

THOSE THORNTON GIRLS



MARY ETHEL OLIVER



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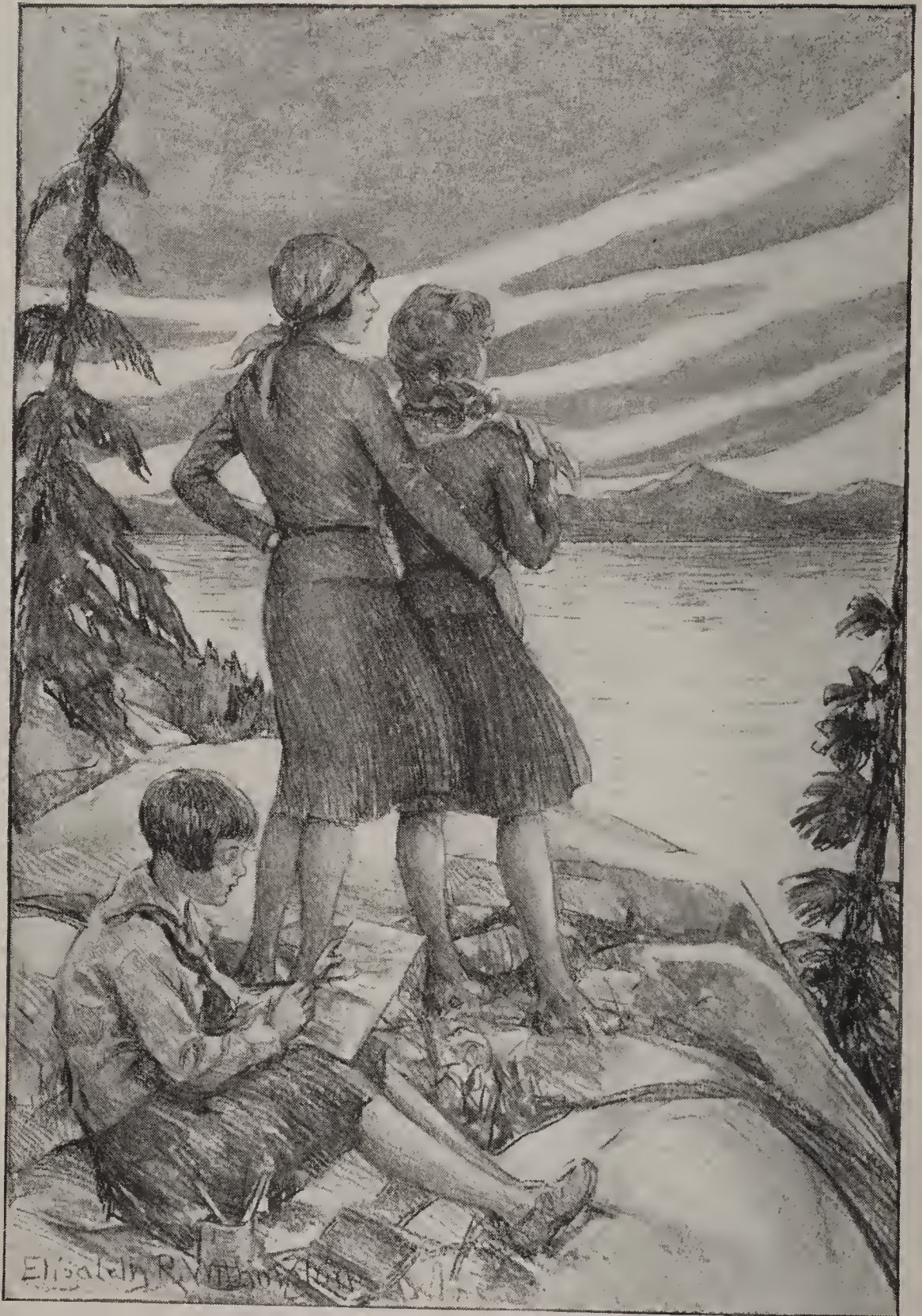
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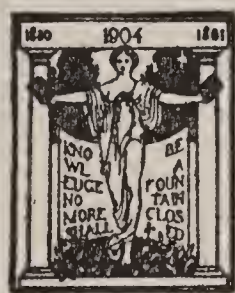


THE MIRACLE OF SUNRISE OVER LAKE TAHOE.—Page 130.

THOSE THORNTON GIRLS

By
MARY ETHEL OLIVER

ILLUSTRATED BY
ELIZABETH WITHINGTON



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THOSE THORNTON GIRLS

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D. S. H. 10/7/30

Gratefully dedicated
to my
FATHER and MOTHER

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. "THOSE TALENTED THORNTON GIRLS"	11
II. THE SLEIGH-RIDE	20
III. AUNT DOROTHY	29
IV. MEMORIES	40
V. CRISTEL'S JOURNAL	50
VI. LOOKOUT TRAIL	56
VII. FAY'S SECRET	68
VIII. CHINATOWN AFTER DARK	80
IX. DREAMS	92
X. CONCERNING A LETTER	100
XI. THE LITTLE REBEL	107
XII. VACATION	117
XIII. THE CAMP AT LAKE TAHOE	126
XIV. A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR	134
XV. MR. LYNN KEEPS UP HIS REPUTA- TION	143
XVI. HOME AGAIN	150
XVII. BILLEE'S CIRCUS	158
XVIII. ON THE THRESHOLD	166

XIX.	MYSTERY	176
XX.	FAY'S TRIUMPH	185
XXI.	A GENIUS IN THE FAMILY	197
XXII.	THE CABIN ACROSS THE DIVIDE	206
XXIII.	THE MYSTERY SOLVED	218
XXIV.	OF MANY THINGS	226
XXV.	FAY DECIDES	238
XXVI.	BON VOYAGE	247

ILLUSTRATIONS

The miracle of sunrise over Lake Tahoe (Page 130)	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
“ I really ought to be taking lessons ” . . .	92
Cristel and Dorothy gleefully read the big sign	162
Then Gordon Blake <i>had</i> stolen Aucar’s letter!	212

THOSE THORNTON GIRLS

CHAPTER I

“ THOSE TALENTED THORNTON GIRLS ”

CRISTEL stepped out of the Naylor Grocery just in time to hear her name spoken. “ All the Thornton girls are talented,—all except Cristel. She’s just a plain little home-body.”

A slight feeling of annoyance crept over her as she hurried out of earshot, but finally she laughed softly. “ I’ve heard that so often that I ought to be getting used to it, but I can’t seem to.”

In a small mountain town where all the girls did a certain amount of housework, it was no particular compliment to be called “ a plain little home-body.” At least Cristel did not think so. However, she did not nurse her resentment long; there was something more important on her mind just now. She loitered along absent-

mindedly, enjoying the crunching of snow under foot, while she fingered the thick letter she had just brought from the post-office. At her own gate she stopped and stood gazing lovingly up at the big, brown-shingled house with its gables and porches, snow-topped. The spacious lawn about it was now an expanse of white, rendered all the more dazzling by the bordering pine groves. Cristel glanced toward an up-stairs room.

“Two more days, and that room will be occupied again,” she sighed. “I just know the old brown house will never be the same.”

She walked up the path, still ruminating dismally. Why had “Nurse Anne” taken it into her head to go back to Europe? She had been much more than a nurse to the children ever since they could remember, for they had only a faint recollection of their own sweet mother.

“*Why* do we need Aunt Dorothy?” Cristel wondered, when she later glanced in at the room awaiting that personage. “I’m sixteen, and perfectly capable of looking after the house and two younger sisters. Norah is still with us, too. I can’t see why Dad insists that

any one else is necessary.” Much as she felt it her duty to love this sister of her father’s, she shared the fears of the younger girls, that life in the old home would not be the same with a maiden aunt who had no use for men, and undoubtedly had very decided opinions anent the bringing up of the younger generation.

“Fussy as frills, too, I suppose,” Cristel fretted, running her hand over the already faultless counterpane. The strains of a lovely violin *adagio* floated up to her from the room below. Billee and Fay were practising for the Washington’s Birthday program in which Fay was to play. Strangely enough, boisterous Billee was content to sit hour after hour, practising accompaniments for her talented sister.

The Thorntons were proud of thirteen-year-old Fay. She had been studying five years now, and was playing concertos and other difficult selections such as one heard in great concerts. The music stopped, and quiet reigned for a few moments.

“I wonder how Fay and Aunt Dorothy are going to get along,” Cristel mused as she hurried down-stairs and entered the living-room.

Billee had gone, and Fay was already curled up on the couch, with a kitten and a book. Fay was the beauty of the family, with her doll-like features and thick mop of golden curls. Cristel ran her hand over her own reddish locks, compared Fay's pink-and-white face with her freckled one, and decided that if Aunt Dorothy were susceptible to appearances, Fay would have the advantage.

"Hello, Cris," called the little sister, glancing up. "You look as though you had just come from a funeral. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering why my hair is so straight, and yours so very curly."

"Seems to me you're always wondering that," Fay yawned over the kitten's head. "Father tells me I'm vain, but I think you're the vain one of the family—always wishing for curls, or apple-blossom cheeks, or something else you haven't got."

Cristel laughed. "Heartless wretch! You don't appreciate your blessings,—talent, and curly hair, and all the pretty things an adoring family can shower upon you. I wonder if you'll ever know what it is to want something

that you can't have. Wait till Aunt Dorothy comes.”

“I don't have to wait until Aunt Dorothy comes,” Fay answered solemnly. “I've known for a long time what it means to want something I can't have.”

Cristel sat down beside her. “Really, Fay? You sound just as though you were ready to cry. What can you possibly want as much as that?”

Fay shook her head. “I can't tell you now, but maybe I will, sometime.”

“Can't I help the tiniest bit?”

“No.”

Cristel sat back and looked at the pretty face in its frame of soft curls. Fay was adorable in spite of all her moods and outbursts. It was hard not to spoil her. Every one did, in fact, and yet there was something she wanted so much that to think of it brought tears to her eyes. Her clothes were pretty enough. The whole family would willingly sacrifice themselves to see that the little swan was properly decked; she had books and toys, friends. What could it be that she lacked?

“Is it something I could get for you?” Cristel hazarded.

“No, no. Don’t talk about it now. I’ll tell you sometime, maybe.”

At this moment Billee dashed in with her usual tempestuousness, waving a paper over her head. “Here ’tis. I found it!” She stopped at sight of Cristel. An inquiry flashed from her eyes to Fay’s, and Cristel saw the signal for silence. Billee placed the paper under a pile of books with an obvious attempt at nonchalance, and immediately began to chatter about the geography lesson for to-morrow. Cristel tried to comfort herself with the reflection that Fay had promised to tell her sometime, “maybe,” and changed the subject.

“Have you finished your gifts for Aunt Dorothy?” she asked. “She’ll be here very soon, you know.”

Billee rumped her boyish brown crop uneasily. “I *think* I’ll call mine finished,” she said. “Boudoir caps are awfully hard to shape, and I hate crocheting, anyhow. But if I leave it the way it is now, it will be perfect for a table mat. There’s quite a hump in the middle,

but Auntie can put a vase or something on it, and flatten it out.”

“That’s probably just what she will need for her round table, Billee,” Cristel agreed diplomatically. “I suppose yours is done up in pink tissue-paper and satin ribbon already, Fay?”

One of the things of which Fay was immensely proud was her ability to “pretty up” everything about her. She was not meticulously neat—(who could be, with harum-scarum Billee for a room-mate?)—but she managed to give everything with which she came in contact, a touch of daintiness quite in keeping with herself. She smiled with naïve pleasure at Cristel’s remark.

“I used blue paper and ribbon, this time. I’m giving her some stationery, because Daddy says she writes lots of letters.”

Cristel tweaked her ear. “You are more thoughtful than we sometimes give you credit for, aren’t you? Do you think you are going to like our aunt?”

“No,” Fay replied, without the least hesitation. “How can we like an old maid who has

all her hair cut off, and who doesn't like men or cows?"

Startling as this description was, it was akin to Cristel's own visualization of their unseen relative. Dorothy, their father had told them, was an unmarried sister of his, whom he had not seen for years. He had been very fond of her, but they had become a little estranged since Dorothy, with her usual determination, had left their New England home, entered a large eastern publishing house, and worked her way up to a literary agency of her own. Martin Thornton admired his sister's capability, but he would have preferred to see her exercise it in some other capacity. Business life hardened a woman, he contended, and made her unfeminine. He hoped that none of his daughters would wish to follow "careers."—But when Dorothy wrote that her efficient partner had made it possible for her to take a year's leave of absence from the office, Martin Thornton immediately replied with an urgent plea that she come to Lakrest and fill the breach left by the children's old nurse, Mrs. Clement. Evidently Dorothy was interested in the nieces

that she had never seen, for she acceded readily to the plan.

“Daddy says that she was always very orderly and punctual,” Cristel announced, “and she must be more so, now that she’s been a business woman for so long. There’s a long letter from her to-day. It sounds friendly enough, but I dread her coming, just the same.—Billee, you’ll have to be careful about your shoes, and leaving tennis racquets and things in the front hall.”

Billee groaned. “I don’t suppose she’ll approve of *anything* I do,” she ruminated with such an air of tragedy that it was comical. Nobody ever took Billee seriously, in spite of her eleven years. It was really quite annoying at times.

“Well, we have two more days of freedom,” ended Fay. “Let’s talk about the sleigh-ride.”

The other two brightened at this suggestion, and the bogey of Aunt Dorothy was forgotten in an animated discussion of plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER II

THE SLEIGH-RIDE

“ Is everybody settled? ”

“ Jenny, you'd better put on your scarf, it's going to be cold.”

“ Billee Thornton, you almost sat on the marshmallow cake.”

“ Isn't this a dandy big sleigh? ”

“ Stop poking straw in my face.”

Both Lakrest schools were represented in the merry party which was about to start on a sleigh-ride over winding mountain roads that had once been pioneer trails. A chaos of voices broke into a sudden shout, and they were off, the quivering bells gradually settling into a rhythmic jingle.

It was not long before they left the houses of the town behind and glided merrily along through pine woods. What a day it was! Sun shining through fragrant boughs and gleaming on diamond-cruled drifts, air sparkling with frost jewels, a cloudless, deep-blue sky!

“Isn't it heavenly, Cris?” exulted Fay. “Look how blue the lake looks against the snow. Wouldn't it be great if we could go all the way to Lake Tahoe? Does it get frozen all over? Think of the grand skating, if it did!”

“Isn't Pine Lake big enough for you?” queried Benny Ludlow. “You're just as bad as Billee. She wants the whole court whenever she plays tennis.”

“If you'd do a little more traveling yourself, you wouldn't have to be beaten by a girl!” came from Benny's unsympathetic sister.

“Billee, don't lean out so far, you'll fall. What on earth do you want a snowball for?”

“It's not a snowball. I just want to show Mabel how to make a little snow man.”

They sped on, laughing, talking, singing,—unmindful of the fact that along this very road, a band of pioneers once toiled, resting now and then, only to struggle against starvation and the lonely wilderness until the prayed-for rescue came. Not all unmindful, though, for Cristel never passed over this road, lovely as it was, without growing pensive at the tragedy

of it. The sighing pines seemed to whisper the story, the ice-locked lake, to hold the secret in its bosom. But now its shores echoed to jingling sleigh-bells and children's laughter. The bright day was not conducive to tragic reflections, however, and when a lusty young voice rang out in the school song, Cristel put aside her sombre thoughts and joined heartily with the rest. They reached the lodge at last, and came to a halt in a flurry of bells and flying snow.

"I'm stiff!" Benny groaned, jumping out lamely. This condition did not last long, for he was shortly sprinting toward the ice at break-neck speed.

"Careful! The ice may be too thin!" called Mr. Sutherland, a young man of twenty-four, who bore the title of "principal" with inward amusement, but with a grave consideration for the responsibility involved. "Miss Steffens," he went on, "will you and the girls look after the food, while the boys and I see what sort of firewood we can scrape up?"

"It bears! It bears! See!" Benny shouted, executing high jumps all over the most dan-

gerous parts of the ice. "Can we skate, Mr. Sutherland?"

"If you don't crack the ice all to pieces before we get a chance," the principal laughed. "Look *out*, young man. You'll go through."

However, Benny's rather too optimistic test of the ice proved its strength, and so as soon as the edibles were set away in the lodge, and the fire started in the big fireplace, the young people flocked out on the lake, to skate and frolic until hunger should tempt them away.

"Don't you skate?" Mr. Sutherland smiled, gliding up to Cristel, who stood on the bank, watching.

"Yes, but Fay lost one of her skates, so I let her take mine for a while. I'll have my turn when she's finished."

The young man looked out over the crowd of rosy-cheeked fun-makers and glimpsed Fay skimming along like a graceful little bird.

"She knows how to skate, doesn't she?" he remarked admiringly.

"Fay knows how to do almost anything," Cristel beamed. "We're so proud of her!"

"And there's Billee," he added, his eyes fol-

lowing another figure, engaged in a terrific game of hockey with Mabel and Benny. "Do you girls always give Fay first turn?"

"Almost always. You see, she's the artist of the family."

Cristel's voice was almost maternal, but Franklin Sutherland restrained his desire to smile, and nodded gravely. "Of course."

"Cris, play slide with me?" interrupted Gertrude Naylor. "You take three steps and slide, and we see who can slide the farther."

Miss Steffens approached to speak to the principal, and Cristel obligingly joined Gertrude to "see who could slide the farther."

"Interesting girls, don't you think, the Thorntons?" Miss Steffens smiled.

"Very,—Cristel, especially."

"Cristel? I find Billee much more entertaining, and Fay is a darling."

"Billee *is* amusing, and Fay is such a darling that she is going to be sadly spoiled, unless her innate fineness comes to the rescue. But there is something very worth while about Cristel, too.—Shall we skate?"

The two teachers crossed hands and drifted

leisurely over the ice. Fay swooped past them, and turned around her sister in a graceful figure eight.

“Don’t you think they’re beginning to like each other quite much?” she stopped to inquire earnestly. “Wouldn’t it be lovely if we could have another wedding like Miss Dalton’s, last year?”

“Looking forward to being a pretty flower girl again, Peacock?” Cristel laughed. “Well, I shouldn’t plan on it if I were you, Fay, because I’m quite sure that Miss Steffens is engaged to a man in Honolulu.”

At this moment, Billee rushed up and sat down rather precipitately at her sister’s feet. “Did that on purpose,” she explained serenely, —pulling off her skates. “Want to borrow these, Cris? I’m tired.”

“She would rather have her own skates,” interjected Fay, bending to unfasten the straps.

“Then you take mine,” insisted Billee. “I don’t want to skate any more. We had a ’nawful strenuous hockey. Our side won, with only me on it.”

Cristel had her turn. There were few things

that she liked better than to skim over the ice in swift, flying strokes, or in a long, graceful glide, while figures flitted past on either side. At such times she pitied the people who lived in the valleys and in the cities along the coast. Wonderful their life must be, down there among palms and blossoms, and in the brightly lighted cities,—but how much they missed! She did not stop until Edgar's Scout bugle called them all to supper in the lodge.

It was a happy, hungry crowd that assembled about the roaring fire, plates piled with sandwiches in one hand, a tin cup of creamy coffee in the other.

“M-m-m, life is just perfect, now,” sighed Benny Ludlow, starting on his second chicken sandwich.

“Aren't these pickles crisp?”

“Wherever did you find such a big box of potato chips? Are they from your father's grocery, Jenny Naylor?”

The little flaxen-haired Naylor girls piped up, “Yes,” in unison, and Jenny added, “My Daddy has heaps of potato chips.”

“I'm ready for another cup of coffee, Cris-

tel, and a piece of that gooey chocolate cake," Billee informed her sister.

"But you shouldn't have coffee!"

"Oh, but I'm thirsty, and starving, too!"

"Starving, after all those sandwiches?"

"I don't think the coffee will do her any harm, Cristel. It's nearly all cream," said Miss Steffens.

"You should hear the story of the pioneers, and then you wouldn't talk about being starving," declared Cristel, pouring the coffee into Billee's cup.

"We all know that," volunteered Benny Ludlow. "I think it's thrilling,—all those people camped in the woods by the lake, and the wolves howling all night,—and nothing to eat. The women made soup out of bark, and tried to cook shoe-leather."

"It must have been a wonderful adventure," sighed Edgar Wall. Having just disposed of half a dozen sandwiches and two huge pieces of cake, he could afford to look at hardship in that light.

"Nevertheless," began Mr. Sutherland, after the chatter had subsided, "doesn't it

make you proud of your country to sit here and think what people went through for it?"

"It doesn't seem possible that such things happened on this very spot," Cristel answered, her eyes softening with a characteristic, dreamy pensiveness. "And yet it *is* thrilling to be here, and picture all the scenes that took place under these trees. It's almost as thrilling as seeing the home of George Washington would be, or going through an old castle where kings and knights fought."

"That's Cristel's castle in Spain,—to see a castle," volunteered Billee gaily, and the conversation shifted to other topics.

Purple shadows began to creep up over the drifts before Mr. Sutherland called, "Everybody ready for home?"

There was a scramble to clear away what few scraps were left and to put out the last spark of fire. In a few moments they were in the sleigh again, and they started off through the twilight to the rhythm of *Jingle Bells*.

CHAPTER III

AUNT DOROTHY

THE big brown house had been scrubbed and scoured until it was almost immaculate, and still Cristel hovered from room to room, nervously shifting a chair here, or flecking off a speck of dust there.

“It’s too bad that we haven’t some fresh flowers, Daddy,” she said.

Mr. Thornton cocked his dark head on one side and surveyed the room critically. “Those manzanita berries are very lovely against the brown woodwork, and I really like Fay’s arrangement of the furniture and rugs. She has quite a bit of taste, for a kiddie.”

“She has, in everything,” Cristel assented. “Now, if only Terry doesn’t get in and run all over everything with his muddy paws. Do you suppose that Aunt Dorothy will approve of it all?” She was going to say “like it,” but that seemed too strong a verb to apply to one of her aunt’s temperament.

Mr. Thornton fingered his moustache pensively. "Dorothy was always a bit old-maidish about things," he answered guardedly, "even when she was a young girl. And you must remember that I haven't seen her for years."

Cristel sighed. He certainly was not very encouraging.

"It's almost nine o'clock, Daddy, and you said that you had an appointment at quarter after. Will you be back before you go to the station to meet Auntie?"

"No, I'll get a bite of lunch down-town. Good-by, Cris. Don't worry. Everything looks as nice as can be."

After her father had gone, Cristel still wandered about, rearranged a couple of colored plates in the dining-room, swept up the two hearths, kept a slow fire in the corner room. She hurried through the kitchen where Norah was hovering about, a good deal flustered—for Norah. However, the pots and pans gleamed in neat rows along the tiled wall, the stove and floor shone with the effects of much scrubbing. Just outside the entry, Cristel stopped with a

little scream, and Norah came running to see what was wrong.

“ Oh, nothing much. But as usual, Billee’s forgotten to take off her rubbers, and the little cakes of snow that dropped from her heels are just melting all over the place. Norah, I’d just *die*, if Aunt Dorothy should come in and see this messy hall.” With a tragic gesture, she indicated the little puddles on the floor.

“ Sure, Oi’ll mop it up in no time. Don’t worry, child, or ye’ll be a nervous wreck before the woman even gets here.”

Cristel was afraid that she should, especially when she went back to the heretofore meticulous living-room, and found Fay’s music scattered about the rack, her violin-case open on a chair, and the violin adorning the top of the piano. Cristel usually did not mind this; Fay picked up her music at such odd moments, but the expected guest was different. With another prodigious sigh, the young housekeeper removed a worn volume or two from a top shelf in the bookcase, and replaced them with two dry, but ornamentally bound books. A few more similar changes, and the bookcase began

to look as spick and span as any in a museum, and about as tempting.

She paused to consider for a few moments, and finally removed a few of the most worn volumes altogether. She was not quite sure but that a modern literary adviser might consider Dickens somewhat out-of-date.

Luncheon that day was a strained, unhappy affair. Billee found herself the recipient of many don'ts, from the unfolding of her napkin, to the last spoonful of pudding. Fay took it upon herself even to criticize Cristel's table-setting, no doubt as a sweet revenge for being scolded about leaving her music in disorderly array.

After lunch dishes had been cleared away, there came another tour of inspection, and then Cristel called her younger sisters from their fun in the snow, and told them that it was time to dress.

“Don't go near Auntie's room, either of you,” she warned, “and be sure you hang up your things.”

Fay's soft mouth puckered up. “If it's going to be like this all the time, I—I'll despise

her," she declared, and could not be persuaded to retract her words. "Just like Miss Murdstone, in *David Copperfield*."

"Daddy's sister couldn't be like Miss Murdstone," Cristel demurred, "and you must remember, Fay, that no matter what happens, she *is* Daddy's sister, and she has come all the way across the continent to take care of us."

Fay pouted even more, but she said nothing, and Cristel ran up to her own little room on the third floor. She loved this little nest of hers, with its sloping ceiling, and the one wide window looking off over wooded mountain slopes to a glint of water where the creek formed a miniature falls as it leaped over a cliff. Even to-day, with the sky a sombre gray, the little cataract in the distance seemed to be rejoicing among its fringe of icicles. Cristel sat looking at her view until she was quite rested, and then turned her attention to rendering herself as presentable as possible to the critical eyes of Aunt Dorothy. The freckles on her cheeks bothered her. Her hair just wouldn't go right, and to cap the climax, the back pleat of her skirt refused to hang straight.

“The only way to remedy it will be to sit on it for half an hour,” she decided, and forthwith hurried down-stairs and sat, for half a minute. At least, she never sat for more than half a minute at a time. There were final instructions for Norah, and the rubbers on the front porch must be taken in, and of course she must go up and remind the girls to leave their room tidy.

The familiar shriek of the train whistle startled her as she sat down for the twentieth time. Aunt Dorothy’s train! Billee chose this moment to dash into the room with her best taffeta frock buttoned entirely out of any semblance to its natural lines.

“Why didn’t you let Fay button it?” Cristel asked, a little impatiently. Would Billee *never* learn to dress herself?

“She’s still prinkin’,—polishin’ up every single curl with a hair-brush. Thanks, Cristel. The train’s in. Guess she’ll be here any minute, now. Am I all right?”

Cristel gave her a last pat and tug, and decided that Billee was as nearly “all right” as possible.

“ Now go to the piano and play that lullaby you were practising, or anything else that’s soothing.”

Billee laughed. “ Poor Cris! You’re all fidgety. I’m not going to let Aunt Dorothy bother me that much, and neither is Fay, you can bet. I’m just bustin’ to know what she’s like, though.”

“ Billee! ”

“ Well, I *am* almost b —— ”

“ *Don’t* say it again.”

“ All right. You do need calming, Cris. I’ll play Chopin’s *Funeral March*.”

She began to play, with exaggerated emphasis. The sombre chords brought a nervous laugh. “ Heavens, Billee, not that! What would she think, coming in to such an accompaniment? ”

Billee obligingly swung into a Macdowell theme, just as steps were heard on the front porch. Cristel tossed her head and stepped to the door. She had done her best. Now, it was up to Aunt Dorothy. If she was of the disapproving kind, nothing more would help, anyway.

Voices in the hall—Mr. Thornton's, and a woman's pleasingly modulated one, exclaiming, "Such a pretty path!"

"She calls a path a *path*," whispered Billee, coming up beside her sister.

"Sh-h-h. Daddy does, too, sometimes. We must go out, Billee. Where's Fay?"

Just then, the door slid open, revealing Mr. Thornton, standing beside a young woman. Her head was bent over a refractory glove-button; she did not lift her eyes until he had said, "Dorothy, here are your nieces, Cristel and Billee."

Even Cristel stood and stared. Aunt Dorothy had dimples! And brown, twinkly eyes, tiny white teeth, and the sauciest little turned-up nose! Impulsive Billee scarcely could restrain a whoop of delight as she rushed forward to hug her.

"Why, you're just a girl!" she informed her aunt cheerfully, "and we thought you were a funny old maid like those in the comics."

Cristel's shocked protest was drowned in Dorothy's merry laughter. "Is that what was the matter? I thought perhaps there was a

smudge of soot on my nose or something. And this is Cristel?" She kissed the oldest niece warmly. "Martin, what on earth have you been telling the children about me?"

Mr. Thornton looked nonplussed. "I'm afraid I haven't been very encouraging. You see, Dorothy, I wasn't so sure, myself, what you would be like after seven years as an efficient business woman."

The brother and sister exchanged reminiscent glances. "I think you will win, in the end. You always do," Mr. Thornton said, and the girls wondered what he meant.

"But where is my other niece, Fay?" Dorothy inquired. "I'm so anxious to see her. She's the violiniste, isn't she?"

As if acting on a cue, Fay appeared, a fairy vision in pale blue, her curls shining like spun gold. She stopped in the middle of her much-practised greeting, however, and lost every trace of desire to impress, in her frank contemplation of her aunt's fascinating eyes and dimples.

"Is this—Aunt Dorothy?" she asked weakly.

“It is, you darling,” that person told her gaily, while the two stood smiling mutual admiration at each other.

Aunt Dorothy's conquest was completed when she took off her hat. Her dark hair was short, but it framed her face in attractive curves. Even her brother had to admit that cutting off her hair had not wreaked such devastation as he had supposed. Dorothy's “bob” was really very becoming, so much so, that Fay found herself wondering if curls were so enviable, after all.

The girls glowed with satisfaction while they piloted her through the rooms and she exclaimed in delight over everything, including Patsy the yellow kitten, Terry, and Billee's three ducks, waddling across the yard in single file.

“They're named after the Three Musketeers,” Billee informed her proudly; “that cocky golden one is d'Artagnan.”

Some time later, Dorothy rose from the piano, leaving the music on the rack. “You don't really mind, do you, Cristel?” she asked. “I don't want to interfere with the habits of

such a perfect little housekeeper, but I always think a piano looks more friendly with a few sheaves of music on the rack." Whereupon Billee winked, and Fay giggled.

That evening, Cristel stole into the living-room, stopped to pet Terry and Patsy who were curled up together on the rug, and then walked over to replace the worn copies of Dickens on the shelves.

"We might have known that she couldn't be like what we thought," she mused, "when she's Daddy's little sister, and her name is Dorothy!"

CHAPTER IV

MEMORIES

DESPITE her bobbed hair and dimples, Aunt Dorothy was a most business-like little person. She kept her room in perfect order, was always prompt at meals, and devoted regular hours every day to the "scads of mail" (Billee's expression) which came for her. And whether in tailored business suit or informal house-dress, she was the epitome of neatness. A suggestion of reserve in her manner made her all the more adorable to the three young Thorn-ton. From the very first moment, they fairly worshipped her. Billee always maintained that Fay stood speechless for fully fifteen minutes, the first time that she saw Aunt Dorothy in an evening gown. As for Billee herself, she might have been seen industriously polishing the toes of her shoes (though leaving the heels rather conspicuously dull) and one might even catch her coaxing out the wave in her hair. Cristel

smiled with a "big sisterly" air at the two younger girls, and then proceeded to squander fifty cents of her precious savings on a jar of the new freckle-cream that Daskam's drug store was advertising.

"Aunt Dee," Fay inquired, one evening, after they had all sat regarding the coals for some minutes, "did you really mean what you said to Daddy the other night, about your career,—and never getting married, and all that?"

Dorothy's surprise ended in a laugh. "Worried, Precious? Are you anxious to be rid of me?"

"No. But it's awful to be an old maid, isn't it?" Fay persisted.

"Not so *very* dreadful," Dorothy laughed.

"Oh, *I* think it is," declared Fay, quite emphatically. "I'm going to marry a rich and handsome man who can play my accompaniments for me."

"And what will Billee do then?" smiled Cristel.

"Oh, she'll be playing concertos herself, by that time."

“ I will not! I’m going to be a tennis champion, and get my picture on the sport page.”

They all laughed, much to Billee’s amazement. “ Well, I am!” she repeated, with a belligerent glance for any one who dared deny it. “ I beat Ben Ludlow once, last summer.”

“ So I heard,” agreed Dorothy soothingly. “ How about Cristel? Are you planning to ‘ set the world on fire,’ too?”

Cristel only smiled dreamily.

“ Oh, Cris will be the old maid of the family,” said wise young Fay. “ She doesn’t like boys, and she can’t play, or paint, or anything. She’ll just stay home and keep house for Father, like that girl in the story we’re reading.”

“ And if she does, we’ll be just as proud of her as of any vain Puss and Fiddle.” Mr. Thornton’s voice was gentle, and he stroked the shining hair as he spoke. Fay’s eyes softened.

“ Well, at any rate, it’s always the *heroine* in a book who is a comfort to her parents,” Fay admitted consolingly.

“ Cristel,” began Dorothy. “ Suppose some good fairy appeared to you and said, ‘ You

may have one wish, but it must be something for your very own self, no one else.' What would you wish for?"

Four pairs of eyes turned inquiringly toward the oldest sister. "Something for my very own self?" she drawled thoughtfully. "Well, I think I'd ask to go abroad. I'd like to see those darling Dutch children with their cute white caps and wooden shoes, and I'd like to go to England and see the place where Dickens went to school, and London Bridge, and Stratford-on-Avon, where Shakespeare was born. That's what I'd wish for, a trip to Europe."

"Would you really?" exclaimed Fay. "I thought you liked to stay at home and read."

"No," put in understanding Billee. "Cris likes to have interestin' things happen, so that she can write about them in her brown journal. She has all about the Donner monument, and what it means, and she wrote all about why the Indians named Lake Tahoe 'Lake of the Sky,' but 'most every day she has nothin' to write about, 'ceptin' how Fay burned the toast, or how I fell in the mud on the way to school."

“Do you let other people read this brown journal?” queried Dorothy.

“If they want to.”

“And if I should want to?”

Cristel hesitated. “Perhaps, some day,” she said finally.

Dorothy did not urge her. “Well, I hope that you will be able to see all the interesting places you would like to describe in your brown journal,” she said. “When these other two chicks become rich and famous, who knows what may happen?”

“I’ll take you with me when I go around winning championships,” volunteered Billee, “or maybe Fay’s millionaire will give you the money.”

“With two such offers, you ought to be able to get there,” Mr. Thornton chuckled. “While you ladies are mapping out your futures, I’ll run into my den and attend to those Burton papers. You can take them over to the office, Fay, when you go for your violin strings.”

“That reminds me, I have a Harmony problem to work out for to-morrow’s lesson. Come on, Fay. You promised to help me with it.”

Billee took Fay's arm and escorted her out without waiting for acquiescence.

Left alone with her aunt, Cristel appropriated a footstool at her feet, and sat for a long time absorbed in Dorothy's accounts of the people and places she had seen. She watched the shifting green lights in the dark blue stone of Dorothy's ring, while she visualized the little Australian gem shop from which it had come.

"The Australian opals are irresistible," Dorothy declared.

"I know," nodded Cristel. "I saw some, last time I was in San Francisco,—dark ones, with shifting fire in them, and others all milky white and gold, like clouds and sunshine."

Dorothy silently studied the dreamy face until Cristel spoke again. "Tell me some more of your experiences," she begged.

"I had one little adventure that *you* would have enjoyed," Dorothy began, after a pause. "It was in the Varied Industries Building at the San Francisco World Fair. Mother just couldn't tear herself away from the Persian rug exhibit, but even \$500,000 rugs grow tiresome to a little girl, and I looked about for

something else to occupy my attention. A group of schoolgirls came in, and I drifted along with them, admiring ebony tables and chairs inlaid with gold and pearl in dainty, intricate designs. I was soon talking with the brown-eyed girl who seemed to be in charge of the display. She laughed when I told her that the rugs and furniture seemed gorgeous enough for a palace in the *Arabian Nights*, and promised to show me things that were used in *real* palaces.

“The schoolgirls strolled along with us while the pretty Persian opened many cases full of wonderful things. She gave us perfumed Oriental candy, and allowed us to handle what she called her ‘bead-work,’—silken scarfs and velvet slippers embroidered in real pearls and golden thread!

“‘They’re fit for a princess,’ I told her.

“She laughed merrily and said that a princess would wear the velvet slippers. ‘Now I will show you things worn by kings and queens,’ she added.

“Another locked room was opened, and I pinched myself to see if I were really awake.

Such an array of diamonds, rubies, pearls, turquoises,—case after case of them! She pointed out the crown jewel of Persia, two immense diamonds encircled by smaller ones, and next to it was a ring set with the most valuable turquoise in the world. The betrothal ring of the Shah held a ruby as big as a quarter.—Rare old illuminated books and manuscripts, vases, pottery, and all this magnificent jewelry,—I shall never forget the wonders I saw that day.

“We learned that our fascinating hostess had come to America only nine months before, in the veil and Oriental garb of her country, and that she had worn her veil and adhered strictly to her native customs for several weeks.

“She explained that in Persia the little girls start to school at the age of six, under the instruction of men. But as soon as they are ten years old, Persian girls put heavy black veils over their faces, and must look at no man unless he be a close relative. She went on to say that when she first came to America, she wore her veil and looked at no man, not even at the President of the United States, when she was presented to him. ‘But,’ she ended,

‘you see that I have changed since then. I wish to learn all the American ways, and so I wear American clothes and do as the Americans do.’

“I was just wondering who this little maid could be when I was recalled from my visions of Oriental splendor by Mother’s voice. I thanked my Persian hostess and said a hasty good-by.

“Even after I had recounted my experiences, Mother could scarcely believe that I had been admitted to the Persian jewel-room. Suddenly she asked me what the Persian girl looked like, and when I described her, Mother just stood stock still and exclaimed:

“‘I believe you’ve been talking to a princess, Dorothy!’

“I took the newspaper that Mother held out, and there, on the front page was a photograph of the smiling, brown-eyed lady. Under it was printed ‘Princess B—— of Persia, who is in San Francisco for the World Fair’!”

“How—how thrilling!” gasped Cristel, with shining eyes. “A real live princess! Still, you might have guessed; nobody *but* a princess

would embroider with pearls and golden thread.”

The hour hand was nearing twelve, and still Cristel sat listening to the chronicle of Aunt Dorothy's girlhood. Somehow it brought her nearer. The efficient business woman sitting beside her did not seem so far removed from the young girl who had thrilled as Cristel might have done, over her glimpse of “a real live princess.”

“Of course,” Cristel began after a pause, “I haven't had nearly so many interesting things to write about, but if you really want to see my brown journal ——”

“I do want to, very much.”

“Then I'll leave it in your room to-night.”

Dorothy nodded “All right,” and smiled with sly triumph.

CHAPTER V

CRISTEL'S JOURNAL

EVEN after Cristel was asleep, that night, Dorothy sat browsing through the brown journal with something more than ordinary interest, for behind the naïve pictures of home life in the little Sierra town, shone a dream that she, too, had dreamed. Cristel, in many ways, was like the girl that she had been.

“Fay played her first piece in public to-night,” wrote Cristel, four years before. “She looked so sweet in her new blue dress, and played *The Swan* just beautifully. We’re all so proud of her.”

A year later—“Billee and Fay are being much petted and spoiled after their Beethoven concert. Everybody is talking about ‘those talented Thornton girls,’ and Daddy is just beaming. Sometimes I feel like the ugly duckling, even though Miss Redmond does comment on my themes. Writing is a selfish sort of pastime, unless one writes for others. I wonder if that’s too big a dream for me?”

Dorothy reread this little paragraph, and smiled an understanding smile over the dream that was "too big." She read on, chuckling over accounts of Billee's escapades, of Fay's temperamental moods, and the trials of the young housekeeper. The little book was brimful of fun and adventure, notwithstanding the fact that Cristel had seldom been away from Lakrest.

" September 4, 19—

" To-day was *such* a day! Nurse Anne was in bed with a dreadful cold, and Norah left on an early train to shop in Sacramento. Fay, the darling, thought that she would atone for yesterday's tantrum by proving what a little angel she could be in an emergency. Both she and Billee had disappeared when I went in to call them, and at the same minute I got a dreadful whiff of something burning. So, even before I had time to look in on Nurse Anne, I rushed down to the kitchen. The smoke was as dense as a London fog. (Never saw a London fog, but that's a good simile.) The odor was suffocating. I jerked open the door of the broiler, and there, in the neatest rows I ever hope to see, were a dozen slices of bread, burnt to a crisp and still smoking. When I finally had the house aired out, and the broiler

cool enough to start another batch of toast, Billee and Fay came running in, wide-eyed and frightened.

“ ‘No, it isn’t a fire. You’ve only burnt up a loaf of bread,’ I told them, not very sweetly, I’m afraid. They didn’t seem to know what I was talking about.

“ ‘A loaf of bread? No, Cris, it’s Nurse Anne that’s all burnt up. We’ve burned her ’most to death. Oh, Cris!’

“ I left that kitchen in two leaps, and stampeded up the stairs, expecting to find Nurse Anne writhing in sheets of flame. But she was lying quite still, and there was no sign of an exploded stove or anything of that sort. What on earth had they meant? Nurse groaned, and I rushed over.

“ ‘What’s the matter? What have they done to you?’ I asked her.

“ ‘Oh, nothing much, it’s just that mustard plaster. Fay put it on, and I fell asleep, and she forgot to take it off. Child, get me some sweet oil, quick. I’m almost skinned alive.’ ”

Dorothy chuckled and read on.

“ October 15, 19—

“ Woodpiles are stacking up, and the whirr of the circular saws cuts in on Fay’s practice and just about drives her wild. She says that the saw makes a chromatic *glissando*, or some

such thing, and how can she practise a dreamy *cantabile* with that horrid chromatic *glissando* interfering all the time? But *I* like the whirr of the saws, the woodpiles, the reddening leaves, and all the other signs of autumn. The sheep and cattle are beginning to come down from the high pastures, and they go mooing through the very centre of town, stirring up dust and excitement. Billee has a dreadful habit of making friends with all the herders. Yesterday she came home and showed us how to twirl a lariat. But it was last week that she did the *most* dreadful thing. Some day Billee is going to see us all drop dead of heart-failure.

“Just as she was coming from the post-office, Saturday, she heard the baaing of a herd of sheep, passing along the flume road. Of course she must needs dash away to see them pass, but that was not enough. She had to follow them, pet the lambs, play with the collies, and forget her responsibilities generally, until it was way past lunch time.

“We were all worried, naturally, and so when she didn't arrive at two o'clock, I went out to look for her. We had heard the sheep passing and guessed what she was about. We were sure either that she was still following them, or that she had wandered down some side trail and gotten lost, perhaps hurt. I was prepared for anything but what I actually saw

when I finally found her, a mile or more down the flume.

“ On a little knoll above the road I saw her silhouetted against the light. I hailed her, but she only made frantic gestures for silence. It was some time before I managed to scramble up beside her to see what it was all about, and my hair nearly stood on end! Not fifty feet away, in the hollow directly below, was a full-grown bear, feasting on berries while Billee stood there, calmly watching!

“ ‘He’s been following the sheep,’ she told me nonchalantly. ‘I’m so glad he found the berries, ’cause the lambs are too darling to be eaten by an old bear.’

“ It took forcible persuasion to get Billee away from there. She couldn’t see why I objected to a first-hand study of animal lore, even when our commotion had attracted the attention of old Bruin, and he stood surveying us contemplatively. Finally he ambled off into the woods, and Billee was triumphant.

“ ‘Bears aren’t interested in girls when there are berries around,’ she said disdainfully.

“ Two days later, Benny Ludlow saw a bear entering the woods a mile above Lookout Point, and we’re all just as glad as Billee that Bruin has given up following the sheep and ‘eating up the darling little lambs.’ ”

At times the journal verged into bits of

description or folk-lore, occasionally a crude, but colorful poem. Dorothy pored long over the little book, now and then forgetting even to appraise it with her keen, editorial eye. It was long after midnight when she turned out her light.

“Cristel has made the most of her limited experiences,” she reflected. “I wonder what she would do with the world outside of Lakrest.” Dorothy was radiant, for she had found out something that she wanted to know, and she had made a decision.

CHAPTER VI

LOOKOUT TRAIL

ONE afternoon in early March, Billee stood on the porch of the big brown house, sniffing the air like a contented little animal, and noting with satisfaction, the unmistakable signs of spring,—water dripping from the eaves where icicles had hung, patches of green showing through the soft wet snow, tight red buds on the bare trees. There was a pungent odor of moist earth in the air. Billee wanted to turn off into the woods and see if the trails were clear, but she knew that it must be damp and slushy. She did not quite know what to do with herself this afternoon. Aunt Dorothy was busy writing; Cristel had gone with Fay to the dentist's. She finally tossed her scarf about her shoulders and wandered off down the road.

Turning away from town, she branched off into a narrow byway and in five minutes was out of sight of any habitation. On each side

of her, dense forests of pine bordered the road, with here and there a tempting trail leading off into the darkness. Billee hesitated at one of these openings, but shook her head. The sun had had little effect upon these shaded trails. They were still deep in snow.

“Anyhow, I can manage the short trail to Lookout Point,” she decided, impatient at the necessity of setting one foot directly in front of the other. She stopped where the trail to Lookout Point branched off. The snow was still smooth and white along it. No one had been there since the fall. She hesitated a while, then slowly, gingerly, began stepping along the smooth white line that marked the trail.

“I can manage it,” Billee told herself, even as she slipped and struggled upward. “And won’t I crow when Benny Ludlow finds that *I* was the one who broke the trail to Lookout Point, this spring?” Benny had claimed that distinction for several years.

It was a moist and slippery struggle, and once or twice, Billee clung close to the side of a cliff while she gazed down into dizzying

depths that dropped sheer into nowhere, it seemed. But she reached the end of the trail without mishap, stepped triumphantly out onto the clear abutment known as Lookout Point, and glanced down over the miles of forested mountain and level valley below. Already the waning sun was tinting the distant, snow-clad hills with fairy colors,—rose and gold, and delicate amethyst. Billee was subdued by the grandeur of it all.

“I wish Aunt Dorothy could see it,” she soliloquized, and the thought brought her senses back to earth. “Aunt Dorothy! Even Cristel will have a fit when she finds out where I’ve been.”

With a none too easy conscience, she turned away and started down the trail again, following as closely as she could, the footsteps she had made on her way up. The descent was easier, for every sliding footstep was a gain. She began to hurry, gloating over her achievement,—the first to break the trail to Lookout Point! Half running, half sliding, she raced along, singing a victorious refrain, and so the thing happened before she realized it.

It was the steep bit of trail just above the curve. Billee tried to stop her swift, slippery descent in time to feel her way cautiously around the dangerous spot, but it was too late. The wall to which she had clung before seemed to leap suddenly sideways, and Billee was shooting off into space! For an agonizing second she felt herself falling into a sheer, black chasm. And just as suddenly, her terrifying descent was interrupted by the outspreading branches of a burly pine which clung to the side of the cliff. She grasped the branches with both hands, held tight, and closed her eyes, in obedience to some instinct which warned her not to look down.

“Safe, safe, safe,” she told her reeling senses. Billee did not know that she was using *Coué*, or any other kind of psychology. At any rate, it worked, and in a few moments she was able to loosen her frantic clutch, open her eyes, and adjust herself quite comfortably in the branches, while she looked up and tried to figure out a way back to the trail. She very nearly let go, for there, peering down at her from the upper branches, were two

startled blue eyes. Their owner was creeping gingerly from branch to branch.

“ Hang on! ” he called cheerfully. “ I’ll get you out of it. ”

Whereupon Billee promptly demonstrated that she needed no assistance as far as climbing trees was concerned, even trees that seemed, like this one, to be rooted in space. A strong hand grasped her arm as she struggled upward.

“ Hurt? ”

“ N-no, only bruised a little. Ouch! ”

It was a hair-raising experience, that climb, with safety only fifty feet away, but eternity just a matter of a false step. However, they “ made it, ”—Billee and her unknown rescuer, and at last they stood on the trail, gazing down into the chasm which yawned hungrily below them.

“ Do you know, kid,—that was a narrow escape? ”

Billee, in comparative safety, soon regained her composure. She looked up into the smooth-shaven, clean-cut face.

“ Did you fall over the edge, too? ”

“ No, ” he laughed shakily. “ I was coming

up the trail, and I saw you fall. Whatever brought a kiddie like you up here?"

Billee removed a solacing hand from her bruised shoulder and flashed a protesting, "I was just pioneering. I can break trails as well as anybody."

"Yes, I guess you can," he hastily assured her. "Suppose we amble back toward town. I guess the worst is over."

He was more shaken up than Billee herself. Back on the comfortably wide road again, she promptly proceeded to recover her usual spirits, and was soon contemplating the stranger with interest. She wondered who he was, and how he happened to be on Lookout Trail.

"Guess I nearly missed the honor of breaking the trail," she said finally. "You came near being the one, didn't you? Do you live far from here?"

He smiled. "Rather. I came some little distance to see the famous view from Lookout Point, among other things."

Billee stopped, dismayed. "And you didn't see it, after all! Why don't you go back? I'm really quite all right."

He shook his head. "I sha'n't feel satisfied until I see you safely home. I can look at the view another time."

Without knowing exactly why, Billee already liked this tall, blue-eyed stranger. She tucked her hand confidingly in his, and looked up at him.

"I'm sure it's very nice of you. My name is Wilma Thornton, but everybody calls me Billee."

"And it just suits you." His smile was wide and boyish. "You don't happen to have any relatives in New York, do you? Of the same name, I mean."

Billee shook her head. "No, I've only one uncle. He's in Cuba, and his name is George. There are lots of Thorntons that aren't any relation to us."

"I suppose."

"We haven't any relatives around here, unless you count Aunt Dorothy. She's staying with us for a while."

"Yes?"

"Uh-huh. She's not like most of the aunts you hear about, though. She's young-looking

and pretty, though I guess she really is rather old, twenty-five at least, maybe twenty-six."

He looked down at her as she continued. "Aunt Dorothy doesn't like men or cows, but I don't see how she can help liking you."

A sudden laugh made Billee wonder what funny thing she had said now. "This is where I live," she informed him finally, as they stopped before the gate. "Here's my sister going into town with Auntie's pile of mail. Cristel, this is Mr.—Mr.——"

"Blake," the man supplied.

"How do you do, Mr. Blake?" Cristel greeted him cordially, though she looked at Billee accusingly. How many times they had cautioned her about making friends with strangers!

"I met him—that is, eh," Billee wondered how she was going to explain. She could not very well tell Cristel that she had met Mr. Blake up in a pine-tree, and yet that was exactly the case.

Mr. Blake came to her assistance verbally, this time.

"When I first saw your sister a half hour

or so ago, she was hanging to a pine-tree rooted in the edge of Lookout Trail, and telling the world how safe she was. I—didn't exactly agree with her, and it did not take much arguing to persuade her to climb back to a firmer hold on life."

Cristel paled. That Billee could have thought of attempting Lookout Trail at this time of year was beyond comprehension.

"Yes, he rescued me," the culprit admitted. "It was very nice of him," she reminded Cristel. Cristel did not seem to appreciate Mr. Blake's heroism, even yet. Oh yes, she was giving him her hand.

"Billee went over the edge, and you risked your life?"

"No risk at all," Mr. Blake insisted. "You have a plucky little sister."

"Plucky, or something," Cristel sighed, in a way which made Billee think that she was rather doubtful about it. "To think of what might have happened!"

"Don't think of it," Mr. Blake advised her gaily. "The danger is all over, and Billee has even forgotten her bruises."

Cristel was immediately contrite. "You're hurt, dear!"

"No," Billee denied, "just a bump on my shoulder." She was rather glad that there was a bump somewhere, for Cristel's sympathy was much more agreeable than her reproach.

"Come in right away, and I'll attend to it. Will you come, too, Mr. Blake, and have some tea? You must be cold."

"Thank you, no. It's getting late, and I must be going on. I'll be going through town. May I take your mail in for you?"

Cristel thanked him and handed him the packet. "There are several that I was going to deliver in person, but it won't matter. They're stamped, and may as well go through the post-office."

"If you like, I'll deliver those for local people. It won't be out of my way."

"Thank you. I'll be ever so much obliged. They're late, and that will save a day or so. But please don't go to any trouble."

"It won't be any trouble at all. Good-by." He turned and strode away with a gallant wave of his hat.

“ Isn’t he nice? ”

“ As far as I know, but Billee, I do wish you would tell me, next time you go off by yourself. Just think what might have happened if that pine-tree hadn’t been there, or if Mr. Blake hadn’t happened by.”

“ But there’s always somebody near to rescue me. ’Member last summer, at Lake Tahoe? I stepped off the pier to see if the bottom was as blue as the top, but I never did find out, ’cause Peter Herbert rescued me before I could even sink that far.”

But Cristel was gazing pensively after the tall figure down the road. “ I don’t know anything about that man,—and yet, I meekly handed over all that valuable mail. What will Auntie think! ”

“ Oh, Mr. Blake’s all right,” Billee asserted confidently. “ We forgot to ask him where he lives.”

“ That’s just it, Billee.”

“ But, Cris, you don’t think he would steal! ” Billee fumed indignantly.

“ No, I don’t, but Auntie will be worried.”

Cristel told her about it immediately, but

ended her confession with a positive, "I'm sure the letters are safe with Mr. Blake, Auntie. Why, he's the very nicest man I've ever met."

Dorothy made no reply, and there was a line between her eyes.

CHAPTER VII

FAY'S SECRET

MR. BLAKE had delivered several local letters, and so the uncertainty on that score and the excitement over Billee's adventure soon subsided, and the attention of the girls turned toward spring vacation. Aunt Dorothy had hinted that she might take advantage of the holiday to indulge in a trip to San Francisco, in which event she would of course take one of the girls with her. Fay openly expressed her desire to go, emphasizing the fact that Father had promised her a real Symphony Concert soon.

"And there are other things in San Francisco right now that I may never have a chance to see again," she added.

Cristel turned from the bookcase in time to catch an interchange of glances between her and Billee, and the half-forgotten secret of Fay's popped into her mind. She had scarcely

thought of it since the day that Fay had promised to tell her sometime.

“What is there that you particularly want to see?” asked Mr. Thornton, looking up from his paper.

“Oh, just everything,” Fay answered indefinitely. “You know, Daddy, I haven’t been to the city for almost two years.”

“Neither have your sisters. It’s really Cristel’s turn.”

Dorothy took this opportunity to insert gently, “I had quite made up my mind to take Cristel. I’m anxious to see what she will write about it all in the brown journal.”

Cristel was about to thank her, when something in Fay’s expression stopped her, something more than the hint of rebellion in which Fay sometimes indulged when she could not have her way. There was genuine disappointment in the blue eyes, and a shade of wistfulness as they rested on Cristel inquiringly. The oldest sister cleared her throat, and spoke as evenly as she could.

“That’s dear of you, Aunt Dorothy, but we’ve all been promising Fay that Symphony

for months. *Would* you mind taking her instead? It really doesn't make much difference which one of us goes, does it?"

Dorothy looked quizzically from the youngest to the oldest. She saw Fay's expression change to eager hopefulness, but her keen eyes saw also, Cristel's disappointment.

"You see, Auntie," Fay went on, "they *have* promised me."

For a moment Dorothy hesitated, and then,—"I'm sorry, Fay," she said firmly. "I've really promised Cristel."

"But she says I may go instead."

"Perhaps another time, dear. I have very good reasons for wanting to take Cristel, now."

An ominous silence settled over the room. Everybody seemed to be waiting for the expected outburst, but Fay disappointed them. She merely sank back in her chair, winking back the tears that welled up. It was more than Cristel could bear.

"Really, Auntie," she said appealingly, "I'd rather have her go."

Dorothy continued to study the two faces. "I've quite decided that you're to go," she

told Cristel at length, then smiling into Fay's disappointed face, "It just occurs to me that one of the others ought to go along, too, to keep Cristel company when I'm busy."

"Fay, of course," Billee spoke for herself. "I'd rather go later, and hear some of the summer organ recitals in the Auditorium, and maybe see the Junior Championship matches."

Fay's tears disappeared in a radiant smile.

"Please, Aunt Dee!"

"Well, since your sisters are both so accommodating."

"You're all *dears*," Fay beamed, suddenly appreciative of the fact that others were willing to sacrifice their desires to hers.

As it turned out, it was Fay and Billee who left with Dorothy for San Francisco, and Cristel who stood on the platform waving good-bye. Mr. Thornton had received a sudden call from Portland. Cristel stayed behind to help him pack, and to see him off, but two days later, she boarded a south-bound train to join the others.

It was her first journey alone, but she was

exultant and unafraid. Something within her found satisfaction in the anticipation of new scenes and faces. She reveled in vistas of lake and woodland, and hungrily observed every hint of change as the train descended rapidly into the foot-hills toward the warm, fruitful valleys.

Salt breezes off the bay at last told her that her destination was near. She hurriedly gathered wraps and baggage in order that she might procure a forward seat on the ferry and watch San Francisco's skyline evolve out of the mist. Just as the boat headed for the slip, a million lights flashed on and twinkled through the dusk as if to welcome her.

Dorothy met her at the ferry building and carried her off through the crowd to what she laughingly termed the "sky parlor," a tiny apartment on the top floor of Mrs. Crofton's one-time mansion.

"Oh, isn't this cosy!" was Cristel's exclamation, at first glimpse of it. The place shone with dim rose lights, and the fireplace sent out a cheery glow.

Dorothy disappeared and shortly came back

to say, "The water still runs hot, so you can have a warm shower if you want to, Cris. Our home-made shower is one of Billee's inventions, but it works pretty well, and you'll appreciate it after a trip through the smoky tunnels."

"Hurry and get into something comfortable," advised Fay, "and Billee and I'll show you what a good supper we can get."

All this appealed to the tired and hungry traveler, and in a short time she emerged from her home-made shower, much refreshed. She went about the little apartment exclaiming over the mysteries of the wall-bed, and the bureau which was attached to a revolving door so that it could be spun around out of sight in the closet. Between her tours of investigation, she placed linen and dishes on the table, set out bread and butter, cream and sugar, and insisted upon making tea in the wonderful teapot of transparent glass. She managed to be very much in the way in the tiny kitchen where Billee broiled chops over one burner of the gas-plate while Fay daintily browned "French fries" over the other.

“Anybody would think that you had never seen an apartment before,” Fay laughed.

“Well, I haven’t,” Cristel cheerfully admitted. “It’s like a little doll-house.”

“Norah would be shocked at the idea of canned peas, wouldn’t she?” Dorothy apologized, setting a steaming bowl of them on the table. “But one can’t shell peas and ‘do San Francisco’ at the same time.”

“I’m crazy to begin ‘doing San Francisco,’” Cristel rejoiced.

They sat down to their informal repast, and the conversation turned to the doings of the day. There was a steady stream of talk until the last crumb of cake was cleared away, and the dishes were washed and put back into the cupboard.

“And to-morrow,” Fay ended, after a long dissertation on the glories of an orchestra which had “dozens of violins alone!”—“To-morrow, we’re going to see Nadia!”

The girls were eagerly looking forward to Nadia, the great Russian dancer. They had seen pictures of her, poised daintily on the tip of one toe, or leaping through the air like a

winged creature. She had always seemed to them as some perfect being from another world, glimpsed occasionally by a favored few. That they were actually going to behold her was just one more incredible thing to be added to the other incredible experiences of the week.

Next day Fay seemed even more excited than she had been on the night of the Symphony. She carried Nadia's picture about with her and propped it up before her as she dressed.

“Just think, I'm going to see her in less than an hour,—Nadia!”

When they arrived at the theatre, the orchestra was already filing into the pit, and they had only a few minutes in which to get to their seats and look about. They were in the balcony. Cristel and Billee could hardly be restrained from leaning over to gaze down on the jeweled ladies and their escorts below.

“Look at that man putting his silk hat on the seat next him,” giggled irrepressible Billee. “Wouldn't it be funny if some one sat on it!”

“Sh-h-h-h,” admonished Cristel. “I wish

I could see their faces. Dorothy says there are lots of famous people here to-night."

"Well, you're going to see Nadia soon," answered Fay. "That ought to be enough."

She relapsed into unusual quiet and scarcely took her eyes from the blue velvet curtain which concealed the stage. When the orchestra suddenly ceased tuning and broke into a dainty polka, she uttered a little cry of delight and leaned forward eagerly. Billee laughed and gave her a hearty pinch, at which Fay bestowed upon her a withering glance and refused to speak to her for the rest of the evening.

A bell rang somewhere in the wings, the conductor's baton rapped loud through the sudden hush, and to the air of a well-known Swiss yodeling song, the curtains divided upon a quaint Alpine village. On the stage danced a group of youths and maidens in costume which matched their sprightly steps in gaiety. The sturdy hero and his mincing rival, the jigging old couple, the lightly tripping heroine,—they were all like figures of Dresden china, suddenly come to life. When the cur-

tains closed on the final tableau, Fay clapped delightedly for some time, and then turned to bestow an impulsive hug upon her aunt, accompanied by the rather doubtful compliment, "If I should die to-morrow, I'd love you all my life for giving me this."

The curtains next swung open upon a cold, blue haze, so realistic that she shivered, much to Dorothy's amusement, though even she had to admit the effectiveness of the white ground, the laden trees, and softly falling flakes. A long sigh in the music, like a gentle rising wind, and in scurried a bevy of tiny human "flakes," leaping, circling, and curveting like the feathery things they represented. Frolicking, playing, tiptoeing, they settled at last into a long white drift among the trees. The music stopped, and there was the complete silence of a real snowfall, for a long, thrilling moment.

A spotlight focused itself on the side, the stillness became intense until broken by a triumphant blast from two silver bugles. A misty, snow-flecked curtain parted, and in danced Nadia herself, in a spangled white costume that made one think of moonbeams danc-

ing on a frozen drift. As usual, Dorothy enjoyed the perfect grace of every movement, from flying leap to gently swaying pose, but Fay's rapture attracted her attention. Dorothy wondered, and finally attributed Fay's enthusiasm to her naturally artistic nature, and the novelty of it all. But Cristel's mind went back to that evening when Fay had told her of her secret wish for something she could not have. She thought that she knew now what that wish was, and determined to find out if her conjectures were true.

"Fay," she began, when back in their own room, they were still chattering excitedly about fairies and Dresden shepherdesses, "if you had your choice, which would you rather be, a great violiniste, or a great dancer, like Nadia?"

Fay's hair-brush paused in mid-air, and she turned to stare at her sister. "How—how did you know?" she asked.

"I didn't know, I just guessed, from the way you acted to-night."

"And does Aunt Dee know?"

"I don't think so, but why do you make a secret of it, Fay?"

“Because—well, you know what Daddy thinks about careers.” Her voice was husky.

“Goodness, Fay, do you want it that much?”

“I want it more than anything else in all the world.”

“You said that about music, once.”

“Yes, I love music, too. But I want to do more with it than to play, or just to sit and listen.”

“I know how you feel, dear. I’ve had my dream, too, for a long time.”

“*You, Cris!*”

“You never guessed, Fay? Aunt Dorothy and Billee did. I want to write.”

Fay sat with her mouth and eyes wide open. Finally she asked, “And you would go against Daddy’s wishes?”

Cristel shook her head. “We must try to win his approval. I think we should talk things over with him.”

“Yes—but I sha’n’t give up this dream for *anybody*,” Fay breathed, with a flash of determination in her eyes, and despite her smile of amusement, Cristel was a little awed.

CHAPTER VIII

CHINATOWN AFTER DARK

THE city of San Francisco always fascinated Cristel. Every day of her week there was filled with delightful activity. There was a concert and a play, but she enjoyed them no more than the simple pastime of walking down Market Street, leisurely studying the big shops, watching the amazing flow of traffic and people. Even as she sat waiting in the ferry building, or in the lounge of the Emporium, she was conscious of some inner sense of satisfaction. Unlike Fay, who tended to dominate every situation in which she found herself, Cristel was quite content to stand by and observe.

“Cris,” began Dorothy, one afternoon toward the end of the week, “Fay and Billee have gone to the park with Mrs. Crofton. The rest of the day is yours. How would you like dinner in Chinatown?”

“I’d love it!”

They went out, and after a little shopping in town, turned up Grant Avenue, whose gorgeous Oriental bazaars never failed to interest.

“ I wish I were rich ! ” Cristel sighed for the tenth time. They were passing windows full of bright kimonos and shawls, teak-wood furniture, quaint tea-sets, exotic ornaments of jade, amber, and carved ivory. They browsed through a little old book-shop set far back in the alley, while they munched queer candy of dried cocoanut and orange-peel. They wandered through Sing Fat’s for over an hour, coming out burdened with incense-burners, lucky Buddhas, and other Oriental baubles.

“ Now let’s find a tea-room,” Dorothy suggested. “ I’m hungry enough to eat two helpings of *chow-mein*,” an exaggeration of which Cristel was not fully aware until later.

They climbed the stairs to an airy tea-room over one of the colorful bazaars. The slant-eyed head-waiter led them to a table near the window, where they could look out on the queer gargoyles and demons which ornamented the building across the street.

“Do you think you’d like *chow-mein*?” Dorothy asked, as Cristel frowned over a menu which was worse than Greek to her. “It’s awfully good.”

Cristel took her word for it, and ordered *chow-mein* and tea. Then, out of curiosity, she added water-chestnut salad, Chinese fruits, and rice-cakes.

Dorothy tried to conceal a smile of amusement, the purport of which Cristel readily understood when the waiter set before each of them a deep bowl piled high with enough variegated food for several meals. She gasped, but immediately set about sampling the crisp water-chestnuts and investigating the mysteries of *chow-mein*. Every forkful seemed to bring up something different—now a bit of diced pork or ham, now some strange kind of sprout, now a mixture of noodles, onions, and chicken. It was like a journey of exploration, that bowl of *chow-mein*. Cristel disposed of nearly all of it, because it *was* “awfully good.” She did not care for the water-chestnuts. They were too reminiscent of some spring medicine of early childhood, but she thoroughly enjoyed

the clear green tea, sipped out of tiny handleless cups, and the crisp rice-cakes were as so much air, so quickly did they melt in one's mouth. The Chinese fruits were served swimming in the insipid syrup in which they had been cooked. Cristel tried them gingerly with her two-pronged "fork," but found the sweetness galling, and so finished her meal with another tiny cup of tea.

"I'd like to try all the funny things on the menu," she said. "I wonder how many taste as good as the *chow-mein*."

"Not very many," Dorothy laughed, "at least, not to an Occidental appetite."

They rose and threaded their way out through a crowd of tourists from a Round-the-World steamer which had docked that morning. Grant Avenue was aglow with red and yellow and blue lights. The crowds were still surging up and down the narrow sidewalks. It was impossible to walk abreast, one or the other was continuously stepping back in order not to be jostled.

No one could tell just how it happened, but Cristel presently looked up from a window full

of amber and jade to find that she was talking to a total stranger! The girl beside her giggled and walked on, and Cristel glanced quickly up and down the street only to discover that her aunt was nowhere in sight. She hurried ahead for a few blocks, and stopped.

“Must have dropped behind,” she reasoned, still certain that a few moments would bring them together again.

She walked back to the point where she had first missed her aunt, and then proceeding a block or two farther, turned and walked leisurely back, but there was still no sign of Dorothy. There were no familiar faces in any of the stores into which she wandered, but she remained calm and unruffled. Alone in Chinatown, after dark! It sounded adventuresome, but there was nothing appallingly dangerous in the good-natured crowd that jostled against her;—pajama-clad girls, many of them with chubby, almond-eyed babies toddling after them—were certainly not to be feared. Even the taciturn Celestials who flitted in and out of the dark alleyways looked too preoccupied to be harmful.

Cristel loitered up and down, first one side of the street, and then the other, until she was certain that Dorothy had gone on home and would be waiting for her. Mrs. Crofton's was atop a familiar hill. Cristel decided that she would walk up Grant Avenue and turn toward the hill. She was sure that she could find her way home. She progressed as fast as she could in the crowd, still quite calm, her only worry being for possible uneasiness on the part of the others. Dorothy would be upset and anxious. She must hurry.

The crowd thinned as she walked farther up the hill. The shops were small and unpretentious. She began to hasten past tiny stalls which obviously catered only to Chinese trade. Americanized Orientals were fewer here, too; placid-faced women with their hair parted in the middle and rolled in big disks over their ears took the place of the giggling young girls further down. There were vegetable stores and butcher-shops with all sorts of strange produce set out. Cristel noticed that there were no white customers in these stores, and when she saw a great, repulsive-looking devil-fish

dangling limp tentacles over a counter, she understood why.

There were few white people, even, in the crowd now. She was conscious of surprised stares in her direction as she hurried on. The street grew narrow and dark, unpleasant odors began to assail her, but it was not until a grinning yellow face leered out of a dark doorway that she became at all startled.

“But I must come to the right street soon,” she conjectured, “and then I’ll just turn off and hurry out of this dreadful neighborhood.”

The next block was dark, and honeycombed with mysterious doors, narrow stairways, and alleys. Cristel was really nervous by this time, and she dared not pass another of those gliding shadows. Turning down a side street, she fled past dimly lighted buildings in which she could see groups of Chinese, smoking and playing Oriental games of chance.

“All streets lead to Market,” she parodied, knowing that she must eventually reach the main artery of San Francisco if she kept going.

But this street was dark and deserted. A wide, office-lined thoroughfare attracted her,

and Cristel turned again, ignorant of the fact that another few blocks in the direction she had been going would have brought her to the ferry building, and car-lines to every point in the city. The pavements hurt her feet, accustomed as she was to trails and rough roads. She grew weary, but hurried steadily toward the aura of light which she knew was the intersection of Market Street. A few stragglers stopped and stared, but she sped on, and at last heaved a sigh of relief. She was on Market Street. But what a sea of traffic and blinding light lay between her and the opposite side! Cristel had been in a big city but seldom. The streaming traffic and dazzling lights bewildered her.

“ Oh, I can never, never get across,” she fretted, marveling at the courage of the women who dodged in and out between moving cars and automobiles.

She stepped off the sidewalk, only to rush back again and repeat the procedure half a dozen times. She saw people smile amusedly. That was enough. She stepped off the curb again, and managed to dodge successfully half-

way across the street. There, a moving line of street-cars stopped her, and for a moment she found herself in the narrow lane between two tracks, clanging cars grinding by behind her and before her. She began to feel dizzy and could not help imagining what would happen if she should fall. In that instant, she was more terrified than she had ever been before. But she went ahead, dodging blindly now, her one object being to attain the safety of the sidewalk. She stepped up on the curb at last, almost upsetting a tall, blond young man who was striding past.

“Oh, I beg your pardon!” Cristel gasped.

The tall young man smiled, raised his hat, and started to move away before she recognized him.

“Mr. Blake!” But it was Billee’s voice, not Cristel’s. Billee had appeared out of the crowd and grasped his hand. “I’m so glad I’ve found you again. We forgot to ask you where you lived,—why, *Cristel!* We’ve been hunting all over for you. Aunt Dee is nearly frantic.”

Dorothy, who had been deserted by Billee, half a block away, now came hurrying up to

seize the lost one as though to make sure she would never get away again, and to shower incoherent questions and exclamations upon her. Inexpressible relief was written on her face.

“We’ve been home and back, and up and down Grant Avenue half a dozen times! I had only the vaguest hope that we’d find you on Market Street. I’ve never had such a scare in all my life! I can’t imagine how I was careless enough to lose you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Cristel. “I was afraid you’d be worried. Somehow we got separated while I was looking in a window. But I’ve been all right, really,—until I started to cross Market Street. How do people ever get used to it?”

There were hurried explanations on both sides. Dorothy paled when she discovered where Cristel had wandered.

“I never dreamed that you would think of going up that way.—We must find Mrs. Crofton and Fay.”

“To tell them that the lost is found,” finished Cristel, “and that she explored darkest Chinatown, alone and unafraid, only to be

scared out of her five senses at sight of a belligerent trolley-car.”

During all this time, Mr. Blake had been standing back looking hesitantly from one face to another, while Billee held his fingers tight in her little brown fist. Cristel hastily made the necessary introductions.

“The man who rescued Billee,” she ended triumphantly. Now, Aunt Dorothy could see for herself that Mr. Blake was a man that one could trust.

They seemed to look at each other an unusually long time, but finally, Dorothy extended her hand. “You seem always to be present at the moment when one of my nieces needs to be rescued,” she said, laughingly.

“I can’t claim any part in the rescue,” he replied, with a smile, “though I most certainly would have been glad to help, had I noticed the ‘belligerent street-car.’”

With a gallantry that won them anew, he helped them into their taxi, and bowed himself away. Billee waved as the car drove off.

“Isn’t he nice? And isn’t it funny that we should run into him in San Francisco?”

Oh! ——” her mouth and eyes stood open fully a minute before she brought out, “He forgot!”

“Forgot what?”

“To tell us where he lived.”

Dorothy laughed, but Billee thought she looked a little worried, too. Could it be possible that she was still uneasy about those letters?

CHAPTER IX

DREAMS

DURING those first few weeks after her visit to San Francisco, Fay spent much time posing in front of the mirror, and practising the dance steps that she could remember.

“ I really ought to be taking lessons right now,” she sighed when Billie came in and discovered her poised on an upturned wash-basin, with a red, white, and blue Fourth of July horn held daintily between two fingers.

But Billee laughed immoderately and told her that she looked more like a funny valentine than like Peter Pan, whereupon Fay considered herself insulted, and went off to find solace in Cristel’s sympathy. Cristel was always sympathetic.

“ Do you think Daddy would let me go to the city to study, Cris? ” she asked, after some discussion.

“ No, I don’t think he would. But perhaps he would allow you to take lessons from Miss



“I REALLY OUGHT TO BE TAKING LESSONS.”—Page 92.

Emmerling, the gym teacher out at school. She has studied dancing in New York and Europe, and knows nearly all there is to know about it."

"That would do for a start," condescended Fay, "and after I've learned how, maybe Daddy will see that it is my career. Will you come down and sort of help me explain?"

"Yes, if you want me to. I'm afraid I can't help very much, though."

This was not very encouraging, but now that Fay had the idea in her head, she was determined to go on.

"Let's tell him right now," she suggested hopefully. "Auntie has just been talking about Nadia, and maybe that will help."

They went down-stairs and entered the living-room quietly. The brother and sister were seated at the table discussing the news. Billee snuggled in a big armchair before the fire, poring over the sport page. When Mr. Thornton looked up inquiringly, Cristel took it upon herself to begin.

"Fay has something on her mind. She has decided that she wants to take dancing-lessons."

Dorothy laughed. "Stick to your fiddle, Pussy Cat. Professor Steiner has high hopes for you."

Mr. Thornton smiled indulgently. "The effect of seeing Nadia, I suppose."

"I really mean it," insisted Fay. "I know I could dance if I had some one to teach me."

A few moments of tense quiet ticked away. Dorothy sat with eyes downcast, wondering if she had been responsible for what she thought a sudden whim on Fay's part. It was with a feeling of relief that she heard her brother laugh, and saw him reach out to grasp Fay's little white hand.

"Dancing is a nice accomplishment for a girl," he said. "You might take a few lessons from Miss Emmerling and see how you like it."

He seemed to enjoy her obvious astonishment, and chuckled behind his paper as Fay tried to stammer out her thanks. Even Dorothy looked amazed, but as usual, it was Billee who broke the tension.

"Say, what a terrible game! I could pitch better than that, myself!" she asserted with all

the disgust of a professional critic. She kicked the green sport page into the fire, and jumped up to romp with Terry.

The door-bell rang, and Benny Ludlow came in to announce that they were having a "crowd" over at their house, and would Billee and Fay come over and play for them, and would Cristel come along, too? There would be sandwiches and a candy pull, and maybe dancing. Edgar was there, and Martha. Martha was superintending the candy making.

"Oh, we were going to make candy to-night, too," Billee told him exuberantly, "but it'll be lots more fun to have a real party. I'll take along some nuts."

After the two younger girls had gone, Dorothy looked inquiringly toward Cristel. "Fay and Billee seem to go out a lot," she ventured. "Why didn't you go?"

"I'm not in the mood for a party to-night. Fay and Billee go everywhere and always enjoy themselves, because they can do so much, help entertain, I mean. But I—I just 'go along, too.' Goodness, I wish I could do something to keep up the family reputation."

Dorothy studied her a moment, and then asked, with seeming irrelevance, "Did you enjoy San Francisco very much?"

"You know I loved it!"

"I suppose you have it all written up in the brown journal?"

"Of course."

After a pause, "Mayn't I see it?"

"Why, yes, if you want to."

"Run and get it now."

Cristel left the room, and returning a few minutes later, handed the little brown book to her aunt. "Dorothy," she began, seating herself again, "you said that you had a special reason for wanting to take me to San Francisco. Did you really? Won't you tell me about it?"

Dorothy nodded. "Yes, Cristel. It was this," she said, tapping the brown journal.

Cristel laughed incredulously, but Dorothy was reading absorbedly. Finally she looked up. "I think, Cristel," she began with a slow smile, "that some day you *are* going to do something to keep up the family reputation."

Mr. Thornton glanced up from his paper.

“ You seem to take Cristel’s journal quite seriously, Dorothy.”

“ It is worth taking seriously, Martin.”

Cristel could hardly believe her ears. A funny little thrill ran through her and set her eyes beaming. It was not only Aunt Dorothy who was speaking; it was a professional literary adviser.

“ Have you thought any more about writing?” Dorothy went on.

“ I’ve hardly dared to,” Cristel answered huskily. “ I love to write about things that I do and see, but that doesn’t mean I would be a success as a writer, does it? I—I’ve sent in several stories to the magazines, but they were never printed.”

“ A-ah!” Dorothy shook her head disapprovingly. “ Remember what I told you! Were they stories of knights and princesses in distress?” she asked, with uncanny insight. “ I thought so. Best leave them to Tennyson and Scott, and stick to your journal until you’ve had enough practice for more ambitious things.”

“ So you think that Cristel has a career be-

fore her?" Mr. Thornton queried, while the object of discussion sat listening incredulously.

"I wouldn't go that far," Dorothy replied guardedly, "but she has talent."

He glanced at Cristel's eager face. "It's a pretty big responsibility you're taking, Dorothy. Might it not be a forlorn hope that you are creating for her?"

Dorothy addressed her answer to her niece. "Within reason, we can do what we want to do. You'll have obstacles to overcome, Cris, but I think you will write, if you want to earnestly enough."

Cristel thought of Fay. Yes, Fay would overcome any obstacle that stood in her path. But she? She observed her father's frown. He had disapproved of Dorothy's going into business, but she had won him over by her own earnestness and ultimate success. Cristel wondered if she would have the courage to do likewise. Both she and her aunt looked toward him apprehensively as he rose, folded up his paper, and started toward his den. At the door he turned.

"Before you make up your mind to be a

writer, Cristel, read the biographies of a few literary strugglers.”

This sounded discouraging, but Cristel glanced toward her aunt, and saw a smile of triumph flit across her features.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNING A LETTER

FAY took her first dancing-lesson from Miss Emmerling at four o'clock the following Friday. She came home glowing with enthusiasm, and demonstrated to a more or less admiring family all that she had learned,—the five positions, balancing and bending exercises, leaps, and two steps of *The Fairy Frolic*.

“You do very well,” her father told her, not at all displeased.

Fay hugged him impulsively. “It’s because I love it, Daddy. And Miss Emmerling is going to have a pageant some day, and I’m going to be in it. Miss Emmerling is quite famous for her pageants. She has given them in London and New York, and she says she thinks Lakrest would be an ideal place for a School of Pageantry.”

“I agree with her,” Mr. Thornton said, his expression a mixture of relief and pleased sur-

prise. "And now, if you will set the table, Fay, we'll see what arrangements we can make about further lessons with Miss Emmerling."

Fay sang as she set the table, not only because she was happy, but because she actually liked that particular little task. She loved to have everything from salad forks to centerpiece "just so," even when they were using the plain, everyday china, and in that respect, she believed in Miles Standish's philosophy, "When you want a thing well done, do it yourself." She laid out spoons and forks and placed the water glasses precisely in line with the tip of the dinner knife, just as Mrs. Clement had taught them all. Even Cristel sometimes forgot this little detail, and as for Billee, she would as soon set a place left-handed as not.

"That's one thing about Fay," Cristel thought, "she does a thing thoroughly, when she's interested in it."

Conversation that dinner-time was an excited babble about Fay's dancing-lessons, and plans for Cristel's graduation in June. Dinner over, Dorothy took Cristel's hand and led her toward the door.

“Fay and Billee will clear the table,” she said, smiling winningly at those two. “Cris and I are going to have a little conference.”

They went up to Dorothy's room, where Cristel touched a match to the pile of wood in the fireplace and pulled the shades to shut in the coziness. Dorothy settled herself snugly in a low chair before the fire, and Cristel took Patsy in her lap and curled up on the rug to begin the discussion of the problems of being seventeen.

“I've been reading some literary biographies,” she began, “and I think that Dad must have suggested them on purpose to discourage me.”

“*Are* you discouraged?”

“Not at ordinary obstacles, but at the one big obstacle.”

“Your father?”

“Yes. I'm not like Fay. I wouldn't be willing to sacrifice *everything*.”

“Well, don't worry too much about that particular obstacle. Your father is not unreasonable. He believes that every girl should be equipped with a means of livelihood, and

he'll have no objection to your studying with that end in view. Naturally, he wants you to be prepared for an emergency."

"Yes, but according to the biographies, literary aspirations are not very practical in an emergency."

"No. You should have some other vocation to depend upon during the years it will take to get a start. How about the *Lakrest Eagle*?"

"I thought of that, but there isn't any chance for me. We don't have enough happening in Lakrest to keep even two people busy, and there are three on the *Eagle* staff."

Dorothy laughed. "We shall have to begin with something else, then. Get all the experience you can; it doesn't matter what. The more sides of life you see, the better. You'll often hear people say that before you can write, you must live, and it's true, Cristel. Jekobi thinks that it is dishonest to write of a place you haven't seen, or of an emotion you haven't experienced. That's a little too exacting, in my opinion, but every writer does his best work when he writes of what is familiar to

him. So—as to what you’re going to do next fall, it doesn’t really matter.”

Dorothy paused, but Cristel was too absorbed to interrupt. She waited for her to go on. “Have you read any of Aucar’s books?” Dorothy asked suddenly.

“Yes, three of them. I love his nature descriptions.”

“That’s his strong point,” Dorothy nodded. “He can almost make you smell the woods, or a field of new hay. I believe he’d be one of the outstanding writers of the day if he would strengthen his character portrayal. Just look at this sheaf of script from him. He uses five hundred words on the view, but gives us scarcely an inkling of the kind of man who was standing there looking at it. And after all, the view is not important to the story; the man *is*.”

Cristel took the pages reverently. It was the first time that she had held in her hand the manuscript of an “honest-to-goodness” author, the first time that she had heard Dorothy speak so intimately of her work.

While Cristel read, Dorothy got up and rummaged through a pile of letters on her

desk. When she returned to her seat, a frown of worry clouded her face.

“ You know, Cris,” she said at last, “ I just happened to think that Mr. Aucar hasn’t acknowledged my last letter, and,” she did not finish, but became pensive again.

A knock on the door startled her. “ Come in!” she called, and Billee dashed in to announce joyfully:

“ Daddy and I took a walk down-town, and we saw Mr. Blake on a horse, and he waved to us. I think he must live around here somewhere. Next time I see him, I’m going to ask him.”

“ I wish you would!” exclaimed Aunt Dorothy so fervently that even Billee stopped her vigorous pantomime to stare at her. “ I was just thinking of your Mr. Blake, Billee.”

“ You aren’t still worried about those letters?” Billee inquired, almost indignantly, and Cristel studied her anxiously.

“ Of course we met him very unconventionally,” she said, “ and it was foolish of me to hand over your mail to a perfect stranger. I was so sure that he was a gentleman, though.”

“And all the store people got their checks all right,” added Billee as a clinching argument. “Mr. Blake gave them to ’em himself.”

“Yes. It isn’t that,—only Mr. Aucar’s letter contained some valuable papers and a check, and he should have acknowledged it immediately. He hasn’t done so yet.”

“Oh,—you don’t really think that Mr. Blake is a man who couldn’t be trusted!” Billee was truly hurt and shocked.

“No, of course not!”

“It was a very foolish thing for me to do,” Cristel admitted. “I wouldn’t think of handing over your mail to a perfect stranger in San Francisco, why should I do so in Lakrest?”

Dorothy suddenly laughed. “Don’t worry, dears. I’ll write again to Mr. Aucar. I’m sure he received the letter all right.”

The others looked relieved. Of course Mr. Aucar could explain.

CHAPTER XI

THE LITTLE REBEL

“ ISN'T it *ever* going to stop raining? ” Fay crossed to the window to look out at the down-pour. The only sign of life in the almost deserted street was the Naylor delivery wagon, going by with water glistening on its sides, rivulets streaming over the driver's hat-brim, sheets of rain pelting against the horse's damp hide. Cristel came up beside her sister to view the misty outlines of the forest against the dim, gray sky.

“ I think it's glorious, ” she enthused, “ to look out at the storm and then turn back to the firelight.—I have to go to the post-office after a while. Will you have a cup of hot chocolate and some toast for me when I get back? ”

“ You'll have to ask Auntie to get your chocolate. I have a dancing-lesson at three. ”

“ Nonsense, Fay. You can't go out in this storm, with your sore throat. ”

“It may stop raining. Whether it does or not, I have to go. It’s very important.”

“Not important enough to risk your death of cold,” Cristel said firmly. “Besides, you have loads of time to practise for the Charity Concert, if that’s what’s worrying you. Don’t be foolish, Fay.”

“Oh, why is every one so unreasonable to-day?” pouted Fay, with a gleam of the rebellious spirit she had not shown for some time. “You and Aunt Dee,—I’m going to tell Father that I’m going,” she announced, a little haughtily.

“Do,” advised Cristel calmly. She was very sure that her father would agree with her own views as to Fay’s going out, and she did not in the least mind her sister’s occasional resentment of her authority.

Slipping on her raincoat and rubbers, she stepped out into the storm, enjoying the blasts of moisture which blew in her face and the wind which whistled past her ears. An hour later, she was hurrying homeward. Half dreaming as she picked her way between the puddles in the street, she had very nearly col-

lided with a very wet young person before she realized who it was.

“Fay! And you with your dreadful cold,” she added accusingly.

Fay’s eyes were hard and brilliant, her cheeks flushed. “I don’t care!” she cried, attempting to pass.

Cristel seized her arm. “Don’t be silly, Fay. Come home with me.”

“I won’t! I’m going to Miss Emmerling. She is the only one who appreciates me.”

Cristel tightened her arm about her little sister and gently turned her toward home. “I’m sure Miss Emmerling appreciates you,” she said soothingly. “But you’d better come home with me now, dear. You’re all wet, and you’re dreadfully hoarse. You *mustn’t* catch any more cold.”

Fay resisted and squirmed herself free. Her eyes flashed.

“No! I sha’n’t go back.”

She turned and dashed ahead a few steps, but faltered suddenly. Cristel reached her again and held her forcibly, while she hailed the highway bus. Fay did not resist, this time,

and was easily lifted to a seat in the machine. The glittering eyes closed and the flushed little face dropped on Cristel's shoulder.

“ Oh, Cris, I'm sick. My head is simply bursting! ”

The older girl ran caressing fingers over the hot forehead, and patted the flushed cheeks while she murmured comforting words. By the time that they reached Fay's room, the erstwhile rebel was very glad to be undressed and tucked away in bed. She lay back on the pillow, her head throbbing, everything about her awhirl in a dizzy maelstrom.

Dorothy hovered over her, pale and anxious, while Cristel telephoned for Dr. Brent, and tried to soothe her distracted father. Dr. Brent's calmness helped to quiet the startled household, but his expression as he ministered to the patient was not reassuring. He was silent a long time before he finally turned to Dorothy.

“ Scarlet fever, ” he said abruptly. “ Have you had it? ”

“ Yes, and so has Cristel, but Billee hasn't, and neither has Mr. Thornton. ”

He nodded gravely, and after a few more business-like questions, he ordered Mr. Thornton and Billee to move immediately. "Of course, they may stay here," the doctor added, "but they run a great risk, and as I must put the house under quarantine, it might prove inconvenient."

In such a short time may a smoothly running household, or even a smoothly running world be thrown into confusion. To the exiles, the knowledge that the fairy of the house lay moaning and delirious in a darkened room which they were not permitted to enter was almost unbearable. There were tears and many vain protests before they were at last persuaded that to move was the safest and wisest thing to do. Cristel promised to telephone every day, and keep them informed of the patient's progress.

Fay was dangerously ill. Even at the neighbor's, where Billee and her father were staying, there hung a pall of fear. They waited for, yet dreaded the frequent tinkle of the telephone, lest Cristel's quivering voice betray what she dared not tell in so many words. All

Fay's little vanities and tempests were forgotten now. They thought only of the gay little sprite who had flitted in and out of the house all day, pirouetting and dancing wherever she went, or of the dreamy-eyed girl whose singing violin had been known to bring tears to the eyes of even hardened old Mr. Eldone.

In the darkened and almost deserted house, hour after hour dragged by while Fay tossed about and cried deliriously for her father. The memory of that last stormy interview seemed to be uppermost in her mind, and she craved his forgiveness and understanding. Fay, in her delirium, seemed to remember only that she had defied him.

A long sad week spent itself at last. Both Dorothy and Cristel were heavy-eyed and pale from their constant vigil by the sick-bed. Now there was something akin to terror in their eyes, for Dr. Brent had told them that he was helpless to do more. Fay might not live the night through. Yet he forbade the others to see her, even now.

She lay in a heavy stupor, her long lashes resting against fever-burned cheeks. She

breathed heavily, and with great difficulty. Utterly spent, she had no strength to exert herself beyond a faint flutter of the lips. She was still trying to ask for something.

Dr. Brent ordered Dorothy to lie down, and went away himself to snatch a few hours of sleep. Cristel was to call them if "anything happened."

Leaden hours! Cristel held her finger on the faltering pulse. She dared not move her tear-inflamed eyes from the thin little face on the pillow. Midnight, and then one o'clock. The hourly chimes seemed like the peal of a death knell, and even the ticking of the clock on the bureau seemed to be counting off the seconds of a precious life. Another hour, and still no change.

"Oh, I can't bear it," Cristel sobbed.

She glanced helplessly toward her aunt, but the tired watcher was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. When Cristel looked back at Fay, she was immediately aware of a change. The fiery spots that had burned in her cheeks for days were fading. She breathed more quietly, —then,—a slight toss of the golden head, a

long, fluttering sigh, and she lay very still. Cristel uttered a frightened cry, and Dorothy was immediately beside her.

“ Oh, Aunt Dee,” Cristel choked, and tumbled forward on the bed, all her pent-up tears gushing forth in heart-breaking sobs.

“ But Cristel, Cristel dear! Look, her eyes are open! ”

There was a joyous ring in Aunt Dorothy's voice that brought Cristel to immediately, and she looked up into Fay's wondering blue eyes. A little white hand fluttered over to her, and the older sister grasped it convulsively.

“ Fay, I thought you were ——. Oh, Fay dear, say something! ”

“ I'm tired. ”

It was barely a whisper, but it was reassuring, and when Dr. Brent let himself in quietly, he found the two watchers radiant with joy. Fay had closed her eyes again, but she slept naturally and comfortably. She had passed the crisis safely. It was almost certain that, with careful nursing, she would get well.

But for a long time she was weak and ill, hardly able to raise her head from the pillow.

She seemed to be in a daze, as though still haunted by memories of that mysterious land into which she had almost slipped away. Her first words as she groped her way back to familiar surroundings were for her father:

“ Did you tell Daddy I’m sorry? ”

They showed her his notes for her, brimming over with affection and forgiveness, and she lay back, smiling happily. But frequently they would come in after a brief absence and find her sobbing bitterly, or lying still with a bewildered expression in her blue eyes.

“ Can it be possible that she is still worried about her father? ” Dorothy wondered.

When the bars of quarantine were lifted at last, and the exiles were permitted to return, the anxious father was the first to be admitted to the convalescent’s room. Fay’s eyes lighted when she saw him, and she held up her frail little arms. The two estranged were reunited.

“ I’ve been waiting, oh so long for you to come. I’m sorry, Daddy. ”

“ And forgiven, ” he added huskily.

Fay turned her face to the pillow and sobbed.

“Why, Fay, what is it? You’ll be all right in a few weeks. Dr. Brent says there is no reason at all why you shouldn’t go on just the same as ever, after a good rest. What *is* it that worries you?”

She did not heed him. He talked on soothingly for some minutes. At last she turned and looked up at him.

“It’s—so good—to hear your voice, Daddy. I thought I was never going to again. For ever and ever so many days, the world was all hushed. Everybody seemed like a ghost.”

Mr. Thornton went white. Fay, little music-loving Fay, stricken deaf! She saw his horror, and smiled reassuringly. “But I’m all right now. I woke up one morning, and the dreadful stillness was gone.”

“You—you didn’t tell any one this before?”

“I couldn’t bear to. I’m really all right now, though,” she insisted gaily, “all cured of everything, even tantrums. At least, I *think* I’m cured of ’em.”

Mr. Thornton blinked, but he was smiling. He knew that Fay was better, but he knew also that she was closer to him than ever before.

CHAPTER XII

VACATION

WINTER lingers long in the Sierras, and there were still patches of snow among the rocks one day in early June when Cristel and her classmates gathered flowers for the school. However, the sunshine was warm and bright, and mountain daisies, buttercups, violets, and tiny starflowers poked their heads up through the new grass in defiance of the white patches among the crags.

There were not many graduates at the Lakrest School that year, but they all had looked forward with impatience to the gala day. Cristel was one of them. At home, she was the honored member of the household. Dorothy had sent to New York for the sheer white organdy dress to be worn on the great occasion. Fay, now quite herself again, was helping with the dainty underthings to go with it. Billee got out her crochet needle to make "trim-

min's," she didn't quite know for what, but hoped they would be useful for some part of the Commencement wardrobe.

Cristel and her classmates spent hours clambering up and down steep trails, venturing into dark woods, and risking life and limb hanging over sheer precipices to pluck wild flowers and ferns. As a result, the school hall was a bower of color and fragrance when families and friends began to assemble for the closing exercises of the year. They were simple, but more impressive than many affairs of larger, and more elaborate proportions.

Billee Thornton played the march from *Aida* with her usual vigor, and the graduates filed solemnly down the middle aisle to their places of honor upon the stage. There was a moment's hush, and then Mr. Sutherland rose to extend the usual welcome to parents and friends, and to present the members of the class of 19—.

Cristel thought he was very wonderful as he stood there and talked about "life's pathway," and "budding youth," and "the shining future." It gave her a little thrill of pride to

think that this man from the big world outside Lakrest had often praised her work. She was glad that she had achieved a scholarly record. That was something, even if Dorothy's predictions should not turn out to be true.

Billee and Fay came forward now and played the much-practised concerto, and Beethoven's *Minuet*. All Lakrest beamed with pride as the little golden-haired violiniste graciously acknowledged the applause and played an intricate little pizzicato dance for an encore. How well she played that, and how she seemed to enjoy it! She bowed and smiled again and again, in response to the clapping hands. Cristel began to visualize a future in which this little sister would smile and bow thus before the plaudits of thousands. Yes she was glad *she* had made a good scholarship record. That was the least she could do.

There was singing, and a piano duet by two of the graduates. Years afterward, Cristel could look back and see it all again,—the room—full of faces (what a throng it seemed that day!)—the loving smile on Father's face,—that impish wink of Billee's just as the name "Cris-

tel Thornton" was read, and she stepped forward to receive that much-prized bit of paper, her diploma. She even remembered the white satin polka dots on Ruth Haven's hair-band, and her own solicitous care lest her crisp organdy frock be crushed.

But ceremonies which involve months of preparation are soon over, and hardly had the engraved diploma been passed from hand to hand at home, and the organdy frock put away for "Sunday best," when Commencement talk ceased, and everybody began to make eager plans for the summer vacation.

Much to Fay's disappointment, Miss Stefens did not marry Mr. Sutherland, but left Lakrest to be wedded to some one else at her sister's home in Honolulu. And of course Fay could hardly go to Honolulu even for the honor of being flower girl at her teacher's wedding. At any rate, Fay had been doing a great deal of "growing up," especially since her illness. She could even smile at the memory of that little maiden who had longed to be a flower girl.

Summers at Lakrest were always full of fun

and adventure. Everybody climbed the mountain trails, fished in clear streams, swam and rowed about the lake, and finished the summer tanned and freckled. Billee was rescued the usual number of times by members of the family or others who happened to be conveniently near when she chose to fall over a precipice, or explore the bottom of a lake. This summer, in a fit of inspiration, she used up all her school paints on a picture of "Sunrise Over Lake Tahoe," done in tones of violent red, yellow, and purple. Fay wrote a poem on the same subject, in which she supplied all the remaining colors of the rainbow, but she spent most of her spare moments skipping about the woods like a young dryad, mocking the birds, decking herself with garlands, and posing beside pools and streams. Cristel took long walks with Terry, or explored new trails with venturesome Billee, studying the flowers and butterflies. Sometimes she went with the older girls, swimming and boating, or seeking new adventures to write in her brown journal, along with a prose version of "Sunrise at Lake Tahoe."

The camp at Lake Tahoe had been a sug-

gestion of Aunt Dorothy's. When the illness of a relative took Norah away for an indefinite period, just at the beginning of Mr. Thornton's vacation, Dorothy's suggestion of a camping trip to Lake Tahoe was a delightful solution to the problems that arose.

The week just before Norah left was one of great bustle and confusion. The pets must be provided for, tent and bedding had to be resurrected from their winter storing-place, to be aired, rolled up, and strapped to the running-board of the machine. Provisions must be packed carefully in the chest behind, pans and kettles, too, for Norah insisted that if her charges *must* "live like haythens in the wilderness," they should be made as comfortable as possible.

Everything was ready at last. Norah stood on the steps to wave them good-by. Mr. Thornton had promised that one of the girls should drive up, but Dorothy, being more used to city traffic than to narrow mountain roads, was nothing loth to let Cristel have the wheel. As the machine turned out through the gate into Main Street, they all settled back with a

feeling of security and a sigh of anticipation for the joys to come.

They stopped in town to stock up on films and sunburn lotion, and to see what the mailbox had for them. As usual, it was a pile of mail for Aunt Dorothy. Leaving the others to wave the last good-bye as they sped over the bridge toward the highway, Dorothy glanced through one letter after another. Only one did she examine closely, and finally tossed it into Cristel's lap. It was a note from Mr. Aucar's lawyer, stating that that gentleman was away on one of his periodical jaunts in search of local color, and that all his mail was being held for him, at his request.

"We have several letters from his publishers," the communication ended, "but as they are being held, unopened, we suggest that any message of immediate importance be addressed to us, personally."

"Just shows that you may as well stop worrying about Mr. Blake. The missing letter is probably reposing in the offices of Dixon and Wise."

"I *knew* he was all right," Billee triumphed.

“ I don’t think that I really mistrusted him, dear,” Cristel said soothingly. “ It was just my natural wariness of strangers.”

They were spinning over a crooked road now, and each curve brought into view wonderful vistas of forested mountain and green valley. Dorothy laid her mail aside to enjoy it with the others. Occasionally they caught the flash of a mountain stream tinkling along beside the road, or the gleam of a lake set among a fringe of pines. Here everything was still green and fresh; there were patches of snow in the higher clefts.

Cristel was a good driver, and more than once, the city-bred woman at her side marveled as she guided the machine around hairpin curves, up sudden grades, and across railroad tracks hidden from view by snow-sheds.

Snow-sheds are roofed-over shelters, sometimes miles long, built over the railroad to keep the tracks clear of snow during the winter. They serve a good purpose, but do not render railroad crossings particularly safe. When the road runs through one of these sheds, all that one sees is a dark opening through which he

must pass. The tracks, and any train that might be racing over them, are completely hidden from view.

Everybody became tense at view of a shedded crossing, and breathed a sigh of relief after it was passed.—They reached Donner Lake in time for luncheon, and ate there at a little table overlooking the shore where merrymakers splashed about in the clear water, unmindful of the tragedy of the Donner pioneers.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP AT LAKE TAHOE

THE miles ahead to Tahoe were lonesome ones, but Cristel at the wheel was glad that they had the narrow road to themselves. The silence of the forest was broken only occasionally by the whirr of another machine, or by a hearty hail from some intrepid hiker, striding along with his blanket-roll strapped to his back. Once, a caravan of pack-mules appeared around a bend, took fright, and vainly tried to climb a sheer precipice as Cristel slowly edged the machine past them.

It was late afternoon when they reached Tahoe City, and Billee proudly escorted Aunt Dorothy to a propitious spot for her first glimpse of that wondrous lake whose sapphire blue waters stretch for miles to the borders of another state. And Aunt Dorothy being properly impressed, they took to the machine again and proceeded along the shore drive, past

camp and villages, until they came to a lonely hut.

“There is smoke coming from the chimney,” Cristel observed. “Can you imagine any one living so far away from any sign of humanity?”

“Don’t you call the road a sign of humanity?” her father challenged.

“That probably explains the existence of the hut,” Dorothy added. “Let’s go in and see what they have.”

An old woman answered their summons, and promptly invited them into a tiny room filled with pine-cone souvenirs and post-cards.

“You looking for a place to camp?” she inquired as she served them cooling draughts of spring water.

“We’re just going to stop somewhere along shore, not too close to the resorts.”

“Why don’t you camp here?” the woman asked eagerly, waving her arm in the direction of the lake. “There’s a clearing down there right next the water, half a mile from the road, and yet not too lonesome. There’s wood and spring water, and Lake Tahoe for your front

yard. And my man'll help you with the tent and heavy work."

Billee's eyes grew round, and even Cristel's regarded her father with wistful inquiry; but they waited for his decision.

"You won't be too lonesome?" Mr. Thornton asked, with an obvious twinkle in his eye. "This looks even wilder than the place I had in mind."

"The wilder, the better," Dorothy promptly assured him, and won the everlasting gratitude of the younger Thorntons.

He gave his assent and the woman immediately called her husband, an aged ex-forester, still stalwart and straight, despite his eighty years. With Mr. Lynn to show the way, Mr. Thornton took the wheel and carefully guided the machine in and out among the trees and brush to the clearing beside the lake.

They left the machine behind a screen of foliage and exuberantly set about taking possession of the clearing. It was an ideal spot, with the blue waters of Lake Tahoe stretching far toward the horizon, a clean-washed pebble beach before them, and low-branched pines

shutting in their little domain and giving at once a sense of privacy and coziness.

Aunt Dorothy surprised everybody with her adept skill at driving pegs and handling ropes and canvas. "You seem to forget that I spent five summers at a girls' camp in Maine," she laughed, happy to show them that she could do a few things other than reading manuscripts.

In no time the tent was up, a fire crackling, and the odor of coffee and broiling steaks assailed their already keen appetites. With Mr. and Mrs. Lynn as honored guests, they sat down to their hearty repast, not too hungry to enjoy the transformation of Lake Tahoe from liquid sapphire to molten gold, amethyst, and silver. The moon had risen before they left the table and grouped themselves about the dying fire to hear Mr. Lynn's thrilling tales of adventure.

But even the cheery blaze of the fire could not long offset the chill night air that creeps up after dark in the mountains. The Lynns said their good-nights and started back over the half-mile of woods to their hut by the

roadside, and the girls set about the business of clearing up and making ready for bed. All except Fay rather envied Mr. Thornton, who took his blanket-roll off into a little grove near by, and prepared to sleep with the sky as his roof.

It was next morning's sunrise which sent Fay into poetic rhapsodies, and caused the raid on Billee's school paints, and Cristel's supply of adjectives. But perhaps Billee's splashes of vivid paint would better portray that orgy of color than any mere words could do. No one has ever done justice to the miracle of sunrise over Lake Tahoe.

The process of getting breakfast was too prosaic a performance to interrupt such a display, and so Old Sol was well above the horizon before the kettle began to steam, and the bacon began to splutter and call the inspired onlookers back to the grossness of mere hunger.

Shut away from the world though they were, they found plenty to do. There were myriads of birds, chipmunks, and other little wild folk to get acquainted with; there were tiny lake

trout that liked crackers and were tame enough to come close to shore in quest of them. There was the Lynn rowboat to tempt the campers far out on the lake, despite legends of bottomless pits whose suction would draw unwary boatmen from the surface.

“But it *is* true that in parts of the lake, the bottom has never been plumbed,” Mr. Thornton told them while they drifted toward shore to allow Cristel to dive off. “Tahoe is said to be the crater of an extinct volcano, and it harbors all sorts of mysteries in its depths.”

“Such as the mystery of its blueness,” murmured Dorothy softly, indicating the pale blue crystal drops which fell from the oars.

By noon the sun was making unnecessary exertion an effort, and so, after a luncheon of crisp, cool salad, they all found shady spots in which to rest. Cristel became absorbed in the autobiography of a favorite author, while Dorothy sat gazing dreamily out over the water.

“What is it that amuses you so highly?” Dorothy asked, after Cristel’s chuckle had broken in on her revery a number of times.

“You ought to read what this man thinks about you critics,” Cristel answered, quickly.

Dorothy’s dimples flashed. “I have read it,” she said, “and there’s a more modern author who thinks the same, or worse. At least he does of me.”

Cristel looked puzzled. “Oh,” she said finally, “you mean Bradley Aucar.”

Dorothy nodded, and Cristel regarded her silently for a moment. “I wonder what he would think if he could see you,” she hazarded. “You certainly don’t look like a seasoned business woman, Auntie.” When Dorothy twinkled like that, she reminded Cristel of the way Billee looked after she had done something particularly naughty, and enjoyed herself hugely in the doing of it.

She did not voice this thought, however, for she had seen Aunt Dorothy behind her manuscript-littered desk, and despite the dimples and saucy nose, Cristel held her in awe. Dorothy had been a constant unfolding of surprises since the day she had flashed her first smile of greeting. Cristel beheld in her more than the pretty sister of her father. To her,

Dorothy was the incarnation of success, for she had overcome many obstacles. Under her influence, Cristel felt a growing sense of faith in herself. She could fight as others had fought,—as Aunt Dorothy had fought. Some day, she would win!

CHAPTER XIV

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

“ I WISH something exciting would happen,” yawned Billee. She and Cristel had had their ice-cold dip in the lake some hours ago, and were whiling away a hot afternoon feeding the trout. “ It’s been an awfully tiresome day.”

“ We *haven’t* had many adventures this summer, have we?” Cristel agreed. “ I wish we could do something a little different from the usual.”

Billee sat up, her face alight with inspiration. “ Tell you what!” she beamed. “ Let’s take our cots outdoors and sleep under the stars to-night!”

“ That would be fun,” Cristel agreed immediately. “ Just we two; it wouldn’t be any adventure if we had too much company.”

“ Let’s go out in the woods and find a place to put our cots,” Billee enthused, and promptly disappeared among the trees.

After some discussion, they selected a place within sight of the camp, but far enough away to give them a sense of isolation.

“Daddy would never let us sleep out any farther away,” Cristel offered as a final argument, for Billee preferred a little hollow some distance off, out of sight of any sign of civilization.

Amid much laughter and excitement, they moved the two cots out into the grove, and had them all made up, hours before bedtime.

They had their usual camp-fire that night, with stories and songs, and Fay's violin playing Indian melodies. But the fire died down at last, and Father performed the final ceremony of throwing earth on the embers.

“Still determined to sleep outdoors?” he asked, when the blackness of night enclosed them, and there was no cheery glow to offset it.

Cristel looked toward the edge of the dark grove where their cots were awaiting them, and shivered a little, but she answered readily, “Of course!”

Good-nights were said. It seemed suddenly very dark and lonely, but Billee and Cristel

grasped hands and sped toward the grove. Their woodland dressing-room had all the privacy that could be desired, and it was airy, and odorous of pine.

“It’s going to be fun,” Cristel laughed excitedly, “though I did feel just the least bit scary when Dad put out the fire, and it seemed to get so dark all of a sudden.”

Their cots were set close together. They kept on talking for a long time while the woods grew dark and silent. Billee’s voice became drowsy eventually, and she dropped off to sleep in the middle of a sentence. Cristel lay awake, listening to the night sounds, the stir of the foliage, the screech of an owl in the distance, the flutter of a bird in his nest above them. She looked up at the clear, star-pricked sky. The Milky Way stretched across like a long, filmy cloud through which the brighter stars shone as through a veil. Cristel had never seen so many stars before. There seemed scarcely room for a bit of dark blue sky to peep through. Drowsiness finally overcame her, and she slipped off to sleep.

She was suddenly awakened by Billee’s fist

descending on her face, none too gently. "Gracious! What are you trying to do, annihilate me?" Cristel protested, fully awake.

"No, not you, just a bug."

Cristel could only laugh, and after she had called Billee's attention to the riot of stars in the sky, she began to doze again. Again Billee awakened her. This time, she was sitting up in bed.

"What's the matter?" drowsily.

Billee sank back. "I thought I heard something."

"It was the wind."

But the silence was shortly broken by a distinct rustling among the leaves. A twig snapped, there was a soft swish among the low foliage, and something had darted by, close to their cots. Cristel smothered a shriek and sat up, but the prowler had disappeared.

"O dear, what do you suppose it was?" she quavered.

"Somebody's dog," Billee answered calmly.

"But there isn't any other camp near us, and the Lynns have no dog."

Billee was already asleep, and did not hear.

Cristel was too tired to be very much frightened, and she slept again.

A warm, rosy dawn lighted the sky when she awoke. Smoke was already streaming from the camp-fire, and she sat up to stretch her arms and draw in deep breaths of the piny air. A bit of folded paper lay on her pillow. Mystified, she opened it.

“Glad you had a pleasant night. Found you sound asleep when I peeped at you this morning. Better get up as soon as you awaken. You and I are going exploring to-day.

“AUNT DEE.”

“Dear Aunt Dee! I wonder if she worried about us.”

Cristel awakened Billee, and the two shortly afterward made their appearance in the clearing.

“Have a nice night?” called Father cheerfully.

“Wonderful!” announced Cristel, for now their nocturnal visitor seemed as though it had been a dream.

Mr. Thornton's expression was quizzical. "Nothing happened?"

"Oh, we did have a little scare. Something brushed by. Did you hear it, too?"

"Yes, a deer, most likely."

"Weren't you scared to *death*?" gasped Fay, saucer-eyed, "out there alone together in the dark."

"That's just why we were not scared, I suppose. We were 'alone *together*,'" laughed Cristel.

Her description of the starry night offset further conjectures as to the nature of the midnight prowler. The beauty of the sky had impressed her more.

"I believe I'll sleep outdoors to-night," Aunt Dorothy decided, as they sat down to camp pancakes with butter and syrup.

"And leave me all alone!" squealed Fay.

"No, dear. Cristel will stay with you, and Billee will keep me company."

"I'll find a spot within hearing of both camps," Father added, and everybody acquiesced to the arrangement. Seasoned campers though they were, the prospect of a

second visit from the unknown prowler was not without its thrills.

After breakfast, Cristel and Dorothy waved to the others who were slipping out over the lake in the rowboat, and turned toward the hut. A particularly wild-looking spot across the road had attracted Aunt Dorothy, and she wanted to get some pictures of it.

“Let’s stop and say ‘Hello’ to the Lynns,” she suggested, “and then we’ll have a long, glorious morning to explore.”

They found Mr. Lynn in back of the little hut, absorbed in the task of oiling a gun.

“You’re not preparing to shoot our nice little deer, are you?” called Cristel, as they approached.

He looked up, apparently startled. “Deer?” he queried, rising to greet them. “Have you seen the deer? They haven’t been around for a long time.”

“We haven’t *seen* any, but something ran by our camp last night, and Dad thinks it must have been a deer.”

“Maybe so,” nodded old Mr. Lynn, waving them to a seat on a fallen tree-trunk. “I

should have told you they might take a notion to visit you, but I thought you were too far from their runway to hear them.”

“ Their runway? ”

“ Yes.” Mr. Lynn continued to polish his gun-barrel vigorously while he talked. “ They go down to the lake to drink, but their trail is some distance from your camp. There’s a doe and her fawn. We call the little fellow ‘ Peter Pan.’ You’re likely to see the two of them trailing down to the lake at night, even if you don’t catch sight of them during the day.”

“ I hope we do see them,” beamed Cristel. “ How pretty they must be! There was only one last night, though,” she ended.

“ Only one? ” Mr. Lynn’s hand paused in the middle of the barrel.

“ Yes, judging from the sound.”

“ What sort of sound? ”

“ Oh-h, just a swift rustling, and the snap of a twig now and then.”

“ Couldn’t you make out the click of hoofs on the turf? ”

“ No, I don’t think I noticed that particularly.”

Mr. Lynn slowly resumed his polishing, remaining very pensive until the girls rose to go. "I'm glad that you're not getting that gun ready for them," Cristel laughed. "I was afraid you had your mind intent on venison for dinner."

"Not I, but there may be another hunter about who has a fancy for venison steaks." Mr. Lynn spoke lightly, but Cristel was a little alarmed at his words. "Better keep to the road," he called as they started off.

CHAPTER XV

MR. LYNN KEEPS UP HIS REPUTATION

“HE doesn’t know that we live on the edge of the woods all the year round,” remarked Cristel reassuringly, though she had her own qualms when they turned off the road to follow a slightly marked trail.

“In spite of all he said, I’m a little worried about the deer,” Dorothy asserted. “Mr. Lynn was a great hunter in his day, and that gun certainly looked as though it were ready to do business.—Look, Cris, there’s a tiny hoof-mark. Do you suppose this can be the deer-trail?”

“That’s just what it is,” Cristel answered. “Maybe we’ll catch a glimpse of them. There ought to be a good view from the top of this knoll; you can get a picture of the lake.”

“And I’d love to have one of the deer. Do you suppose we’ll meet them?”

“We may, if we’re careful.”

But they reached the top of the knoll with-

out encountering anything larger than a chipmunk, and seated themselves under a tall pine to look out over the tree-tops and shining water.

“You can even see Emerald Bay,” Cristel observed, waving toward the right, where the lake suddenly narrowed to a rounded cove as green as the gem which had given it its name.

“Lovely,” marveled Aunt Dorothy. “It’s like a huge, exotic jewel,—a great sapphire, with a tiny emerald on one side.”

They sat for a long time, absorbing the beauty spread out below them, enjoying the woodland solitude, while off in the distance they could see the smoke from scattered camps, or watch a lake steamer scuttling across the blue water like a tiny beetle. A slight breeze whispered through the branches above them, there was a drone of insects in the sunny air. It seemed a sin to break the spell of peace and solitude, but hours had flown since they had left camp. They must return before the others would become anxious. Dorothy took her pictures, and they started back along the almost imperceptible trail.

"I wish we could catch sight of the deer," she said, just as Cristel suddenly stopped and laid a hand upon her arm.

"Listen!"

From below them came the sound of bounding pebbles loosened by ascending footsteps.

"Behind that big rock, just below. If we go down very quietly, we may see them."

The trail was slippery, however, and it was impossible to go quietly. Just as they reached the rock, there was a clatter of slipping shale, and they caught only a glimpse of a brownish-yellow body, streaking off into the foliage.

"He was hiding right behind this rock," declared Dorothy, peeping over.

Cristel was very quiet while they found their way down to the road. She made no comment when Dorothy went on. "I didn't know that a deer could slink off so fast." Cristel knew that deer did not slink; and that hasty glance had shown her something yellow and sinuous. She thought of Mr. Lynn and his gun, of his remark about the other hunter who might have a fancy for venison steaks. It was a relief to reach the road again.

While Dorothy took a few moments to speak with Mrs. Lynn, Cristel drew the old forester aside and told him of their experience.

“It was too yellow to be a deer,” she ended. “It was either a fox, or—a mountain lion.”

His keen eyes never left her face as she talked. He nodded significantly. “I’ve seen that streak o’ yaller, too,” he said. “The deer have attracted him. He’s too wary to catch with a rope, even if there were enough men to do the job. I’m going after him before he gets back to his watch beside the deer-trail.”

“Then it *is* a cougar?”

He did not answer.

“Don’t you think I ought to tell the others? Is it safe to go on camping where we are?”

“Mr. Cougar won’t bother you, ’s long as you don’t have any fresh meat lyin’ about. I don’t know as it’s necessary to alarm the rest of the camp. You’re perfectly safe.”

“But Aunt Dorothy was going to sleep out in the grove to-night. Mightn’t the lion follow the deer-trail to the lake, as he did last night?”

“He might have, last night, but I don’t think he will again.” The old forester turned

toward the hut, and a moment later Cristel saw him disappear in the brush, gun in hand. She almost wished that she hadn't told him. What if he should be hurt? What if he should only succeed in wounding the cougar? All the stories of injuries inflicted by wounded beasts flamed through her mind. Despite Mr. Lynn's fame as a hunter, Cristel felt that she must tell some one what he was about.

"Hurry, Aunt Dorothy," she said, starting suddenly off toward camp. "Father may be worried."

They were half-way to the camp when Dorothy stopped with a little cry of admiration. "Look, Cristel!"

In a sunny spot only a few yards away, stood the doe and her fawn, gracefully alert, gazing at them with great brown eyes. Dorothy's camera clicked busily. She had run off several shots of the lovely pair before the doe threw back her arched neck and led her fawn off into the woods.

"Mr. Lynn has them half-tamed," Dorothy smiled. "I wonder if he has ever seen the wild one we came across this morning?"

“He probably has,” nodded Cristel, but her conscience twinged. How could she tell Aunt Dorothy her suspicions and spoil the anticipated night out under the stars? And on the other hand, how could she let her sleep out in the grove, *without* telling her? A ringing shot halted the words on her lips. They stopped and stared at each other.

“The deer!” worried Dorothy.

“That shot came from the other side of the road.”

“Then what was it?”

“Mr. Lynn.”

“Oh.” Dorothy was immensely relieved. “Trying out his gun, I suppose.”

Cristel hailed her father as soon as they were in sight of camp, talked hurriedly for a few moments, and drew a sigh of relief when she saw him start off toward the hill.

A cooling dip and luncheon on the pebbled beach helped to pass the time, but Cristel scarcely took her gaze from the trail.

“Cris,” said Aunt Dorothy suddenly, “I demand to know what’s up. You’ve been acting queer for the last two hours.”

Cristel did not answer, for her father was coming down the trail. "Got him!" he shouted, "at the first shot,—only fifty yards from the road!"

A babel of excitement! It was some time before he had a chance to explain that Mr. Lynn had shot a mountain lion that lay crouched beside the deer-trail on the hill.

"The trail we came down?" echoed Aunt Dorothy.

Cristel nodded, and Dorothy's expression was a comical mixture of alarm, relief, and disappointment. "And to think that I trotted right up to that rock to look at him! But what a nuisance to have to tell people that I encountered a wild mountain lion, and he ran away from me!"

CHAPTER XVI

HOME AGAIN

THE incident of the cougar did not disrupt the camp, in spite of Fay's ardent desire to "pack up and go right home." Dorothy had her night under the stars, several nights, in fact, and once she and Cristel were rewarded with a glimpse of the doe and her fawn, silhouetted against the moonlight near the lake.

Altogether they had had a most delightful time of it, and were not a little reluctant when the time finally did come for them to "pack up and go right home." They said good-by to the old couple, after Mr. Lynn had gallantly presented Aunt Dorothy with the skin of the lion that had run away from her. Mr. Thornton drove on the homeward trip, and they arrived at the big brown house just at sunset of a warm August day.

"We've had a glorious time, but it's nice to be back, isn't it?" said Cristel, the "homebody," who did not sit down to rest until the

machine had been unpacked, and supper of creamed eggs and hot chocolate was steaming on the table.

With school in the offing, Billee and Fay set about to make the most of the remaining days of vacation. They spent many hours with piano and violin while Cristel helped Norah put the house to rights after its weeks of vacancy.

She loved every nook and cranny of the big house, from the cellar where Norah's preserves shone in tempting rows, to the unfinished attic where the girls often came on rainy days to tell stories or give plays. Most especially she loved the little gabled room which had always been hers. To-day she sat at her desk listening to the familiar sounds about,—the throb of Fay's violin and Billee's too vigorous accompaniment, the rattle of dishes in the kitchen, the tread of her father's footsteps across the front porch,—yes, even the click of Aunt Dorothy's typewriter had become a part of it all. Outside, the wind rustled among the pines and blew gently through the screen, laden with odor of balsam and late wild flowers.

For a long time she sat musing while her eyes wandered absently from the river to the familiar road, down which a flock of sheep was being driven on its way to the valley, after a summer in mountain pastures.

“Cristel!” Billee’s voice from the hall below. “If you’re going to see Janet and the others off on the five-thirty train, you’d better hurry. It’s after five, now.”

“Oh!” Cristel jumped up, startled from her reverie. “Thank you, Billee. I shouldn’t want to miss seeing them off.”

She ran quickly down-stairs. “I’ll be back by six,” she told her father, “unless you want me to stop in town for something.”

“No; better be on time for dinner.”

“I will,” Cristel promised as she flew down the steps.

She was half-way up Main Street before the dust raised by the passing sheep had settled. A number of people had already gathered at the railroad station when she arrived there, hot and breathless.

Out of this year’s class, three were going on to the University. A little group revolved

about them, giving parting admonitions and extracting promises.

“Here’s Cris!” called Janet. “I knew you’d be along to wave a hankie at us. I wish you were going on to college.”

Notwithstanding her high scholarship, Cristel had never been particularly eager to go to college. But now, in the face of her uncertainty over the future, she almost wished that she could join the trio who were looking forward to four happy years of work and play. To-day, she envied them.

“I do wish you were going,” Janet repeated.

“So say we all,” added George, no less sincerely.

“You really ought to change your mind,” Edith Edwards put in. “With the three of us in Berkeley, and the rest of the class scattered all the way from Reno to Los Angeles, whatever will you do up here in Lakrest all by yourself?”

“I won’t be quite all by myself,” Cristel objected with a smile.

A peremptory toot from the little train sent

everybody scurrying to get the travelers aboard before the signal for departure.

“ Good-by! Don't forget to write! ” Calls, smiles, tears! The train gained speed and disappeared in the woods bearing off another contingent of Lakrest young people.

Cristel was not the only one who turned away, sober-miened. Every year it was the same. One or two Lakrest graduates might go into a local store or bank; a few of the girls might stay at home, but an appalling number always left for the cities to take positions or to go farther with the education that would eventually lead to work in larger towns than Lakrest.

The significance of it had never particularly bothered Cristel until now, but every step seemed to bring it more forcibly to her mind. She was passing the gray stone house of the Nestors, built to stand for generations. Now it was empty and deserted; it had been that way ever since Emilie Nestor had married an engineer and gone to South America, taking her father with her. On the next corner was the snug little cottage that had so often been

a scene for parties and merrymakings. Now it was just a lonesome refuge for the two old people whose children were out in the world seeking their fortunes. At intervals all along the way were neglected gardens and boarded up houses telling a mute story of what had been.

“And some day it will be the same with the brown house. Aunt Dorothy will be gone, Fay may be studying in the city, then Billee and her Physical Culture School, and I — O dear, we can’t *all* go away and leave Daddy alone. Our home will just die!” She was turning in at the gate now, and her eyes were full of love for the rambling old home,—love, and a queer, panicky fear.

“You look like the professional mourner in *Oliver Twist*,” jibed Billee, when Cristel entered the dining-room. “I didn’t know you liked Janet so much, or is it George?”

“Not getting lonesome already, are you?” queried her father anxiously.

“No, but I don’t like good-bys; let’s talk about something else.”

“The pageant,” suggested Fay promptly.

“Ruth Wentworth is writing it. It’s going to be a lovely Indian legend with a natural background. It’s so thrilling building the music and dances around the theme.”

“The future pageant artist speaks,” smiled Mr. Thornton. “But as for the immediate future, what is it to be, Cristel? Business college in San Francisco?”

There were more or less suppressed gasps of astonishment around the table, much to his amusement. Cristel’s answer was prompt.

“It’s to be home, right now; but I’d like to study shorthand and typing. Miss Courier, in the Express Office, takes one or two students every year.”

Both father and aunt beamed approval. “I’m glad to see that you’re not mad to dash off to the city, right away,” said the one.

“That’s a very good idea, Cris,” began the other. “Every writer should be equipped with shorthand and typing, and then, should it be necessary to support yourself while you’re waiting for these ornery editor people,”—this, with a twinkle—“to recognize your ability, you will have something practical to depend upon.”

No one but Aunt Dorothy was quite ready to take Cristel's writing seriously, not even Cristel, herself. Even now, she wished that Dorothy would not speak so confidently about it. It was embarrassing, in the face of her younger sisters' assured talent, and her father's wary skepticism. She would win some day, of course, but it was not in her nature to discuss a battle still unfought.

"Everybody seems to type nowadays," she said. "Please pass the butter, Fay,—no, the sweet butter."

CHAPTER XVII

BILLEE'S CIRCUS

BILLEE had spent the entire evening carefully puncturing the paper tickets with pin-pricks, because "Circuses always have perforated tickets."

Next morning she waited impatiently until Dorothy had slipped her breakfast napkin into its ring. "May I be excused now, Auntie?" she begged. "Fay will take half an hour to finish that piece of toast, cutting it up into strips that way. And I'm in an awful hurry, really. The circus is this afternoon, and I have to rehearse. I'm to be the animated rag-bag."

"Go ahead," laughed Dorothy. "There are some things on my trunk that might add to your costume."

"O goodie, thank you. Good-by." She stopped at the door. "Are you sure that you don't want to be the snake-charmer, Fay? You could do an Oriental dance, you know."

Benny can play *Song of India* on the harmonica."

Fay's eyebrows arched contemptuously. "Such child's play, Billee! Do you think I'd cheapen my dancing that way?"

"Well," Billee paused doubtfully. "It will be fun. You won't let me have Patsy, either? She'd make a lovely lion,—just the right color, even if she isn't big enough."

"No," replied Fay firmly. "Why don't you take the Three Musketeers? They're your own."

"I thought of them. 'Member the trained nightingales we saw one time? But the ducks would be too hard to manage, and besides, nightingales don't quack. Cris says I can have Terry. He's going to be the trained seal. Good-by." Billee was half-way up the stairs before she finished.

"What are you others going to do with the day?" queried Aunt Dorothy.

"I have my music lesson at ten," responded Fay, "and I'm going to Miss Emmerling's for lunch. We're going to talk about the pageant."

“No wonder Billee’s circus failed to tempt,” replied Dorothy. “How about you, Cris?”

“Nothing special. I was going to dust your room first. You’ve been so busy lately.”

“What a dear! I’ll appreciate it, for I *must* get those letters off. Afterward, would you like to walk down the highway a bit and have lunch at the little Swiss tea-room? I’ve never been there.”

“Neither have I,” beamed Cristel. “I’d love it.”

It was nearly twelve o’clock before Dorothy and Cristel started along the highway toward the little chalêt perched high on a crag above the road. Late as the season was, the outdoor gallery was well filled, and Cristel and her aunt took the last available table on the porch overlooking a vista like a bit of Switzerland. Cristel thoroughly enjoyed the dainty luncheon, and they lingered long over the tiny cakes and tea which finished the meal.

“It’s a joy to take you about,” laughed Dorothy. “You get such a tremendous amount of fun out of it.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” answered Cristel.

“It is fun seeing things and going to places. Look, Aunt Dee, isn't that a lovely tapestry? Who would ever think of finding that in the wilds of the Sierras?”

“French,—to heighten the effect. I'm not at all sure that I like the idea of a Swiss chalêt in the Sierras. A log cabin would be more in keeping. French tapestries don't seem to fit, somehow. By the way, Cristel, did you put my Japanese batik away? It's perfectly all right to use it over my trunk. That won't hurt it, and it's ideal for the purpose. I can't stand having a bare trunk around.”

Cristel did not answer immediately. “Why, I don't remember having removed the scarf from your trunk. Was it there this morning, before I dusted?”

“Well, wasn't it? I don't remember. Perhaps I put it away myself. Shall we go? I want to shop down-town.”

They loitered along the highway, stopping in town to make a few purchases. “And now, we have the rest of the afternoon to ourselves. We may as well make a complete holiday, Cris. What shall we do,—movies, or Billee's circus?”

Cristel gave her a quick glance. "I believe you'd *like* to go to Billee's circus," she accused.

"I really should," Dorothy confessed, without hesitation. "Shall we?"

Cristel answered by turning in the direction of the Ludlows'. Signs of carnival were apparent all along the fence, where flags, colored streamers, and balloons danced in the breeze. Cristel and Dorothy gleefully read the big sign over the gate.

"BIG CIRCUSS

"ADMISSION—2 CENTS

"ADULTS—5 CENTS

" $\frac{1}{2}$ THE PROSEEDS FOR CHARUTY."

The newcomers were uproariously welcomed to the rickety "grandstand," where, ensconced in the midst of a bevy of young Lakrest, Gordon Blake sat beaming!

"He bought out all the b'loons and hot dogs for us, and ordered an extra gallon of ice-cream," a near-by youth informed Aunt Dorothy in a whisper. "He's great!"

Dorothy could not help responding to Mr. Blake's frank smile. He cleared a place for



CRISTEL AND DOROTHY GLEEFULLY READ THE BIG SIGN.

her and Cristel, and before many minutes had passed, the three "adults" were having as glorious a time as the youngest toddler who squealed with delight over the red balloon just presented to her by Mr. Blake. Babies crawled over them; older boys and girls of all sizes squirmed to get close to them; it was impossible to be formal. Gordon Blake and Dorothy Thornton were like two children as they watched a marvelously "tattooed" lady doing stunts in the sawdust ring, while Martha Ludlow dispensed ice-cream and lemonade.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our next feature will be the snake-charmer."

Dorothy wondered what Fay would have said to the gorgeous green and gold of Jenny Naylor's costume, and the jointed snake from the ten-cent store. But she applauded feelingly.

"And now, our remarkable trained elephant," announced the ring-master impressively, only to be rudely interrupted by a shout from behind scenes.

"No, we can't have the elephant. He came apart."

“Due to a slight change in arrangements, the strong man will be next.”

They were all there, the clown, the wild man, the trained seal (slightly off color, as Billee's old green sweater tied on with a red ribbon was Terry's only disguise).

“The animated rag-bag.” Both Dorothy and Cristel applauded extra well,—until Billee appeared. Then Dorothy's jaw dropped, for there, among Billee's rags and tatters, trailing in the dust, was the Japanese batik!

“Billee!” Cristel gasped, but Dorothy silenced her.

“Not now. Get the scarf as soon as she has finished. I'll talk to her later.”

Cristel had never heard that tone in Dorothy's voice. She wished that they had not come to the circus. Immediately after Billee's act, Cristel procured the scarf, confining her scolding to a few tense words.

“Is she really angry?” Billee asked remorsefully. “O dear! I didn't know what it was. She said to take the things on her trunk.”

“Yes, but Billee, your own common sense would tell you ——” she stopped and shook

her head. Sometimes it seemed as though Billee did not have any common sense.

A few moments later, she put the ruffled scarf into Dorothy's hand. "I'm ever so sorry, and Billee is, too. I hope it's not much damaged."

"Oh, the scarf?" Dorothy had been talking to Mr. Blake, and had already forgotten. To Cristel's amazement, the incident was scarcely mentioned again.

"She really was vexed, at first," Cristel confided to Billee, when later, they turned out of the Ludlow gate. "If it hadn't been for Mr. Blake, I don't think she'd have forgiven you so soon. That scarf is *very* valuable, Billee."

But Billee was absorbed in contemplation of the couple just ahead. "Cris," she said suddenly, "I think that's all bosh about Aunt Dorothy's not liking men."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE THRESHOLD

CRISTEL was lonesome. School had begun, and Fay and Billee being absent most of the day, the big house seemed weirdly grave and silent. Even Dorothy was away a great deal now, to conventions and shopping expeditions in Sacramento, bridge luncheons and board meetings in Lakrest. More than once, she had been the guest of Mrs. Brandon, wife of the *Eagle* editor. At dinner there, she had been formally presented to Mr. Gordon Blake, much to Billee's infinite relief. Not that the matter of being properly introduced ever troubled Billee, but Aunt Dorothy was "funny" about such things.

All this left Cristel much to herself, and for the first time in her life, she knew what it was to be lonely. She missed school and its associations, though she had few really intimate friends.

She spent long, tedious hours at Dorothy's

typewriter, after which the waste-basket would be filled with sheets of exercises.

“I don’t see how *any* one ever learns to type,” she sighed to-day, rubbing her aching head while she scanned a sheet of paper in which the capitals danced tipsily above the other letters, spaces appeared where they should not and did not appear where they should, letters tangled themselves up in the most amazing combinations.

She yawned and stretched her cramped muscles, then hastily slipped the cover over the machine and went up to her own room to dream over her view. A lazy breeze, heavy with the odor of sunned pines caressed her flushed face. She leaned elbows on the sill and looked out over the stretch of woodland and meadow. How quiet and peaceful it seemed, and how she loved it! Yet she was restless and lonesome. Almost, she regretted her decision to remain in Lakrest while her classmates went out into the world.

“I wonder what’s the matter with me lately,” she mused uneasily.

She finally got up and went out, sauntering

down Main Street to the drug store. Kenneth Chanslor, another classmate, served her the strawberry ice-cream soda with which she whiled away a little time.

“Seems kind o’ dead around here when school’s in, and we’re out, doesn’t it?” queried Kenneth dolefully. “Sometimes I even wish I were back.”

“*I* do often,” Cristel answered sociably. “But I suppose we’ll get used to it. We can’t go to school forever.”

“Well, I should hope not. I miss the fellows, but not the Geometry and Civics so much. You planning to do anything special?”

“I don’t know; I want to do *something*.”

“Funny, all the girls do now. But there isn’t much around Lakrest. Look what I’m doing!”

“I shouldn’t mind leaving here if I knew I could come back, but so many don’t come back.”

“You can’t very well, if your work is somewhere else.”

Kenneth polished glasses while Cristel sipped the last syrupy drops. “I guess the

trouble with me," she decided, "is that I want to eat my cake and have it, too. I want to go away, and yet I don't want the old brown house to grow empty like so many others."

"Well, you'll have to go into Larson's and sell ribbons or something. The one or two library or office jobs around here are being held so fast that there's not a chance at them until somebody dies."

"At any rate, I've enough to do with my typing and shorthand for a while.—Is this the new *Journal*? I'll take one."

She tucked the magazine under her arm and turned toward Lookout Trail. There was a short story of Aucar's in the *Journal*. Cristel wanted to read it on Lookout Point, where she could glance up from the magazine and see a wild mountain scene such as Aucar liked to describe. The trail was an easy climb at this time of year, and she came out on Lookout Point, untired by the walk, found a sheltered spot, and sat down on a carpet of pine needles to drink in the ever-wonderful view. It was just the place to read one of Aucar's stories. She turned to the front pages

of the magazine and became absorbed in a tale of early pioneer days.

The shadows were long, and the chill of a September evening was creeping up before Cristel aroused herself at the end of the story.

“His descriptions are glorious,” she exulted, rising to start down the trail again, “and he knows the Sierras. That cliff from which the Indians kept their watch might even be Look-out Point.”

There not being any snow on the ground, it was comparatively safe for Cristel to descend the trail with half her attention on adjectives and descriptive phrases. She reached the road without emulating Billee's example of the previous winter. No sooner home than she ran up to her room to dash down a few notes.

“There,” she finished with satisfaction, “I'll copy it in my journal after dinner, and get a picture of the view to-morrow.”

But she did not write in her brown journal after dinner. The Aucar story had intrigued her imagination, and she sat for a long time, dreaming tales of her own. Suddenly her eyes lighted with resolution.

“ I wonder if I dare,” she breathed.

A long minute ticked itself away, and then, “ It will do no harm,” she decided.

The journal was pushed aside in favor of a thick scratch-pad. Cristel filled her fountain pen and began to write rapidly. Sounds of Fay’s violin, Martha Ludlow’s high-pitched laughter, general merriment from below-stairs failed to disturb her. She wrote absorbedly until nearly midnight, and finally stopped with a sigh of satisfaction. Her fingers were cramped, her back stiff, but she had finished a story, a whole story. To-morrow she would revise and type it, and then, “ I wonder if I dare,” she said again.

It took more than one day for Cristel to type her story of the Indian maiden, but after a valiant struggle and many stops for erasures, the deed was accomplished. She slipped the manuscript into a long envelope and hurried down to the post-office, fearful lest she lose her courage. She had a funny little moment of panic after the long envelope had slipped through the slot.

“ Perhaps I should have told Aunt Doro-

thy," she ruminated, on the way home, "but then, it will be better to surprise her."

Long days of anxious suspense followed, days in which Cristel dreamed alternately of what it would mean to see her story in print, and of what she would do with the money the editor would send her. This story was much better than the others she had written; of course it would be accepted immediately.

The days grew into a monotonous round which always began with the hurry and bustle of getting Billee and Fay off to school, and ended with an hour or more of solitary scribbling in her own little room. In between there was housework, trips down-town, study, occasionally a walk with Mabel Mallory or some other of the few lately graduated students of Lakrest High School. Aunt Dorothy was an ideal companion in her free hours, and Cristel enjoyed her long, delightful talks about the things she had seen, the interesting people she had met.

"Auntie, I'm going to miss you so, when you're gone," Cristel told her one day, when they were walking toward town. It was the

first time that any one had definitely spoken of her going, and for a moment Dorothy was silent.

“I’ll be with you six months longer, and after that ——”

“After that,” echoed Cristel dolefully. “Goodness, I just hate to think of your being away off somewhere where we can’t ever get together for walks and talks.”

“Let’s *not* think of it now. Time plays strange tricks with our expectations, and—there may be a little surprise in store for some one.”

Cristel glanced up inquiringly, but Dorothy would volunteer no further information, and only dimpled mischievously when her niece’s curiosity developed into real excitement.

“Not now, I’m not sure about the surprise, just yet. Try to forget about it; I didn’t mean to tell you, really. Run, open the mail-box while I stamp these letters.”

Cristel slipped the key into the family box, and immediately did forget her curiosity about Aunt Dorothy’s surprise. On top of the pile of mail was a long, thick envelope bearing

Cristel's own name. That couldn't be a letter, and yet it bore the stamp of the magazine to which she had sent her manuscript, over two weeks ago. She fingered it uncertainly, and then, seeing that Dorothy was still engrossed in her task, she quickly tore open the envelope and found—her manuscript! They had sent it back, with no word save a stereotyped, printed slip. Cristel gulped. Of course, she knew that even famous authors had had their early work returned in just this way, but somehow, this did not reconcile her to the disappointment. Not a word of encouragement! Then her work was not worth printing, she was a failure!

It would have been impossible to conceal her feelings from Aunt Dorothy, even if she had wished to. Strangely, she did not. She wanted to show Dorothy that curtly worded slip, to tell her that she had been entirely wrong in her judgment. She could not write; she was not one of "the talented Thorntons" after all.

Aunt Dorothy understood immediately. Cristel did not have to make embarrassing ex-

planations. When she ended her tale of woe with a sorrowful, "You see, it wasn't even worth printing," Dorothy took the script from her and glanced through it hurriedly.

"No, it isn't worth printing," she said with gentle candor, "but it has its points, and no doubt was very good practice. I don't think that fiction is your line, Cris."

"But it was you who told me I could write!"

"You can. If you survive your early discouragement you will write some day, but I don't think that it will be fiction."

"What then?" dismally. "Recipes for home cooking? I've won prizes with them, but they are not *literature*."

"No," laughed Aunt Dorothy. How could she be so light-hearted over it all? "As far as I can see, the Fates point consistently in one direction. If you'll only just wait a while, you'll find it out for yourself."

Cristel sighed. Dorothy seemed to run to cryptic remarks to-day. She was evidently very gay about something. It was no time to talk of failure to her.

CHAPTER XIX

MYSTERY

AN hour later, Dorothy called, and Cristel looked in to see her frowning over a bank statement. "Do you remember what day we were in San Francisco?"

"What day! We were there a whole week."

"Yes, I mean what day was it that we met Mr. Blake?"

"Oh, let me see,—we were there the second week in April, and we met him ——"

"The second week in April?" interrupted Dorothy, furling the leaves of a calendar. "This check was cashed that same week."

Cristel wondered what that check had to do with their visit to San Francisco, but suddenly she remembered. Surely Aunt Dorothy was not doubting Mr. Blake *now*. Why, he had been at the house only last week, and they had all had a delightful chat about books and things.

There was some mystery about Mr. Blake.

Notwithstanding his delightful company, he had an air of restraint, and every now and then would check himself in the telling of some personal anecdote. Nobody seemed to know very much about him, except that he was in the Sierras for his health, and that he lived alone in a cabin just over the divide. But his genial friendliness had won him a place in the heart of the neighborhood, and he was almost as well known and liked as was Dorothy Thornton, herself.

“Auntie,” Cristel said now, “you don’t really mistrust Mr. Blake?”

Dorothy’s laughing brown eyes were proof of her sincerity as she replied, “Why, you silly child, of course not!”

Still, Cristel felt that there was something queer about that check. She remembered that Mr. Aucar’s lawyer had written that all mail received after a certain date was being held. The lawyer’s letter had come the day that they had started for Lake Tahoe. That being the case, the letter containing the check should be among those being held in New York. Yet here was the canceled check, cashed in San

Francisco, the same week that they had seen Gordon Blake there. It did not take much perspicacity to see the obvious conclusion. In spite of Aunt Dorothy's optimism, Cristel continued to struggle with doubt and suspicion.

"Can't you write to Mr. Aucar's lawyer again?" she suggested. "He might have forwarded that letter to San Francisco as soon as Aucar sent for his mail."

Dorothy smiled reassuringly. "Please stop worrying about it, dear. I know that Mr. Blake is all right."

Cristel tried to turn her thoughts to other things, but her mind went back to the subject again and again. She felt that she must reason it out, somehow. It was a strange coincidence, surely, and that air of mystery about Mr. Blake did not mend matters.

A busy fortnight passed before Cristel saw Gordon Blake again, but when she did, she felt conscience-stricken that she should have doubted his character, even for a moment. She might as consistently have suspected Benny Ludlow.

The incident began to fade from her mind,

and thoughts of her recent disappointment to take its place. After a little reflection, the conviction that she was a failure seemed ridiculous. She made up her mind to try again, and mailed another manuscript on the same day that she found the New York lawyer's letter among Aunt Dorothy's mail.

"I was going to stop for the basket-ball game, but I'm sure Auntie is anxious to see this particular letter. I'll hurry home," she decided.

Janet waved from a window. "Home for a few days," she explained, and wanted to know if Cristel cared to go for a walk.

"Not just now," Cristel called. "Some day soon, though. I've an important message for Dorothy, now."

"Let me know when you can."

"All right, 'by."

Cristel found Dorothy at the piano, playing absently.

"Hate to interrupt you, Auntie, but here's a letter from Dixon and Wise."

Dorothy opened the letter and scanned it hastily, while Cristel studied her face.

“Don’t bother taking the mail up-stairs, Cris. I’m going up myself.” That was all. Cristel was certain that Dorothy was keeping something from her.

Dinner that evening was a rather sombre affair, despite Norah’s culinary art. Cristel was still puzzled and worried. Mr. Thornton had been preoccupied for several days with the problem of the railroad tunnel which was undergoing repairs. Fay was in the midst of one of her periodic moods, and even Billee seemed worried over something. Terry reflected the atmosphere of the household, and finally Patsy gave up the attempt to play with him, curled up disconsolately, and fell asleep.

“The only cheerful beings about the place are Norah and the Three Musketeers,” Cristel wrote in her diary that night.

Billee came into Cristel’s room one evening, and flung herself on the bed. “Fay’s getting so young-ladyfied, and artistic, and everything since she’s been to High School and studied pageantry, that she’s just no fun at all.”

Cristel laid down her pen to inquire, “What’s the matter now?”

“ Well, we went to the basket-ball game together, and all she did during the whole game was to make remarks about how crude and unbeautiful modern youths are, in comparison with the lovely Greeks.”

Cristel burst into a peal of merriment, but Billee went on, unsmilingly. “ Even in music, we don’t get along nearly so well as we used. She keeps raving about ‘ the poetry of motion,’ and ‘ perfect rhythm,’ and insists on using the metronome to ‘ ascertain the ideal tempo.’ I *hate* metronomes. I wish Dad would keep her away from Miss Emmerling.”

Cristel was still laughing. “ I don’t think that Miss Emmerling is entirely responsible for the sudden burst of metronomes and high-flown phrases. More likely, it’s Gabrov’s *History of Pageantry*. She’ll get over that, Billee.”

“ It isn’t only that. We used to be such good pals; and now she treats me like a baby. Everything I do is ‘ child’s play,’ or ‘ tomboyish.’ Sometimes she acts as though she were older than Aunt Dorothy.”

“ Don’t I know it, dear?” Cristel sympathized. “ But never mind, the real Fay is un-

derneath it all, the Fay that we knew after her illness last fall. You'll be in High School next year, Billee, and then Fay won't seem so far away from you."

"Next year!" Cristel might have said next century. It was all the same to Billee. "By that time, she'll be considering Lakrest High School too 'crude and unbeautiful' for her lofty ideals. You may not realize it, Cris, but sometimes I get *worried* about Fay."

"You mustn't, though," Cristel said, quite earnestly. "Fay does seem to grow up faster than any of the rest of us. Perhaps it's because she is so gifted, Billee, and will make us all proud of her, some day. She does dance beautifully, you know. Miss Emmerling herself says so, and *she* has seen all the great dancers of the world."

Billee did not find this particularly reassuring. "That's just the trouble," she complained. "Fay does *everything* beautifully, except maybe,—Geometry and dish-washing. If she'd only be as she used to be, I wouldn't care how she danced, or how she played, even,—that is, as long as she didn't play out of

tune," Billee added as a conscientious after-thought.

At this moment, the subject of discussion danced in, cheeks rosy, eyes sparkling from her brisk walk in the cold air. "Edgar walked home with me," she informed them, "and we met Mr. Blake just turning in at the gate. He's waiting to see *Aunt Dorothy*, Billee," she added emphatically, as the young person addressed started for the door. "Shouldn't I ask him to dinner, Cris? And—and Edgar's folks are all away. He'll have to eat alone, if he goes home," she hinted.

"I'll go down and see Norah right away," promised Cristel. "I'm sure it will be all right to ask both. You and Edgar were going to practise your violin duet to-night, anyway, weren't you?"

"Yes. I'll tell him he may stay?" At Cristel's nod Fay ran lightly down the stairs, and was in earnest conversation with Edgar when her sisters reached the hall.

Billee glanced at Edgar's lanky form, and at the pale, thin face half-covered by his heavy, horn-rimmed glasses. "If that's her idea of

Greek beauty," she began, but Cristel pinched her. Edgar was beaming up at them.

"You'll practise with us, won't you, Billee?" he asked eagerly, and added in a whisper, "I've hidden the metronome."

At which Billee nodded a grinning assent; Edgar was certainly not beautiful, but he had his redeeming qualities.

It looked as though Fay and Billee were to have a harmonious evening, and so Cristel looked about for Mr. Blake.

"He decided not to wait," Fay told her. "Said he'd come at another time."

Cristel was more relieved than disappointed. She hoped that he would not come again until the mystery of the Aucar letter had been solved.

CHAPTER XX

FAY'S TRIUMPH

“WHATEVER’S the matter, Fay? That’s the second time you played C sharp for C natural. Professor Steiner would have sent you home long ago if you were playing for him; and I wouldn’t blame him. It makes a terrible discord.”

“I think my G string is a little too tight,” Fay excused herself, tuning again. “It’s this awful weather. My poor fiddle sounds as though it has the flu. There, now let’s try it again from the beginning.”

Billee heaved a sigh and struck the opening chords again. The third attempt went better, until they reached the last page. In the middle of a lovely *cantabile* passage, Fay stopped with a snort of impatience.

“Bother! I can’t do that to-day,” she snapped, and laid the violin in its case.

“What *is* the matter? I never knew you to

bungle anything so," Billee frowned. She wished that Fay would practise properly and get it over with.

"We'll have to come back to it when I get this costume business off my mind. Is Cristel in yet? I do hope she gets some pretty goods. The other girls are hiring the cutest little ballet costumes, all fluffy and fairy-like."

Fay peered anxiously out of the window just as Cristel came up the path, laden with packages. Fay dashed out to meet her. "The goods!" she cried excitedly. "Did you find anything shimmery and pretty?"

"Do wait until we get in the house." Cristel's voice sounded tired, but Fay danced along beside her, raining questions until she elicited the information that Cristel had bought gray tarlatan.

"Gray tarlatan for a fairy costume!"

"It makes up beautifully," Cristel argued, "especially for ballet effects."

"Yes, it would be all right except for the contrast. The fairies in the ensemble are to have tulle costumes, and it will look so queer for the soloist to be in gray tarlatan. I'm sup-

posed to be a bit of milkweed down, soft and fluffy, but the tarlatan will make me stand out as stiff as a poker."

"Well, it was the best I could do on that money. You'll have to manage, unless you ask Dad if you may rent a costume, too."

"You know I can't, Cris, not this month. With my music bill, book bill, and all the rest. I can't ask him for any more, now."

Cristel smiled. There had been a time when such considerations would never have entered Fay's mind. "Just as you think," she said. "Perhaps the other girls will decide to make their own costumes when they find that you're setting them such a noble example."

"No, the costumes are already ordered; and Miss Emmerling is anxious to bring it all,—costumes, dancing, and everything up to professional standards." Fay was fingering the gray stuff dubiously. "It will look fluffy in the distance," she said hopefully. "If only the others were not going to have tulle!"

"Tulle is frightfully expensive."

"I know. I don't see how I *can* ask Dad for anything more this month, and yet, a tar-

latan soloist among a tulle ensemble! It would be a crime.”

“Well, it will have to be, unless you can persuade the girls to cancel their order.”

“Too late, and besides, it wouldn’t be fair to ask them all to wear cheese-cloth just because I can’t afford anything better.”

“I don’t believe it’s a question of afford. Dad would be willing to help, under the circumstances.”

“Sometimes I think Miss Emmerling is expecting too much,” Fay mused, “asking high-school girls to put on a finished performance, but her idea is really lovely. I’d love to see it worked out with proper scenery and costumes.”

“And what would they be?” queried a masculine voice. The girls turned to see their father standing at the door.

“Oh, Daddy, have you been down to the theatre? The boys were saying that you were going to help them fix the sets.”

“Been directing an orchestra and shoving around back-drops all afternoon,” he beamed. “That’s why the remark anent proper scenery

interested me. We've just finished a glorious squabble over that back-drop with the huge daisies sprawling all over it."

Fay's eyes lighted. "Why, that's just what we need! I remember now; we thought that was so terrible when we first saw it, those immense flowers all out of proportion to the trees on the sides. But if we take out the trees, and use only green drapes or something, it will be just right. The boys could make gigantic blades of grass to correspond with the daisies, and it would be easy to fix up something that looked like a mushroom, don't you think? We're supposed to be fairies, not humans, and it won't be at all out of harmony to have daisies towering above our heads. We could even make a milkweed pod for me to step out of."

Mr. Thornton regarded his daughter's face with something more than affection,—a sort of wonder at the light which shone there every time she spoke of the thing she loved to do best. "Why," he began, somewhat relieved, "I'll go right back and apologize to Mr. Clark and tell him that his impossible daisies are just what we need."

Everybody in Lakrest contributed something to the annual Charity Concert which was given for the benefit of a mountain home for destitute children. The local glee-club always saved their best selections for this particular occasion. Professor Steiner, who had played before royalty, brought out his old Stradivarius; it was the only time all year that he could be persuaded to play in public. This year, Miss Emmerling had chosen the best talent from her group of rapidly advancing dancers, and built up a *Fairy Fantasy* which promised to be the finished performance she hoped to make it. Fay was to be the Milkweed Fairy enticed out of the pod by Zephyr, the wind. Ten other girls were to play the part of the fairies with whom Zephyr and his playmate were to dance in the final frolic. The idea had intrigued Fay's fancy, and she spent hours with her instructor, devising steps, choosing rhythms, and talking over the possibilities in costume and scenery.

“ I think Miss Emmerling will like the idea,” she said now, her eyes visioning the fairy frolic among daisies and grasses that towered over

them, "and with the ethereal tulle costumes, why, it'll be perfect!" But her delight suddenly vanished as her hand encountered the stiff gray tarlatan. She regarded it a while, shook her head dubiously, and abruptly left the room.

Mr. Thornton gazed after her, and then at Cristel. "I thought that Fay was well over that sort of thing," he said disappointedly. "What's the matter now? Was it the costume?"

"Yes," answered Cristel, with a sigh. "I don't see what possessed Miss Emmerling to let them have tulle. Tarlatan would have done for an amateur performance. They could make the costumes themselves."

Mr. Thornton examined the goods with unusual interest. "Not much like down," he commented briefly. "Is Fay the only one to wear tarlatan? The others have tulle?"

"Yes."

He rubbed his chin, frowning the while. "Why didn't she come and talk it over, instead of leaving the room so unceremoniously? How could she expect me to understand, when she

hasn't even mentioned it? That's like the old Fay cropping up again."

Fay's voice drifted in from the hall. "Eva Richards would do it very nicely, and I could teach her the steps if you haven't time, Miss Emmerling. No, I can't explain now, I will when I see you. There's no reason why you shouldn't tell Eva right away though. Well, all right, if you'd rather talk it over with me first, but I'm sure you'll think I'm right." The receiver clicked, and Fay shortly appeared in the living-room.

"What have you done, Fay, given up the solo just because you couldn't have a tulle costume?"

"But isn't that reason enough? Can't you see how much lovelier it will be to have everything right? Why, that tarlatan would spoil the whole effect. Eva will be able to have a beautiful costume, and we do want it to be just perfect, you know."

Again Mr. Thornton gazed wonderingly at the earnest little face until Fay turned away and went quietly up-stairs. "Cristel," he said finally, "can you recall a time when Fay was

willing to sacrifice her own particular glory for the sake of the group? This career business does seem to have its points, after all," he ended, with a twinkle.

Cristel's eyes opened wide, but before she could answer he turned away. "I must send a wire," he said. Apparently his mind was already on some other subject.

Cristel was disappointed that Fay had given up the honor of performing in the Charity Concert, for it was indeed an honor. People came many miles to hear and witness this much-talked-of program. Professor Steiner's name had always been a drawing card. This year, Miss Emmerling's was added to the list. It was a signal honor to be chosen to represent Miss Emmerling.

Fay proved her sincerity by remaining adamant in her decision. She would give up her part rather than have the Milkweed Fairy spoil the effect of the whole ensemble. When Cristel saw the gossamer costumes of the others, she understood.

If Fay was disappointed, she managed to hide it very well, at least, for a while. It was

three days later that Cristel came upon her curled up in a chair in her room, dabbing a moist handkerchief at red-rimmed eyes.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“Nothing.” Fay sniffed discouragingly, and Cristel turned back to answer the doorbell.

“A package for you, Fay,” she announced, slipping it inside the door. “The coat you sent to have dyed, I guess.”

“Leave it on the chair.”

Cristel complied, and left the room again. It was evident that Fay wanted to be alone. She was hardly settled at her desk in her own room when she heard a squeal from below.

“Oh, Cris, come here, quick!”

Cristel nearly fell over the stairs, but she could hardly believe her eyes at the vision which greeted her. Fay was standing over the opened suit-box, her face radiant, in spite of the recent tears. “Look!” she breathed.

A pile of shining fluff lay in the tissue-lined box. Fay picked it up and held it against her. The fitted bodice was of glistening silver cloth, ornamented only with a pair of iridescent

wings. The skirt consisted of layer upon layer of misty, silver tulle.

“ Like the veriest bit of down, isn't it? ” she exulted. “ Isn't Daddy a *dear*? ”

“ Spoiling you as usual, ” commented Cristel, with a smile, though her own heart sang at sight of Fay's happiness.

Lakrest had never seen the like of the vision that greeted them at the opening of Miss Emmerling's long-heralded *Fairy Fantasy*. After a stirring orchestra number, the music slowed to a pensive waltz, and Zephyr floated in. Up the stem of the milkweed pod he ran, while the pod slowly opened. From somewhere, a moonbeam shot through the foliage and played on the silvery fluffiness within. Something stirred, and as if just awakening from a deep sleep, the Milkweed Fairy rose, and spreading iridescent wings, stood poised on the tip of her cradle pod. The audience watched in awed surprise. They saw a bit of shining fluff apparently floating about from leaf to leaf, from stem to stem. Could it be a human dancer, this creature of such airy light-

ness? From out the glen and shady leaf caves, the other fairies frolicked, played hide-and-seek among the grass-blades, and danced in the shade of mushrooms, until the curtain fell on a colorful ensemble, with the Milkweed Fairy poised in the centre.

Mr. Thornton was silent a long time after the applause had died away.

“Wasn’t she just lovely, Daddy?” Billee’s voice aroused him. “Sometimes I’m afraid that Fay must be a genius or something.”

“Sometimes I’m afraid so, too,” he answered solemnly.

CHAPTER XXI

A GENIUS IN THE FAMILY

FOR days, the town buzzed with talk of Fay Thornton and her remarkable talents. She was in a fair way to be spoiled now, if never before. Billee beamed with the rest of the family over her sister's achievements, but frequently indulged in misgivings. Fay, the playmate of her childhood, seemed to grow farther and farther away from her. Billee was not altogether convinced that having a genius for a sister would be unmitigated bliss, especially when that sister had been an almost inseparable companion for so long.

She went to the library and read all she could find on the subject of genius, and came home quite convinced that she could be just as happy without one in the family. Many of the articles she read were hard to understand, many of them disagreed, but on one point, they seemed to be of accord. Geniuses were hard

to live with, inclined to be selfish and inconsiderate of the happiness of others.

“That explains all Fay’s funny moods and tantrums,” Billee told Cristel earnestly. “She hasn’t had any for a long time, but I s’pose she’ll get that way again. If she’s a genius, she can’t help herself.”

“Don’t worry, Billee,” laughed Cristel. “Fay is perfectly normal, even if she is talented. As a matter of fact, I don’t believe she ever was downright selfish or inconsiderate. Put to a test, she’d always give way to some one else.”

“Well, I’m worried, all the same. I’d rather have Fay just plain human.”

Cristel slipped an arm about her little sister. “It does seem that Fay is destined to grow away from us and do big things out in the world, but she’ll always be our sister. Remember that.”

Billee was not satisfied. “I’m afraid she’ll never be the same old Fay, not since she discovered that she could dance.”

“Nonsense, don’t talk like that. We haven’t lost her yet.”

Down-stairs the front door banged, and they heard Fay's footsteps in the living-room. She put down her violin and struck a few chords on the piano.

"That's the minor progression we had in Harmony last week. Fay and I used to be able to work our Harmony problems together, but now she talks 'way over my head. I've studied music as long as she has. She needn't be so high-flown."

Fay's voice sang up the stairway. "Billee, walk into town with me? I want you to help pick out my new piece."

The sudden change of expression was comical. With a suppressed whoop, Billee started down the stairs, and was beside Fay when they started up Main Street, a few moments later.

"Professor Steiner says I may try a Debussy if we can find one that you can play," Fay explained.

Billee's gaiety vanished. So that was it! Just a matter of convenience, not the comradely custom they had shared, of choosing their music together. Billee could not help resenting the implication that she could not play

anything that Fay could. To the dissertation on dominant sevenths, tone-color, rhythm, and all the rest of it, Billee responded enthusiastically at first, but though she, too, loved music, there were other things that she liked to talk about occasionally. When Fay ignored a reference to the Carnival, and pattered on in unintelligible phrases, Billee sighed, and relapsed into silence. She decided that Fay *was* getting queer, despite Cristel's optimism.

They wandered through the plaza, chose the Debussy piece, matched a sample of Japanese silk for one of Miss Emmerling's scarf dances, and still Billee tagged along morosely.

"I'd like to make a scarf dance out of that sunset," Fay enthused. She stopped suddenly, but still gazed ecstatically at the far horizon. Billee was glad that this inspiration had smitten her just in front of Farley's Bakery. Norah had asked her to order an extra loaf of bread for to-morrow. She waited patiently for the flow of adjectives which she felt sure was forthcoming.

"You know, Billee," Fay began soulfully, "I do think—that Mrs. Farley is making

raisin scones! Isn't that odor maddening? Let's go in and get some, I'm starved!"

Billee emitted a funny little squeak of surprise and delight, as she followed her inside. Perhaps there was hope for Fay, after all!

They sat at a little table near the window, sniffing the warm fragrance of newly baked bread. "I didn't realize how cold and hungry I was," Fay purred. "Just look at those hot scones, Billee. They're fairly bursting with big, juicy raisins."

Billee, having disposed of a generous helping of cake and a glass of milk before she had left home, was not in the least hungry, but she dared not say a word to spoil Fay's sudden transition.

"Have you any money, Billee?"

"Not with me."

"Well, I've thirty cents. Let's get a hot chocolate, too.—Hot chocolates and buttered scones," she told the waitress, her eye on a tray of the triangular delicacies.

The girl brought it at last, and Fay's cold fingers closed on the hot bread. She raised it to her mouth and was just about to bite into

a fruity corner when she looked into a pair of wide brown eyes which stared at her through the window,—hungry eyes, looking out of a thin, sallow face. She laid the scone on her plate again, and stared back. Finally she beckoned. The face disappeared and shortly reappeared at the door. A thin, shabby child crept by the crowded counter and stood beside their table, eyeing the food avidly.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Fay asked softly, while Billee stared and wondered what it was all about. “Sit down, do.” Fay shoved the scone and the steaming chocolate toward the newcomer and watched in horrified fascination while the ragged little girl pounced upon it and began to eat like a young animal. The child did not speak until she had finished.

“Take this, too,” Billee offered, and without a second command, their strange guest began to dispose of Billee’s share.

“My, that’s powerful good,” she sighed. “Do your folks always let you go out and buy such heavenly food?”

“No,” said Fay. “We usually eat at home. Don’t you?”

The frank question did not in the least disconcert her. "I do when there's anything to eat, but pretty often, there ain't."

"Where do you live?" asked Billee wonderingly.

With her mouth too well occupied with the hot scone to permit of a verbal answer, the little girl waved an arm vaguely. "Over yonder, under the big oak-tree," she essayed, finally, after gulping down a huge bite.

The two sisters gazed at each other aghast. "But there are no houses near the big oak-tree," Billee objected.

"I don't live in a house, I live in a wagon, me 'n' Pop. Pop ain't worked for a long time now. His saw got outa order, but the wood-cutting is about done for this year, anyhow. That's why I'm so hungry right now. Sometimes we have loads to eat, though. I jist bet that if any one was t' cut me crosswise, I'd look like a strip o' bacon,—all fat an' lean stripes."

Fay looked properly shocked, and Billee nearly strangled, but they finally composed themselves. They had often seen itinerant workers pass down Main Street, some on foot,

with blanket-rolls on their backs, others on horseback or in shaky Fords, some like this child's father, traveling in a wagon with family and household goods aboard. Until to-day, they had never come in close contact with any of them.

"What do you do in winter, when it's cold?" Billee queried interestedly.

"'Tain't cold down South. That's where we're headin' for now. Pop works in a fact'ry winter-times, 'cause I hafta go to school."

"Won't you be rather late getting back to school?"

"Guess I will. 'Twon't matter much. Pop thinks school's a waste of time. *He* never went to school.—Say, that's a pretty ring. Must be nice to have so many fine things. Well, I must be goin'. Pop wants to get to the valley, 'fore it gets too cold. I'll just take this other scone out to him, if you don't mind. G'by, 'n' thanks."

The little ragamuffin bowed jerkily and scampered off, with a furtive glance toward the crowd of customers.

"Of all things!" exclaimed Billee.

“If only we could do something for her,” worried Fay. “Think of having to live like that, Billee!” She was honestly concerned.

They were still discussing the Gypsy-like child as they walked home. Suddenly a clatter of wheels sounded behind them, and a hooded wagon jolted by. From the back, a tousled head peeped out.

“She’s waving at us,” cried Billee, but Fay was dashing after the wagon. Billee saw her throw some small object into the child’s lap.

“You—you gave her your ring!”

“It was all I could do. It’s pretty, and she’ll like it, and if he doesn’t get work, they can sell it. Think of it, Billee,—not having enough to eat!”

Billee stifled further protest, and laughed,—a low chuckle of relief. That night, she told the whole story to Cristel.

“Why, even I hated to part with that raisin scone, and I wasn’t a bit hungry,” she said, “and as for Fay’s giving away her precious sapphire ring—well, I guess she can’t be a heartless genius. She’s just plain human, after all.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE CABIN ACROSS THE DIVIDE

IT was a nippy fall day that Cristel and Janet chose for their hike. Immense wood piles, flaming foliage, and heavily burdened fruit-trees heralded the winter.

“Let’s walk along the flume until we get across the divide. We can stop for lunch in a pine grove somewhere.”

They followed the flume along its tree-bordered course, stopping now and then to enjoy vistas of piny canyon, or to listen to the roar of the river, booming a sort of bass accompaniment to the treble ripple of the flume. Sun glinted through the golden foliage, on thick masses of pine needles. Except for numbers of tiny toads that hopped across the trail, or an occasional whirr of partridges, they saw no signs of life. They seemed to have the woods quite to themselves. Occasionally the flume passed through a tiny, deserted village, and the

girls climbed over rickety fences in quest of tempting red apples, or clusters of purple grapes.

“We must get a branch or two of these lovely madrone berries when we come back,” Janet suggested, reluctant to sacrifice her edible spoils for purely ornamental ones.

They went along, nibbling fruit, and sniffing the balsamy air, now crossing the rushing flume, now resting on the needle carpeted floor of a pine grove. Once they scrambled, goat-like along the side of a sheer cliff, with only a six-inch ridge between them and the depths below. When they reached the other side in safety, Janet called a halt. “Enough,” she decided, “I move that we sit down and eat.”

“Yes, we’re sadly in need of nourishment,” Cristel remarked ironically, discarding the core of her third apple.

They found a level spot beside the flume, and soon discovered that their appetites were quite unimpaired by their fruit raids. Sandwiches, cookies, and nuts disappeared with surprising rapidity.

“It’s mighty good to see these hills and

woods again," breathed Janet, leaning back with a sigh of contentment. "College is glorious, and I'm in love with San Francisco, but I'll never be happy to stay away from the dear old hills. No matter what I do, Cris, or where I go, I'll always come back."

Cristel smiled understandingly. "That's just the way I feel. I'd never want to leave if I couldn't come back."

"So many don't, though. Trouble is, you can't run away from a job every time you take a notion to. However, I'd sooner sell ribbons in Lakrest than be secretary to a millionaire, if being secretary meant that I would never see the Sierras again."

Cristel nodded. "I, too. Maybe we *are* just plain little home-bodies."

Janet laughed. She, too, had heard that epithet before. "Don't care if we are,—but methinks we're due to wander far from home. Yes, you, too, Cris," she added significantly. "You've something on your mind right now, haven't you?"

"Perhaps I have," twinkled Cristel, but she was not yet ready to tell Janet about her aspi-

rations, most especially as none of the editors seemed to share Aunt Dorothy's sanguine hopes regarding her ability. Every one of her stories had come back, but strangely, each repeated failure made her more determined to succeed. Even now, as she thought of it, there was a light of resolution in her eyes which made Janet quite certain that Cristel had "something on her mind."

"Heavens! the sun has disappeared," she exclaimed suddenly, after they had been indulging in silent dreaming for some minutes. "You don't suppose it's going to rain, do you?" Cristel looked up at the scurrying clouds.

"Looks as though it might. We'd better be starting back."

They scrambled with reckless speed along the Goat Trail, and turned off on a short cut through the woods. They had not been walking three minutes, however, before the freshening wind blew a patter of rain against their faces, and they knew that it was useless to race with the storm.

"We're going to be caught," observed Cris-

tel, "and judging from the look of that black cloud, it's not going to be any playful shower. Let's look for a shelter of some kind."

"Might have been wiser to go by the road and stop in one of the deserted houses. We're not likely to find any shelter in the woods, except a cave, or a tree."

The rain was becoming heavier, a cold, drenching rain, that chilled them even more than the biting wind. "Feels almost as though it might turn to snow; we'll have to get out of it. Look there!" ended Cristel triumphantly, before Janet finished an ironic reply.

Just ahead of them, in a clearing by the trail, stood an old log cabin. "Ready and waiting for us," exulted Cristel, and they ran in the face of the wind, though they were drenched before they reached the porch.

"Why, it's occupied!" cried Janet, as they pushed open a heavy door of half logs, and found themselves in a small room, cozily furnished with rustic chairs and table. The rough-hewn floor was strewn with colorful Indian rugs, and before the deep fireplace, a comfortable rocker and a bear rug tempted one.

Books and magazines lay here and there on the floor and table; there was even a capacious waste-basket, sadly in need of emptying. Two other tiny rooms bore equal evidence that the cabin had been very recently used.

“Rather late for vacationists; must be a hunter,” Janet decided.

“Anybody’s cabin is a haven in a storm,” parodied Cristel. “That’s the law of the mountains. I’m about frozen. Let’s burn up that rubbish in the fireplace and see if we can get ourselves dry.”

Experience in similar emergencies had taught them where to find dry wood even on a rainy day, and they dashed out into the storm long enough to collect something with which to replenish the fire.

“Don’t suppose Mr. Hunter would mind if we emptied his waste-basket for him,” said Janet, recklessly piling the heap of papers on the blaze.

“Oh!” objected Cristel, “he may value those letters and things, Jan.”

“A waste-basket is no place to keep valuables,” Janet responded, nonchalantly stirring

the heap of flaming papers at which Cristel was gazing in fascination. She had caught sight of a familiar name on one of the envelopes.

“Gordon Blake!” she read. “This must be his cabin!”

“Blake? Oh yes, the mysterious Mr. Blake,—he certainly is popular.” Janet threw another handful of envelopes on the fire. One of them, burning at the corner, dropped back on the hearth, and Janet began to poke it back into the blaze.

“Wait!” Cristel whispered hoarsely, but Janet did not hear her, and shoved the letter deep into the licking flames.

The name on that envelope was not Blake, but *Aucar*. And it was typed in clear brown letters on tinted paper, Aunt Dorothy’s stationery. Cristel’s thoughts raced like lightning, but she sat as though paralyzed, and watched the fire eat slowly around the edges of that envelope. Then Gordon Blake *had* stolen Aucar’s letter! Here was the evidence. She felt impelled to snatch it from the flames and save it, but even while she gazed at it, she could not believe what her reason told her. The fire



THEN GORDON BLAKE *HAD* STOLEN AUCAR'S LETTER!
Page 212.

had reached the "Mr." on one side, and had obliterated part of the Aucar. Nothing of the address but "Bradley Auc" was visible, yet this would be evidence enough, and there was still time to save it. But the envelope became a charred bit of ash before Cristel moved, and then it was to throw a stick of wood which completely annihilated the last traces of that ominous envelope. She felt more relieved than otherwise, and yet, she had seen it. It could mean only one thing.

She wondered how she could tell Aunt Dorothy or Billee or her father. All had so liked Gordon Blake and his cheerful exuberance. Billee would never be convinced; even her father, who had met him only once or twice, would be shocked and grieved. And Aunt Dorothy,—somehow Cristel felt most worried about her. Dorothy would never believe this of Gordon Blake. Why, Cristel did not believe it herself, and yet, there was that letter!

Janet found her a most unsatisfactory companion during the rest of their little adventure. Cristel moved as if in a trance, answered absently whenever Janet addressed her, sat silent

for long stretches at a time, apparently quite oblivious of the storm without, and of Janet's anxious excursions doorward to determine weather conditions.

"I think it's over for a spell," she reported at last, "and I think we'd better be starting on while we're warm and comparatively dry. We want to be out of the woods before dark.—Here, you're a good scribbler. Write a little thank-you for Mr. Blake, while I put out the fire."

Janet had the fire well attended to and was ready to go, but the sheet of paper in Cristel's lap was still blank. "Whatever has come over you?" demanded Janet, regarding her anxiously. "Here, give me that paper."

Janet scrawled off a note, pinned it over the fireplace, and started for the door, Cristel followed, still in a daze. Janet took her firmly by the arm.

"You look positively sick. I *knew* that that last apple was too green. And that chilly rain, and all. Heavens, Cris, can you last until we get home?"

Whereupon Cristel laughed a reassuring

laugh, but the walk home was characterized by long lapses of silence, and Janet sighed with relief when she left Cristel at her own gate and hurried on, for it had started to rain again.

Aunt Dorothy was at home, full of anxiety. "Up-stairs right away, child, and get those wet things off. I'll draw a tub of hot water for you. You must put on a woolly nightgown and crawl right into bed. I'll send Billee up with a tray. It's a wonder you're not chilled to the bone."

Cristel did as she was told, but the vision of the letter that had burnt was still before her. She felt more reluctant than ever about telling the others what she had seen. Hour after hour, she put it off, and they all thought that her quietude was due to illness. The next day came, and with it Aunt Dorothy's cheery "Good-morning, how are you?"

"Just fine, thank you, dear. I'm going to get up and help Norah make pumpkin pies."

She did, in spite of protest, though even Norah was worried. "Cristel is not quite herself, that's sure," she nodded. "The darlin' very nearly put half a cup of salt in the filling.

She never will admit when she's sick, poor dear."

All day Cristel pondered her problem. How could she tell Aunt Dorothy, and when? Why was it so hard? "Because I can't believe it myself, even yet," she told her conscience. "I'll wait, there must be some explanation." Still, she wondered how Gordon Blake *could* explain.

She recalled his boyish smile, and twinkling blue eyes, his merriment the day that he had treated the whole of Billee's circus to "hot dogs 'n' lemonade," his chivalric courtesy to Aunt Dorothy, bits of fun and witticism from his conversation,—and the letter in the fire became more of an enigma than ever. She simply could not reconcile a stolen letter with Gordon Blake. Suddenly her brow cleared, and the frown of anxiety disappeared.

"That may not have been Blake's cabin at all," she conjectured. "Perhaps it was all stolen mail, his and Aucar's and all that other." Only the week before, the papers had featured front page stories of two professional mail-robbers who were being sought. Cristel

thought again of the heaped-up fireplace, the overflowing waste-basket.

“ I suppose a mail-robber wouldn’t be likely to leave so much evidence about,” she reasoned, “ on the other hand, if Mr. Blake stole that letter, he wouldn’t be likely to preserve the evidence all these months, either.—I think I’ll write the thank-you note, and just casually mention the papers we burned. That will give him a chance to explain, if he wants to, and I won’t have to tell Dorothy anything until I’m sure about it all.”

She heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, and Billee, coming in to find her beaming over the dust-mop, went back to report that Cristel was “ all recovered from the green apples and the wet rain.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

THE glorious fall days were too precious to be wasted, and in spite of Cristel's occasional lapses into doubt and anxiety, she was happy with her studies and long walks in the crisp, snappy air. There was always some incentive for a jaunt in the woods, or along the road. Now that berry season was over, there were nuts of all varieties, tiny hazel-nuts, large walnuts packed full of luscious meat, chestnut burs, just bursting open. Often she would join a school group on a long, exhilarating hike to some woodsy spot near the lake, where they could build a fire and roast wienies and potatoes. Sometimes she would go with her sisters and Aunt Dorothy to watch the sunset from Lookout Point, when even Billee would sit awed into silence by the magic display of color.

“ Mr. Blake should see it now. He's always talking about this view,” she said.

Mr. Blake! Both Cristel and Dorothy seemed startled at mention of the name. Truth was, that circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the letter had become more mysterious than ever. Mr. Blake had answered Cristel's note. His letter was postmarked San Francisco. Yes, it was undoubtedly his cabin that the girls had found. He was glad it had served them, and they were most cordially welcome. The mail they had burned was of no value.

Cristel was positive about the envelope addressed to Bradley Aucar. She worried about it for days, and then decided that she must tell Aunt Dorothy, that she should have told her long ago.

They were seated before the fireplace in Dorothy's room, for it was November, and the evening was very cold. "I've something to tell you, Aunt Dee," announced Cristel, after a discussion of Aucar's latest story.

"What, been trying to outdo Walter Scott again?"

"Oh, no." This was true, for the later stories had certainly not emulated Walter Scott.

Cristel did not want to bring up her own mis-spent efforts just now, and so she hurried on. "It's about Mr. Blake."

"Oh."

"You remember the day that Janet and I crossed the divide and stopped in a cabin that we thought was his?"

"Yes."

"Well, it *was* Mr. Blake's."

"Really? Tell me what it was like," eagerly.

Cristel described the three rooms, the rustic furniture and colorful rugs, not omitting mention of the heaped-up waste-basket and fireplace. Dorothy was much impressed. She waited for her to go on.

"But the thing I want to tell you about, should have told you about before, is this. In that waste-basket was a yellow envelope addressed to Bradley Aucar."

Dorothy was very quiet while Cristel told her the details. "I'm afraid I'm not a very responsible person," she ended. "I should have snatched it out, and done something about it, but somehow, I just didn't want to. Later, I wrote Mr. Blake a thank-you note on pur-

pose to find out whether or not it was really his cabin. Here is his answer.”

Dorothy took the letter and read it rapidly. “Certainly nothing suspicious about that, is there?” she asked lightly.

Cristel was appalled at her nonchalance. She knew that Dorothy liked Gordon Blake, but was that any reason that she should blind herself to obvious facts? Was it possible that she could not see what all this might mean?

“I want to show you something,” Dorothy declared, with seeming irrelevance, as she handed Cristel a brief business note from Bradley Aucar.

Cristel examined it curiously. “I can’t for the life of me see what this has to do with solving the problem,” she said finally.

“Of course not, but I’ll show you.” Dorothy leaned over. “Now can you see?” she asked, holding her index finger under the first letter in the signature.

Cristel saw instantly. The peculiar formation of the letter was the same in the signatures of both Bradley Aucar and Gordon Blake. Moreover, there were unmistakable likenesses

in the other letters which occurred in both names.

“Why,” gasped Cristel, as the significance slowly dawned on her, “Gordon Blake is Bradley Aucar!”

“And it took you all this time to find it out!”

“How stupid of me not to have guessed before! His scripts alone would show that he has been in this region lately. Yet I never once connected him with Gordon Blake.”

For several moments she sat lost in bewilderment. Gordon Blake, Bradley Aucar! She had come close to a real author, and not known it! Incidents and bits of conversation now came back to her with new significance,—the little glances of understanding between him and Aunt Dorothy. Why, Gordon Blake was a client of hers; she must have known him in New York!

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Cristel asked accusingly.

“For several very particular reasons,” Dorothy smiled. “I really had no right to reveal his identity at all. Gordon’s pseudonym is

his pet eccentricity. But I decided I must do something to keep you from worrying your little head any more about this mixed-up check business.—And there are other—personal reasons.”

“Oh-h-h!” A host of new revelations sent Cristel’s head awhirl again. Dorothy had called Mr. Blake by his first name, and a faint wave of color tinged her cheeks as she laughingly spoke of “personal reasons.”

“As a matter of fact,” she hurried on, “I believe Gordon Blake did take the letter, inasmuch as it was his own, and you told him not to bother mailing those he chose to deliver in person.”

“Did you know Mr. Blake very well, in New York, Aunt Dee?” Cristel inquired mischievously.

“Yes,” admitted Dorothy, smilingly, “in fact, I came to California principally because I thought I wanted to get away from him. He,—he’s one of these persons that won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Cristel smiled at Dorothy’s pretty confusion, and vowed that she did not blame Mr. Blake

for being "one of these persons that won't take 'no' for an answer."

The door-bell rang, and Billee's unmistakable footsteps scampered through the hall, to be followed by Billee's characteristic whoop of delight.

"We thought you were never coming again," they heard her say, and at the boyish answering laugh, Cristel cried:

"It's Mr. Blake,—Aucar."

"It's Gordon!" Dorothy wavered. "Won't you come down with me, Cris?"

Billee decided the matter by bouncing into the room. "Mr. Blake is down-stairs," she beamed, "and he wants to see Aunt Dorothy, most *special*."

Cristel was very anxious to greet Bradley Aucar, but she did not go down. However, it was almost as satisfactory to have Dorothy steal into her room after she was in bed that night. Dorothy spoke tremblingly, and even in the dark, her eyes were shiny.

"We finished our argument about character and locale, and I won," she said, "but we had another little debate, and—I didn't fare so

well." She turned away and started for the door.

The door closed, and Cristel lay in the dark, smiling. She recalled the day that she had walked home with Billee from the circus, and laughingly repeated Billee's slangy, "I think it's all bosh about Aunt Dorothy's not liking men."

CHAPTER XXIV

OF MANY THINGS

THE revelation of Gordon Blake's identity did not spread beyond the Thornton household; though there were vague rumors that he was an author, nobody suspected that he was the famous Bradley Aucar. He preferred it that way, and when he left for Los Angeles a week later, he was still known only as the pleasant young man who had lived in the cabin across the divide. He was to tour Mexico and South America for several months, after which he would return to Lakrest to be married to Aunt Dorothy.

Cristel was not the only one who was pleased at the news. Billee gave frequent demonstration of the fact that she admired Dorothy's taste; Fay bestowed her rapturous approval upon the romance, and Mr. Thornton went about for days, beaming utter satisfaction.

Concerning her plans for the interim, Doro-

thy was inclined to be mysterious, at least, in Cristel's presence. The rest of the family seemed to share some secret with her, and Cristel wondered why she was left out. She knew that Dorothy planned to return East for a time, and she dreaded having her go. Perhaps they realized that she would miss her more than the others. Well, at least they would have her through the winter.

That winter was a long and memorable one. The first snows had come early in November, and by the New Year, Lakrest was under a white mantle several feet deep. Crowds from the valley streamed into the town and near-by villages in order to taste the delights of winter frolics, and for a while, the place was alive with merriment and activity. Then the winter closed down hard. Storms and blizzards followed one after another, and the holiday makers scurried away to their valley homes in search of warmth. There were tales of trains and motor parties stalled in the drifts, of hungry wild animals prowling about outlying villages.

But all this did not greatly affect life in

Lakrest. The young people sometimes found it hard to be confined indoors so much, but even they took a certain satisfaction in the feeling of warmth and safety one experiences when sitting beside a crackling log fire and listening to the wind roaring in the chimney.

“Heaven help any creature that’s out on a night like this,” Dorothy Thornton breathed fervently, one evening, as the wind suddenly shook the big house and sent a fusillade of hail against the windows.

“Ooh, I should say,” corroborated Billee. “I almost blew over when I opened the door the tiniest crack.”

“But isn’t it cozy by the fire, when the windows rattle like that?” sighed Fay, curling up like a contented kitten on the hearth rug. “Auntie, let’s roast some chestnuts and tell ghost stories?”

“Play us something first, won’t you?” begged Cristel. “Right now, before you get too comfortable and lazy.”

“I’m that already.”

“You said you were going to show us your new dance, to-night,” prompted Billee.

Fay was immediately alert. "Yes, I want to see how you like it. It's the one I'm to do in the pageant."

Billee sat down at the piano and sounded the castanet-like notes of a Spanish two-step.

"*You* doing a Spanish dance, Fay?" exclaimed Dorothy. "You ought to specialize on dainty little polkas and toe dances."

"But I want to know how to do *all* kinds."

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Dorothy. "Let's see if we can make you look Spanish. Billee, will you run up and get that black wig you had for the masquerade?"

She divested the piano of a gorgeous shawl which she redraped over Fay's slender shoulders. "So far, so good," she smiled, standing off to survey her work. "Now, with a dark wig, and a red rose over your left ear ——"

Billee entered with the wig, and Dorothy quickly finished the transformation. "There," she triumphed. "Rather baby-faced for a saucy Señorita, but would you know it was our Fay?"

The other girls clapped, and even Mr. Thornton looked over his glasses with obvious

admiration. It took but a few bars of the fiery music to start Fay gliding and coquetting with an imaginary fan. Her little audience watched her, marveling. Here was a new Fay. She was naturally dainty and graceful; they were not surprised when she had given them a creditable performance of *The Fairy Polka* and *Violette*, but this gay little Señorita with the flashing eyes and coquettish smile,—could this be Fay?

They all applauded delightedly and begged for more, whereupon Fay obligingly improvised steps and pantomime to all the Spanish music in Billee's repertoire.

"Good work!" Dorothy approved as the dancer sank into a chair to rest. "Now show your curls again, and let's have the *Fairy Polka*. Your father likes that, and you do seem more like our own Fay in it."

The performer was divested of her shawl and wig, and in her own blue frock and flying curls (which, by the way, made a most appropriate costume) she romped through a playful little dance that they all loved.

"Now," she said, as she finished. "Let's

have the chestnuts and ghost stories, while I take a rest.”

The applause broke into laughter, while Billee hopped off the piano stool and dived in the direction of the cupboard where the chestnuts were kept. Cristel raked the glowing coals from under the big log in the fireplace, and in a few moments, the chestnuts were popping open and sending out enticing odors. Mr. Thornton put away his paper, turned out the light, and came over to join the circle in front of the fire. Fay and Billee stretched on the rug attending the chestnuts; Dorothy huddled in the big chair which every one looked upon as hers, Cristel on the footstool at her feet. Mr. Thornton surveyed the happy group and smiled. This was the sort of evening he loved.

“ You begin, Cris.”

The narrator had able assistants in the shrieking wind, the rattling windows and creaking walls, the weird shadows dancing behind them in the darkened room. It did not take long to transport her listeners to the land of goblins and haunted castles. Billee sat awed

into silence, and Fay fairly jumped when a neglected chestnut burst open with a whistling sizzle like the voice of the ghost in Cristel's story.

One story followed another, until they were all so deliciously thrilled that it took an effort to turn away from the fire and look behind at the fantastic shadows. Even Cristel shivered a little, when, the stories over, she rose to traverse the dark space between the fire and the lamp. But what a difference a flood of light made! Ghosts and goblins disappeared up the chimney, and the listeners were ready for a merry chapter from Dickens. Mr. Thornton read well, and afterward the girls could trace their common love for the best in literature to these winter evenings by the fire, when he read to them.

There were many such evenings that winter, and even the youngest of them could realize the deepest meaning of that precious word "home." At such times, ambition dimmed a little, and they put aside their dreams of brilliant careers, and surreptitiously substituted other scenes, like this.

Winter hung over the mountains longer than usual, and then broke with a sudden thaw. Jack Frost made one more visit, coating all the snow with ice, so that young Lakrest gleefully donned runners and skated to school, or coasted a mile down the frozen highway.

But warmth came at last, and after a disagreeable period of rain and slush, the sky cleared, and the sun shone diligently until the snow all disappeared in rivulets down the hillsides. Spring began to show her colors in a riot of wild flowers, and everybody rejoiced, for the winter was over.

The Lakrest High School Pageant was always given as soon as the warmth of spring permitted outdoor dancing. This year, Fay found herself conspicuous in every phase of the pageant, from authorship to the final performance. She worked with Miss Emmerling in translating Ruth Wentworth's story into terms of dancing and motion. She spent hours in her music teacher's library, hunting out appropriate music. She went through the tryouts

easily, and came out with a leading part. She helped Miss Emmerling coach various groups of dancers. Strangely enough, no one seemed to resent her ubiquitousness in the affair. Some one might object to her criticism, her high-handed management, but no one dared deny that Fay knew what she was about, and was, despite her youth, largely responsible for the ultimate success of the pageant.

It was staged in a natural amphitheatre, with a background of evergreens and growing shrubbery. The sloping hillside just above the turf "stage" was filled with people, for Lakrest High School was acquiring a name for its beautiful pageants.

The informal dressing-rooms were already crowded when Fay reached them. She hurried through a maze of painted warriors and silk-and-lace-burdened colonial sires and madames, and entered the large dressing-room where the soloists were assembled, alternately engaged in making up, and indulging in "nerves."

"Oh, Fay, I never felt so wobbly in my life," was Lois Prescott's very unbirdlike greeting.

“Silly!” scoffed Fay, though she found it difficult to conceal her own agitation. “You’re the sauciest blue jay of them all. Don’t try to make me believe that you’re ‘wobbly.’”

“Miss Tyrrell is here,” some one called. “Those who are ready, see her right away.”

The leading blue jay and a tall water spirit gave a last pat to their costumes and hurried away to be inspected by the costume chairman. Fay was not to go on until the second episode, and so she sat on a trunk and leisurely perused a program while the “prologuers” finished dressing. She smiled to see her name on the program as a Spanish Gypsy. It seemed inconsistent, and yet significant, too. She knew that she could respond to any type of music.

Cristel pushed her way through the crowd to Fay’s side. “Better be getting dressed, dear. The orchestra is tuning, and your turn will come before you know it.”

The scraping of strings had an electric effect upon the dancers. The babble hushed, there was a subdued scamper in which blue jays and flowers and water spirits jostled each

other in a nervous effort to get to their places. The room became less crowded and Fay seated herself before a mirror and loosened her hair while Cristel put last touches to the Spanish costume.

“Isn’t that overture lovely?” Fay sparkled. “And in the first episode, the Indian music is a real gem. I think Miss Emmerling is sorry that she didn’t make better use of it.”

“What do you mean by ‘better use of it’?”

“Have some one really dance to it; it would make a lovely Bow and Arrow Dance.—Don’t you think that this brown powder is a little too dark, Cris?”

Cristel stood off and regarded her sister dubiously. “You do look a bit tawny, but I think it’s your fair hair that does it. Put on your wig. There, it’s not so bad now.”

“But even yet, I look rather swarthy. I’m going to lighten it.” She dipped her fingers into the cold-cream and began to rub them over her face.

“Don’t, Fay.” It was Miss Emmerling’s voice, and they turned to see her standing in the door. “Don’t take off the brown, put

more on. I've decided to let you understudy the Indian Prince in the first part. You're to do a Bow and Arrow dance."

Her commands were decisive, and Fay obeyed mechanically. In five minutes, she stood in the wings, her heart beating wildly while she waited for her cue.

CHAPTER XXV

FAY DECIDES

A BRIEF period of plucking and tuning, a business-like rap of the baton, and the expectant audience relaxed under the spell of an overture that was filled with bird-calls, and rippling water, and wind whispers. A pair of wood-choppers with glittering axes passed through the woods, marking trees that were doomed. When they placed their fatal sign upon a beautiful, giant pine, an old Indian who watched them from the edge of the wood shook his head sadly. The woodmen wandered away; happy children danced in and frolicked together until they espied the aged Indian. They ran to him and demanded a story. The light slowly faded as he sat down to begin his tale. When it brightened again, it shone upon a morning in the forest, when he was a stripling youth.

Amidst a riot of chirping, warbling, and

caroling, a bevy of bright blue-winged creatures fluttered down and danced about with a great deal of sauciness and twitter. Swaying flowers, gleaming water spirits, timid fawns, all danced and played together until the approach of a mortal warned them, and they fled. A young Indian Prince leaped through the forest, exulting in his strength, and testing the sturdiness of his bow and arrow.

Slowly the story unfolded itself,—the Prince's love for a beautiful maiden whose life was demanded in sacrifice on the very eve of her wedding. Temsquah saw his loved one die under the knife of the high priest, and all the world went dark for him. But the spirit of Walohi hovered near, and he knew that she would not leave the forest until he himself should join her and lead her to the Land of Happy Spirits. Yet he could not die. His people needed him. For years, the unhappy Prince was consoled by the spirit which hovered about the grove where he had courted her. A strange people came and forced his tribe to wander far away from the forest haunted by his loved one. The woods echoed to alien

laughter. Gay Señoritas and their lads danced and held festival under the great pine which had sheltered Temsquah and Walohi. When they passed, pretty, beruffled ladies and their swains came to play in the sacred grove. But one day, Temsquah found himself the last of his tribe, and returned to the forest where the spirit of Walohi wandered and longed for him.

Again, the light shone upon the old Indian and the eager-eyed children. The woodchoppers returned and sank their axes into the base of the great pine. They watched it totter and sway. As it leaned and slowly began to fall, the gray-haired Indian suddenly leaped forward, and his worn body dropped beneath the crushing weight. The woodmen and the children stood in horrified silence, but those who wept for their old comrade beheld a beautiful youth rising, wraith-like out of the branches. They saw a lovely spirit maiden join him at the edge of the forest, and watched them disappear. And they knew that Temsquah and Walohi were reunited at last, in the Land of Happy Spirits.

The portrayal of the story, with its prologue

and epilogue, was conducted entirely by means of pantomime and dancing. The very first scene was compelling; it seemed a sacrilege to break the beautiful illusion with applause, but when the handsome young Indian Prince had finished his Bow and Arrow dance, the on-lookers could no longer contain themselves. Untiring, they applauded the long list of dances, maiden offerings, harvest festivals, the tragic and dramatic pageant of the sacrifice, the gay and pretty Spanish numbers which relieved the pathos of the theme. They did their best to tempt the graceful leading couple to do an encore, but the play was going on. Bright shawls and mantillas gave way to satin ruffles and powdered wigs. Dainty minuets and gavottes preceded a colorful tableau in which Pierrot and his coy Pierrette danced before the ruffled lords and ladies. The final picture came—the spirit maiden and her Prince. It was some minutes before the audience awoke from their spell of amazement at the sheer beauty of it.

Author and director were called out again and again, and then there were calls for in-

dividual dancers, the blue jay, Pierrot and Pierrette, La Tzigane, the Spanish soloist.

Fay's versatility was well known in Lakrest, and she received a hearty ovation from her friends and dear ones. When it was discovered that it was she who had stepped into the breach at the last moment and improvised that beautiful Bow and Arrow dance, there were renewed cheers from those who knew her, and murmurs of incredulity from outsiders who could not reconcile the vigor of the strippling Indian Prince with this fairy-like child and her golden curls. Fay's success was undisputed. Even city critics had commented on her talent and prophesied a career for her.

At home, they wondered why Fay never brought up the subject of going on the stage, for now the time was ripe for such a discussion. Cristel felt sure that her father would never give his consent. She dreaded the day when the inevitable interview must take place. What would be the result?

She came home one day, and heard a great commotion in Fay's room. Looking in, she saw a chaos of books, music, and clothing,

strewn over bed and chairs, emptied bureau drawers standing wide open. A half-packed suit-case lay open on the floor, and in the midst of the chaos, Fay stood fuming and wreaking general devastation upon the books and clothing. Cristel's heart skipped a beat.

“Why, Fay!”

The younger sister seemed startled. She stopped her furious winding of a spool of ribbon and stood there, flushed and embarrassed. Cristel picked her way over the clutter, and slipped an arm around her, but Fay stood very rigid.

Cristel choked back the tirade of anxious inquiry and said merely, “I didn't know you were going away so soon. Can't I help you pack? This is a dreadful mess.”

With a deftness born of experience, she began to sort and fold garments, to put bureau drawers and closet to rights again. Quite matter-of-factly, she went about the business of packing that suit-case, and Fay, watching her, answered her inquiries only in monosyllables.

“This music will be dreadfully heavy to

carry. Why don't you pack it separately?" suggested Cristel nonchalantly.

There was no reply, and after another unanswered question, Cristel looked up to see Fay standing at the window.

"Don't you think the scarfs ought to go in here?" she repeated.

Suddenly Fay turned from the window. There were tears coursing down her cheeks. "I believe you all *want* me to go away," she wailed. "Even Daddy! What do I want in the city when I have Miss Emmerling and the wonderful school she is going to build up, right here?"

"Oh," said Cristel rather weakly, and then she sat in the middle of the floor and laughed till she cried.

"What's the matter?" frowned Fay.

"It's too funny," choked Cristel, "here I was, worried sick for fear you'd had a quarrel with Dad and had made up your mind to run away and try to go in the movies or something. I thought I'd try the effect of helping you to run, and I find that you don't even want to walk!"

Fay stood gaping. "It's you that are funny," she said at length. "What makes everybody think that I want to go on the stage? I got over that notion as soon as I began to study with Miss Emmerling. Dancing is most beautiful with a natural background, and outdoor pageantry is the highest form of the art."

It sounded more like Edith Emmerling than like Fay Thornton, but Cristel sighed with relief. She had once harbored visions of Fay, dancing in the spotlight, another Nadia. Now she knew that Fay would find her greatest happiness in the simple Lakrest pageants, and she was glad, for was it not further proof that Fay, like Miss Emmerling, loved dancing for its own sake, and that beauty, not fame, was what tempted her? Yes, Cristel was glad.

"But what," she began much puzzled, "what *were* you packing for, Fay?"

"To go south with Dad. He says I can get there in time for the opening of the Imperial Ballet School. Didn't seem to occur to him that I might not be interested in leaving Lakrest right now. But I don't want to,

really. I wouldn't miss the opening of Miss Emmerling's School of Pageantry, for anything."

"Why don't you explain to him? He will be pleased, I know."

When they talked it all over with Father that night, he smiled a slow, wise smile. "I think you've chosen very well, Fay," he said, "but even had you elected to follow Nadia, I could have trusted you, I know. I hope you'll all be as sincere and earnest about your work," he ended.

"Daddy," Cristel interjected, "you used to tell us that you hoped none of us would have careers outside of home; and now you *want* us to. When did you change your mind?"

Mr. Thornton smiled, and glanced across at his sister. "Well, I can't exactly say, but I think I *began* to change it, the moment I saw your Aunt Dorothy step off the train."

CHAPTER XXVI

BON VOYAGE!

MAY came, gloriously sunny one day, showery the next, and Cristel found herself "just like the weather." Aunt Dorothy had overstaid her leave of absence, but now she was making definite preparations for departure. Cristel, too, was assembling her wardrobe and other possessions, preparatory to an indefinite stay in Sacramento, but despite her fondness for new scenes and experiences, she was not looking forward with any particular joy to the position proffered by the Express Company. She would be lonesome, she knew, and even the week-ends at home would not seem just right, without Aunt Dorothy.

However, the days were not altogether gray. There was one particular morning when she came in from the post-office fairly beaming, and went directly to Dorothy's room.

"What's the good news?" Dorothy asked, shoving aside a pile of steamship circulars.

Cristel waved a check for reply.

“So you’ve been at it again?” Dorothy observed, with what Cristel considered surprising calmness. “But you ‘made it’ this time. I’ll wager the successful script was not a story.”

“No, just a little article about that quaint old mining town that we passed through, last month. It’s really only a page from my brown journal, and *The Wanderer* gave me ten dollars for it!”

Aunt Dorothy nodded wisely. “I told you so. Your brown journal is going to be your fortune, some day.”

“Oh-h-h,” a smile of comprehension slowly lighted Cristel’s face. “So that’s what you mean by saying that fiction isn’t my line. Facts, then? Journalism, I suppose you would call it?”

“Facts can be very fascinating,” Dorothy declared.

“But why are you so discouraging about my poor little manuscripts? One has to start, *sometime*.”

“Yes, but I should hate to see you follow

the course that I did. Too much discouragement is not good, at the beginning. Write all you want, but don't send things out until you're really ready to." This was D. A. Thornton, the efficient editorial adviser, speaking. Cristel was hurt and disappointed. "You're not really prepared to write for publication yet," Dorothy added, more gently. "It would be the same as if Fay got up to play a concerto before she had learned the first five positions."

Cristel was silent. Aunt Dorothy's disapproval was more discouraging than any rejection slip, and to-day,—this memorable day, she resented it a little. How could Aunt Dee be so sure that she was right? Other editors might not agree with her. Why should she promise to stick to the prosaic brown journal, when there were knights and fair ladies to tempt her fancy?

"You won't promise?" asked Dorothy, reading her face. Cristel remained silent. "If you will promise," Dorothy coaxed, "not to send anything out for the next two years, I'll guarantee that you'll have plenty of material

for your journal," she ended, with mysterious significance.

But Cristel still hesitated. "Two years, why, I'll be almost twenty-one by that time!"

"A ripe old age," commented Dorothy, gravely, "but at that, you'll still have fifty or sixty years in which to bombard the editors."

"But everyday things become so tiresome, sometimes," Cristel argued.

"Perhaps things won't be quite so everyday this next year."

At the expression in Dorothy's face, Cristel's antagonism suddenly vanished. "I guess you're right, Aunt Dee. I suppose it hurts my vanity to think that I must scribble in that journal for two years before I'll be ready to write anything fit to print. Yes, I'll promise, if you think it best."

Dorothy's frown disappeared in a beaming smile, and she squeezed Cristel's hand. "That's a good child. And I meant what I said about having plenty of material for the journal these next few months. Sit 'down, 'dear. I've something to tell you before Billee and Fay deprive me of the chance. They have been splendid

about keeping the secret, but I don't think that they'll be able to hold it much longer."

The last of Cristel's little fit of rebellion disappeared in a wave of curiosity.

"Of course you know that I am going back to New York for a time." Cristel knew only too well. "There are several matters to straighten out before I release my share of the business. But after that, I'm going to Europe, Cristel."

"Oh, that will be lovely for you, Aunt Dee. How I envy you!"

"Well, you needn't, because you're coming, too."

Dorothy thoroughly enjoyed the result of this startling announcement. Cristel's eyes grew big, she opened her mouth to speak, but could only gasp. Finally she brought out a breathless, "Wh-what did you say, Aunt Dee?"

"I said that I'm going to Europe, and that you're coming with me." Dorothy continued to smile at her stare of incredulity. "It's true," she assured her. "I've been thinking about it for months, and secured your father's

permission, weeks ago. 'Member the surprise that I said might be in store for some one? At first, I was undecided which one of you to take. It was that brown journal which settled the question."

It still seemed like an impossible dream. "Auntie, you don't really mean that *I'm* going to London with you, that *I'm* going to see Westminster Abbey, and London Bridge, and all the rest of it!"

"And all the rest of it," nodded Dorothy, hugely enjoying Cristel's delight and stupefaction.

When Cristel was finally persuaded that Aunt Dorothy was in earnest, she was beyond the power of expression. In fact, it took days, weeks, for her to realize that instead of a hot, dusty Express Office in Sacramento, she was to pass the ensuing months in the places that Dickens haunted, she was to see the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, to ride in a Venetian gondola, and hear a Berlin opera.

"What I've wished and longed for," she told Aunt Dorothy, over and over. "I just can't believe it's true!"

But it was true, and as the day of departure drew near, she spent long, thrilling hours poring over train schedules and steamer pamphlets.

“I knew it would be no end of fun to take you,” laughed Dorothy, more than once. “I never knew any one to be so thrilled over anything.”

What a whirl of excitement that last fortnight was—friends stopping them everywhere, or calling to leave a farewell gift, letters and wires, reservations, most thrilling of all, the itinerary to be mapped out! Billee and Fay were almost as excited as Cristel herself, though there were times when even Billee would be lost in a pall of envy. But both younger sisters were good sports, even to the point of that memorable *Bon Voyage* breakfast, the morning that the travelers took the train on the first lap of their journey.

It seemed that half of Lakrest was there, and so breakfast was served in the garden, at little tables set close together in a sociable group. Such a deal of excitement and laughter, despite the undercurrent of sadness always

present at a leave-taking! Cristel promised at least a hundred "postals from Paris." Dorothy went about smiling her inimitable smile, now graciously acknowledging some one's good wishes and explaining that Mr. Blake would be back in Lakrest at the same time as she, now teasing some adoring youngster who insisted upon discussing her going away in mournful tones.

Breakfast over, two sturdy youths rose and removed the golden ship from its pedestal to the table where sat the guests of honor. The little ship overflowed with a cargo of loving gifts, steamer letters and cards, all tokens of genuine regard. They opened one package after another. There were diaries, writing tablets, books, folding cases, coat-hangers,—everything to make the journey comfortable. Not for the world would Cristel have broken the seal of that thick letter "to be opened the third day at sea."

It was after the last gift had been opened and the girls began to sing to them, that the merriment completely died away, for it was time to say good-by. Dorothy rose and made

a pretty farewell speech for them both, and everybody smiled, rather crooked smiles, to be sure, but they were determined to make it a cheerful going away party.

The last guest left finally, and Cristel and Dorothy hurried up-stairs to put the final touches to their packing. Everything was ready at last, and they climbed into the machine to be whisked away to the station. The hardest good-bys were yet to come. They had to force themselves to speak gaily.

“I’ll sit on the suit-case, if it won’t bust open,” volunteered Billee.

“Billee,—still using that horrible word!” Cristel sighed.

“It just slipped out. Goodness, what’ll I do when you’re not around to stop it, Cris?” and they laughed shakily.

Cristel turned to bestow a last glance at the big brown house set in its trim lawn and grove of pines. “Europe will be twice as much fun, when I realize that I have that to come back to.”

“That from such an ardent travel enthusiast?” playfully remonstrated Dorothy.

“I’m afraid you’re ‘just a plain little home-body,’ after all.”

But now, Cristel only laughed. For a long time, she had been included when people spoke of “those talented Thornton girls,” but she was glad that she could be “a plain little home-body,” too.

THE END

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