happened to Luke Bailey—"

He was off again, and the girls were vaguely conscious of his voice rambling on and on while

they eagerly scanned the handwriting on their letters.

Then suddenly Betty gave a little cry and stumbled back against the table, holding on to it for support.

"Betty! Honey! What is it?" cried Amy. "You look as white as a ghost."

"A letter," she gasped, holding out an envelope with the familiar red diamond in the corner. She was shaking from head to foot. "Girls, oh, girls, it's from Allen!" Then she turned and fled from the room.

Luke Bailey's biographer stared after her stupidly while the girls gasped and looked wildly at one another for confirmation of what they had heard.

"A letter!" she had said. "From Allen!"

Then he was not dead—their dazed brains comprehended that fact. And he could not be missing either. After a minute that stupefying fact became equally clear.

Then slowly they regained the use of their tongues.

"Did you hear what I heard?" asked Mollie, looking from Grace to Amy and back again.

"I think I'm awake," Grace answered, with the same incredulous look in her eyes.

"She said," Amy repeated slowly, "that she

had received a letter from Allen. Then the report that he was missing must have been a mistake."

"It looks that way," said Mollie, two spots of color beginning to burn in her face. Then she turned to the boy who was still staring stupidly from one to the other of them. Even the story of Luke Bailey had been temporarily driven from his mind.

"Miss Nelson," Mollie explained, taking pity on his bewilderment, "has received the most wonderful news, and we can't thank you enough for bringing it to her. Can't we get you a cup of tea or something?" she offered, rather vaguely.

But the boy refused, and seeing that they were all tremendously excited about something, he finally took his leave, feeling very much abused that his story of Luke and his adventures had not been listened to with the attention it deserved.

Once the door was closed behind this angel in disguise, the girls rushed after Betty and were met and nearly bowled over by that delirious little person herself.

"He's not missing—never was!" she cried, waving the letter wildly in the air, beside herself with relief and joy. "He's just as well as ever he was, and Grace darling, and Amy, too, he says, he says—"

“Oh, what?” cried Grace, her face growing white while Amy clutched the back of a chair.

Betty tried to pull herself together. She turned the pages of the letter in search of a particular place. Finding it, she began:

“He says that Will—Oh read it,” she cried, thrusting the letter into Grace’s hands. “There it is—that paragraph. Read it aloud, Grace. Oh, I think—I think—I’ll die of joy!”

CHAPTER XXIV

HIS THREE SWEETHEARTS

GRACE'S eyes filled with tears of sheer weakness, but she brushed them away impatiently. Then she read, brokenly at first, then radiantly as the marvelous truth came home to her.

“‘Poor old Will certainly did have a narrow escape,’” she read, “‘but thanks to the gods he is out of danger now. I went to see him yesterday—got leave for the first time in weeks—and he was looking mighty chipper. No wonder, with the good looking nurse he had.’”

Amy gave a little involuntary sound and then blushed scarlet when the girls looked at her.

“Never mind!” cried the joy incarnate that was Betty, putting an arm about her. “Just wait till you hear what he says later on. Go on, Gracie.”

“‘But do you know what that old boy said when I happened to comment upon the excellent nursing he must have had?’” Grace read on,

while Amy tried hard to look unconcerned. "He reached under his pillow and pulled out three pictures. "Those are my three girls," he said, and I swear there was moisture in his eyes. "You probably won't believe me, old man, but there isn't a girl or woman over here who could make me look twice at her unless she resembles one of those," and he pointed to the photographs I still held.

"'And when I opened them there was Mrs. Ford's face smiling up at me as sweet as life, and Grace with her best Gibson Girl expression—you can tell her from me that that is some picture of her—And who do you think the third was?'"

Grace paused again and looked over slyly at Amy, who turned away her face, only just showing the tip of one furiously blushing ear.

"'It was Amy Blackford,'" Grace read on. "'And it was one fine picture of her too. Gosh, I didn't know it was as serious as all that, did you, little girl? But then the war does make a fellow feel about ten years older than he really is, and the girls at home suddenly seem the most desirable and necessary things on earth. And Amy did look so sweet and comfy and altogether like home that I couldn't blame the old chap.

"'Then I pulled out the picture of the most

beautiful girl in the world and we talked about home and—other things, you know—until we were ready to weep on each other's shoulders and the handsome nurse put me out.

“‘Do you know what I'm going to do the first minute I reach good old U. S. A. territory, Betty de—’”

But the sentence was never finished, for with a quick movement, Betty snatched the letter away and hugged it to her breast while her face flamed.

“That's all you get,” she cried, “the rest belongs to me. Oh, girls, did you ever hear such wonderful news? Allen strong and well and Will recovering splendidly, and both of them so sweet and loyal. Oh, I could kiss that beautiful red-haired angel who brought all this happiness to us. Where is he? Has he gone back again?”

“Yes, he has, and what do we care!” cried Grace wildly, her face radiant. “Amy, you little goose, you're not crying are you? Don't you know there isn't a thing in the world to cry about? Come on—laugh, you sweet, comfy, little thing. Don't you know that Will is getting better and keeps our pictures under his pillow? That darling, wonderful, adorable boy. Great heavens!” She stopped suddenly and a dismayed expression crept over her face. “Excuse me, please,” and

she was racing up the stairs, leaving the girls to look after her, bewildered.

"What in the world," began Betty, when Amy lifted a face, shining radiantly through her tears.

"Don't you know?" she said with an understanding born of her wonderful happiness. "Grace has gone to tell her mother. You really can't blame her for being in a hurry."

A few minutes later Grace called down to Amy.

"Come on up, Honey," she commanded. "Mother wants to speak to you."

After Amy had left the room, Mollie and Betty looked at each other questioningly.

"I wonder if Mrs. Ford is going to welcome Amy into the family," chuckled Mollie.

"I hardly think so, since there isn't anything definitely settled yet," said Betty absently. She was thinking of Allen and what he had said in the part of his letter she would not let Grace read. Her eyes shone mistily and her heart sang. Allen, her Allen, was safe, and, oh, those wonderful things he had said!

"It must be nice to be as happy as they are," Mollie said, with a little sigh, and with a start Betty came out of her preoccupation.

"Oh, Mollie, dear, I—I forgot," she confessed, putting an arm about her chum. "I was so sel-

fishly taken up with my own happiness that I didn't think!"

"It isn't your fault," said Mollie, smiling bravely. "You just can't be happy enough to suit me. You know that, don't you, Betty?"

"Of course I do, you perfect brick!" said Betty, hugging her fondly. "But we can't any of us be really happy until we know you are. But even that is coming out all right, I'm sure of it," she finished gayly, her old optimism fully restored.

Mollie started to shake her head moodily, thought better of it, and smiled instead.

"I won't be a death's head at the feast," she told herself savagely. "I suppose I'm awfully wicked, but now that they are all so happy, it makes me feel dreadfully lonesome. I'm glad from my very heart for them, of course. But, oh, Paul! Oh, little Dodo! If you will only come back to Mollie, she will never go away from you again, never, never!"

Dinner that night for the other girls was a joyful occasion. The girls dressed up in their prettiest and best, Mrs. Ford and Betty cooked a most appetizing supper, and if it had not been for the one dark cloud still hanging over them, the evening that followed would have been the happiest they had ever spent.

Mollie kept her promise to herself and entered

into the gayety with the best of them, and no one—except Betty, perhaps—realized how much she was suffering.

However, when the lights were out that night and everybody but herself was asleep, Mollie's brave barrier broke down and she sobbed miserably into her pillow.

"I want to go home!" she cried, heart brokenly. "I can't keep this up day after day! I can't! If I don't hear some good news soon, I'll die—I know I shall."

Only the sound of the waves pounding angrily on the shore and the shrilling of a rapidly rising wind answered her, and after a while she sank into a troubled, uneasy sleep.

And how could she know as she lay there, restlessly tossing from side to side and muttering incoherently to herself, that the wind and waves were actually sending her an answer which, in her wildest moments, she could never have imagined?

Toward morning something, she could not tell what, roused Betty and she sat up suddenly in bed, every nerve taut, every sense alert.

The wind had increased in fury while they slept, till now it was howling fiercely about the house, rattling the windows and whistling shrilly through the cracks, which together with the

pounding of the waves, made an almost deafening uproar.

And the rain! It came down in sheeting torrents and was driven by the rushing wind in maddened gusts against the window panes until it seemed they must give beneath the strain.

"What a storm!" cried Betty, pressing her hands against her ears to keep out the noise of it. "I wonder if that was what wakened me."

Then, becoming fully awake, she suddenly realized that she was very uncomfortable, and, looking down, discovered that the bed spread was wet.

"Mercy, it's raining in all over us!" she cried aloud, and, springing out of bed, ran over to the window and closed it with a bang. When she came back she found Grace sitting up in bed and staring at her.

"For goodness sake, what's happening?" asked the latter sleepily: "Is it the end of the world?"

"Search me," returned Betty, inelegantly. She had to almost scream to make herself heard above the noise of the storm. Furthermore, her feet were wet and her nightgown was wet, which did not serve to lift her spirits. In fact, she was feeling decidedly grumpy. "The only thing I do know," she shouted, "is that I'm nearly drowned."

"Don't you know that getting drowned at night

is strictly forbidden?" Grace began severely, but was promptly smothered by an avenging pillow. "Why don't you get in bed?" she asked, when she had succeeded in disentangling herself. Betty was sitting disconsolately on the dry side of the bed, which happened to be that occupied by Grace.

"If you want to know, just feel the covers," Betty answered. "Next time I'm going to make you sleep on the side near the window. Think I'll go in and see if Mollie and Amy are drowned yet," she added, starting for the door. "Goodness, but this is a heavy storm!"

However, when she started to close the window in the next room she noticed to her surprise that the rain had slackened, had almost stopped. But not so the wind. If anything, it had increased in fury.

She was about to turn back and tiptoe out of the room, hoping that she had not roused the girls, when her eye was caught and held by a vivid flash of red somewhere out to sea.

Startled, she stood stock still, staring out in the direction from which that light had come. It seemed weird, eery—that lonesome light sending its signal out into the storm-whipped darkness. For that it was a signal, she did not for a minute doubt.

Then it came again—green this time—a light that shot up rocketlike toward the sky, then, bursting, dived to instant annihilation in the turbulent water.

Another followed, and another, and then the truth came home to Betty. Somewhere out there in that foaming sea a ship had met with disaster, perhaps at this moment was sinking and her crew were sending out desperate appeals for aid.

For a moment she felt almost sick with pity and excitement. Then she controlled herself and ran over to wake the girls.

“Mollie! Amy!” she cried, her voice shrill even above the shrieking of the wind. “Wake up, wake up! Oh, why don’t you wake up?” as the girls opened sleep-laden eyes and stared at her stupidly.

“Wh-what’s the matter,” stammered Mollie, suddenly sensing almost hysterical excitement in Betty’s voice and realizing that something terrible had occurred.

“Is anybody sick?” queried Amy almost fretfully, for she had been enjoying the first good sleep she had had in weeks.

“No. But somebody may be if we don’t hurry up,” cried Betty, wild with impatience. “Don’t lie there asking foolish questions when people may be dying.”

"Dying," they echoed, still staring at her stupidly.

"There's a wrecked ship out there," Betty explained, her words stumbling over each other as she tried to make the girls understand. "They are sending up signals for help, and if we don't get it for them right away it may be too late. Oh, girls, for all we know, it may be too late now!"

Mollie and Amy, at last fully awake and almost as excited as Betty herself, sprang out of bed and rushed to the window to see for themselves the signals the distressed vessel was sending up.

CHAPTER XXV

JOY

WHAT happened in the next hour the girls never afterward clearly remembered. In what seemed a nightmare, they found their clothes, and, after turning things wrong side out, getting the left shoe on the right foot, and various other mishaps calculated to wreck the most well-balanced nervous system, they finally succeeded in getting them on.

"Where shall we go?" Mollie gasped out, as, clad in oilskins, they rushed madly down the stairs.

"There's a farmhouse about a mile down the road," explained Grace, "and all the farm hands sleep on the premises. We can get them. And there's the life-saving station only a little way beyond. They may have seen the signals and be on their way already."

"All right—let's go," said Betty grimly, as she flung open the door.

A terrific gust of wind greeted her and sent her staggering back upon the other girls.

"It's even worse than I thought," she gasped, regaining her balance. "We will have to do some fighting to get there, girls."

"A mile against that wind!" groaned Grace. "Betty, I don't think we can ever make it."

"We've got to—or at least make the attempt," cried Betty, pulling her coat more tightly about her. "If nobody else will come, I'm going alone," she added, and the girls knew her well enough to be sure she meant it.

"Come on," cried Mollie, who had never yet been known to ignore a challenge. "We'll do our best, anyway, even if we die trying."

"Bravo! Spoken like an Outdoor Girl!" cried Betty, and at the challenge in her voice, Grace and Amy instinctively straightened up.

"We're all Outdoor Girls," said Grace stoutly.

"And we'll show you," Amy added, with a ring in her voice, "that we are not afraid to go anywhere that you can go."

"Fine!" cried the Little Captain, her eyes shining. "Come on, then. What chance has a pesky old wind against four Outdoor Girls, I'd like to know!"

She opened the door again, and this time, being prepared for the onslaught of the wind, merely gritted her teeth and ducked her head and plunged gamely into it. And without a minute's hesita-

tion, the others, who were "also Outdoor Girls," followed her.

The fight with the wind that followed was all they had expected it would be—and more. Their clothes were whipped about their legs as if about to disengage themselves and fly away from their owners forever. And several times they were forced to stop and turn their backs to catch their breath and gather strength to go on.

But on they did go until the welcome vision of a gaunt old farmhouse rising ghostily from the early morning mist rewarded them and set their hearts to beating high with hope.

As they fought their way step by step up to the porch, they tried to call out, but found that whatever sound they were able to make was drowned in the roar of the wind.

They found an old-fashioned knocker on the big front door, and worked it with all their strength. After what seemed to them an age of waiting, the door itself opened and a head popped out at them.

"Well, what in time—" the owner of the voice was beginning, when Betty pushed impatiently past him, the girls following close behind her.

It took a surprisingly short time—seeing that the girls all insisted upon talking at once—to make the farmer understand the situation.

"We're going on to the life-saving station," Betty told him, trembling with excitement.

"All right, but my boys'll beat 'em to it," he promised, a glint in his grey eyes.

Then the girls were on their way again, pushing desperately against a wind that seemed to rise higher and higher with every minute, while in the east the greying sky grew light.

"A—clear—day!" Mollie gasped, pushing back the wind-blown hair from her face. "At last!"

"Do you hear anything?" Betty shouted back. "It seems to me I—"

They listened, and then, above the wind, it came to them unmistakably—the sound of voices, masculine voices.

"The life-savers!" gasped Grace. "We don't have to go any farther. Let's—let's—wait for them."

They had not long to wait, for almost before Grace had finished speaking half a dozen men carrying life-saving paraphernalia broke through the underbrush and came running down the path toward them.

They stopped at sight of the panting girls, but Betty waved them on impatiently.

"The wreck!" she cried. "We came for you! Hurry!" and without another word the men

hurried on, leaving the girls to follow them more slowly.

However, they accomplished the return trip in about half the time it had taken them to fight their way against the wind, and as the first bright rays of the sun gilded the country side, they found themselves back at the house, where Mrs. Ford was anxiously awaiting them.

She had some breakfast prepared for them, which they ate standing, then rushed headlong down to the beach. The life-savers were already busily at work launching their sturdy boats, and as the girls followed the direction they were taking out to sea they suddenly saw the wrecked ship.

Driven by the hurricane wind, it had been caught on one of those treacherous bars so common along this part of the coast. Part of the bottom had been torn away, and if the ship had not been so tightly wedged upon the bar it must certainly have sunk hours before. As it was, the starboard deck stood high in the air while the port side almost touched the water and was constantly swept by mountainous combers.

The girls shivered as they looked.

“If the waves should wash it loose—” Betty began, then checked herself. The possibility was too horrible to contemplate.

"Look!" cried Mollie, clutching her arm. "They are filling the first boat. Oh, Betty, they'll certainly be swamped! I can't look!" She turned away but the next minute her eyes were fixed strainingly upon the wreck again.

"They're gone! They're gone!" cried Amy, jumping up and down in her excitement as the boat sunk in the hollow between two huge combers and was lost to view. "No, they're not! They're up again," as the boat, looking pathetically tiny in comparison to the vastness of the ocean, rose gallantly on the crest of a big wave and came rushing toward them, reeling from side to side. The next moment they were lost to view again.

"Oh, they'll never make it, they'll never make it," moaned Grace. "It isn't possible."

But the gallant little boat came on and on, fighting its bitter fight with the elements, till, rising on one last long comber, it swept magnificently in and grounded on the shore.

The girls were already racing eagerly toward it, and a few minutes later were welcoming the poor bedraggled survivors back to safety. There were nine of them in all, four women, one young girl, three men and a little boy. The child was sobbing and clung to his mother's skirts, terrified.

Betty drew Grace aside.

“Some one will have to take them up to the house, let them dry out, and give them something to eat,” she whispered. “Will you do that, Grace?”

Grace nodded, and Amy, who had overheard the request, begged to go with her. Mollie and Betty remained behind to watch the rest of the rescue work.

Luckily the ship was a merchant vessel and carried very few passengers, so that the life-savers were confident of saving all those on board. Also the wind was beginning to abate and the sea was becoming less angry—all of which helped them in their work.

The two girls were standing side by side, eagerly watching the progress of the second boat, when they were startled by a hail from behind and turned to find Grace and Amy flying down toward them.

“Mollie!” Amy gasped, trying to catch her breath while her cheeks flamed with excitement, “we just heard something we thought you ought to know. You know the woman with the little boy,” she hurried on as Mollie was about to speak, “well, while she was comforting her own child, she happened to speak of two other children on board—”

"Who cry a great deal," Grace put in eagerly. "They are in charge of a man who looks like a Spaniard, and they seem to be in mortal terror of him—"

"Girls," the word burst through dry lips as Mollie took a step toward them, "what are you telling me? Oh, I can't bear to hope if—" she grasped Grace's arm and shook it, not realizing how she hurt. "Tell me," she cried, "are they boy and girl—"

"Yes," Grace answered trembling. "I don't know, Mollie, dear, of course, but from her description, those two children sounded an awful lot like the twins!"

Mollie waited to hear no more, but was off like a whirlwind down the beach toward the second boat that was just coming in to shore. And while she ran she was praying with all her fervent young heart.

"Oh, Lord, give me back those babies!" she cried sobbingly. "If you only will I'll never, never, *never* ask you for anything again as long as I live."

Then she saw them!

A big, vicious looking man with black hair and black bushy eyebrows was lifting Dodo—her little Dodo—out of the boat. And while she looked, her heart beating wildly, hardly able to believe the

evidence of her eyes, the man stretched out his hand for the boy, who sat crouched in the back of the boat. Then followed something that made Mollie cry out in rage.

Because the boy hung back in evident terror, the man struck him across the face, and, seizing his hand, jerked him roughly out of the boat.

"Dodo! Paul!" screamed Mollie, racing down toward them, unmindful of wet feet and sodden clothing. "Babies, it's Mollie! Your own Mollie who—"

But her voice was drowned in a shriek from the twins as they tore themselves loose from the man and flung themselves upon her. She dropped to her knees in the sand and strained them to her, laughing, crying, sobbing out endearments while they clung to her frantically, burying their faces in her neck.

"Don't let wicked man get Dodo!" sobbed the little girl. "He's bad man! He hurt Dodo."

With a cry Mollie jumped to her feet, an arm about each of the twins, and looked about for the man. The passengers who had also come ashore in the boat stood looking on in bewilderment. But the Spaniard had disappeared.

"Where did that man go?" cried Mollie frantically. "There he is!" she added, as she caught sight of him just approaching the foot of the

bluff, evidently bent on flight. "Don't let him get away! He's a kidnapper!"

Several of the men were already racing off in pursuit, and as the Spaniard was a heavy man and not over agile, the foremost of them soon overtook him.

He seemed to put up little resistance, evidently realizing that he was too heavily out-numbered. He surrendered to the inevitable and contented himself with merely glowering.

"Come on," cried Mollie, taking the beloved twins by the hand and starting back along the beach while the girls joyfully accompanied her, talking and ejaculating all at the same time, no one knowing what the other was saying—nor caring. The wonderful fact was enough for them.

When they scrambled up to the top of the bluff they found the men awaiting them with the sullen captive in their midst.

"What'll we do with him, Miss?" asked one of them respectfully, touching his cap to Mollie.

"Do with him?" cried Mollie, regarding the Spaniard with flashing eyes. "There isn't anything bad enough to do to him. But for the present, we'll have to be satisfied with locking him up. We have plenty of evidence," she added, waving that part of it aside with a motion of her

hand. "Letters and things, you know. He kidnapped my little brother and sister," indicating the twins, who snuggled close against her and regarded their former captor with terrified eyes, "and then demanded twenty thousand dollars of my mother for their return."

"Blackmail, eh?" growled one of the men, throwing a scornful look at the Spaniard. "Well, you'll get paid up this time, old boy. Get on there, will you?"

It was many hours later and the dusk was falling softly over the land. The passengers of the wrecked ship had long ago started villageward, there to entrain for the city, leaving two of their number behind.

These two were seated at the head of a long table in the little house at Bluff Point, devouring chicken and rice before an audience of admiring and joyful Outdoor Girls. Only Mollie very often could not see them for the tears that dimmed her eyes.

Quite suddenly Betty stopped in the very middle of a sentence to stare at Mollie.

"Your mother!" she cried. "You forgot to let her know!"

"Oh, no, I didn't," Mollie answered. "I sent a telegram by one of the boys who took that dirty

Spaniard to the station. And, oh, girls," she leaned forward suddenly while the tears overflowed and slowly trickled down her face, "if she does as I begged her to, she will be here tomorrow. Darling little mother!"

At the love in her voice the girls felt their own eyes grow wet.

"What a difference!" said Betty softly, looking around the table. "A few nights ago we were utterly miserable. Now we are wildly happy. We have the darling twins back again, and our boys 'over there' are safe. Girls," she cried, suddenly springing to her feet and raising her cup on high, "let's drink a toast—"

"To what?" they cried, rising with one motion.

"To the time when our boys come home!"

And so, in the midst of their happiness, with the dark clouds rolled away and the sun shining through, we will once more wave farewell to our Outdoor Girls.

THE END

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