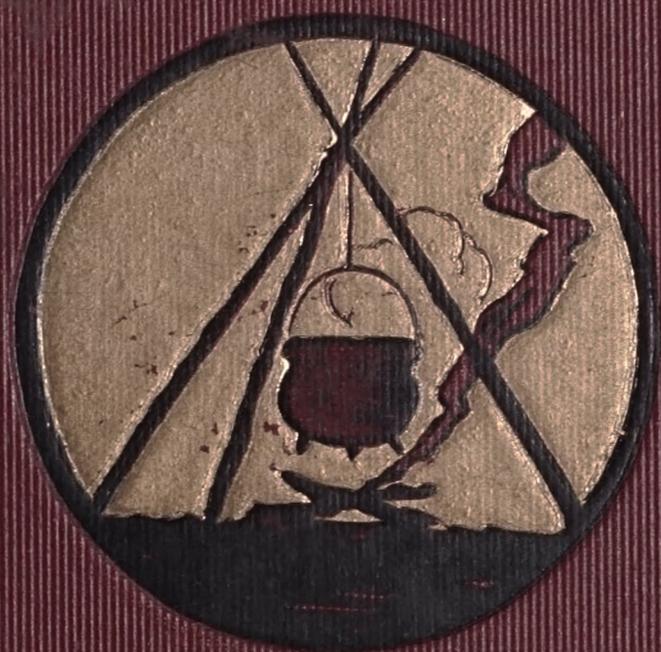


LUCILE ON THE HEIGHTS



ELIZABETH M. DUFFIELD



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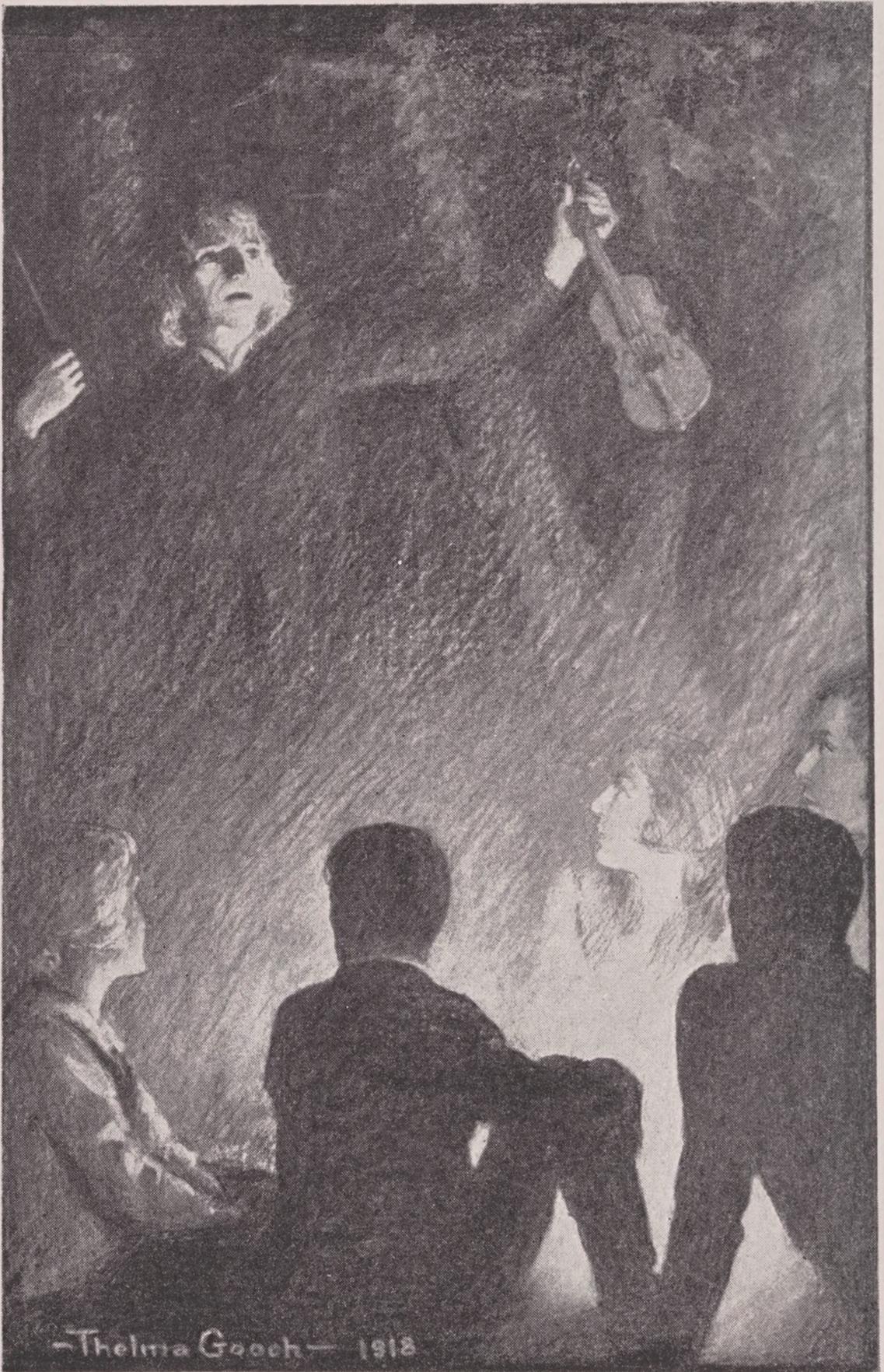
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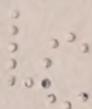


Forth from the bushes straight toward them staggered the musician. (Page 138.)

✓
LUCILE
ON THE HEIGHTS

BY
ELIZABETH M. DUFFIELD
11

ILLUSTRATED BY
THELMA GOOCH ✓



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LUCILE ON THE HEIGHTS

LUCILE ON THE HEIGHTS

CHAPTER I

LUCKY PENNY

“ARE we all here?”

Pretty Mrs. Wescott gazed about her distractedly at the laughing, chattering groups of young folks gathered on the station platform.

There were a great many of them,—little girls, big girls, pretty girls, plain girls, girls of every kind and every type, yet all united in their exuberant youthfulness and the wondrous spirit of adventure.

There were boys, too, many of them, also in varied stages of adolescence—the younger noisy and frankly excited, the older striving valiantly, albeit unsuccessfully to smother their enthusiasm beneath a cloak of elaborate unconcern more befitting their maturer years.

“Are we all here?” demanded Mrs. Wescott again, and at the repetition of the question her

husband turned to her with a boyish laugh.

“There’s one thing we forgot, Nellie,” he said, looking fondly down upon his pretty young wife. “But that one thing is apt to prove disastrous. How are we going to keep track of this army of youngsters without a roll call—”

“Roll call,” cried a pretty, fair-haired young person, the center of an animated group near them. “Who said that awful word? I thought we were going to forget school for one long, delicious summer and here it is, thrust right under our very noses by a person who calls himself our friend. Roll call, indeed—” and she sniffed, indignantly.

“I was afraid of it,” sighed Philip Payton, mournfully, adding, in a tone of gentle reproach, “I know how hard it is to live up to an ideal, but I hardly expected you to backslide so soon.”

Phil had improved a great deal since that eventful summer at Tanike—taller of stature, broader of shoulder with an alert carriage and a sense of humor always present, he was immensely popular among his mates, both girls and boys and many of

the former wondered at his unswerving devotion to Jessie—she of the bright hair and scathing tongue.

“Why, he really enjoys being snubbed,” one of them had remarked, upon the occasion of a neighborhood dance given at Jessie’s home. “Why, if a girl tries to be nice to him he actually looks bored.”

While this statement was undoubtedly an exaggeration of the facts, still it must be admitted that young Philip bore up not only remarkably well beneath the weight of sarcasm heaped upon him but, in the vernacular of the day, invariably and cheerfully “came back for more.”

So now at his enigmatic reference to backsliding, Jessie looked at him in mild surprise.

“Behold,” she declared, turning to the interested group about her, “we have with us to-day the Reverend Billy Sunday in the guise of Philip Payton. In what, kind sir, have I back slid—slidden—which is it—”

“Why,” Phil explained, patiently, “I overheard you telling some of the younger camp fire mem-

bers that since this summer was to be devoted to a fuller development of the camp fire ideals—”

“I know all that,” said Jessie, tapping an impatient foot upon the platform, “but please come to the point—what have I done?”

“Only declared your intention of breaking one of its foremost laws,” said Phil, sententiously. “The camp fire expressly commands you to pursue knowledge—wherever you are and whoever you are, any time and all the time—”

“Oh, you goose,” cried Jessie, clapping her hands over her ears, while the others laughed happily. “And all this comes from an innocent little remark about a roll call.”

“Where’s Lucile?”

A plump little person bustled up to Mr. and Mrs. Wescott and at the question all eyes were turned in their direction.”

“She was here just a minute ago,” the anxious bearer of ill tidings continued, “but you know how she is—never staying in the same place two seconds, and now she is gone.”

“Oh, dear, I knew it,” groaned Jessie. “Some-

one always turns up missing at the last minute—but I never expected it of Lucy. It's almost train time, too."

"Don't worry," Phil reassured her. "Lucile is a madcap, of course, but she and Jack between them will have sense enough not to miss the train. We have five minutes left yet, anyway."

"Five minutes," groaned Evelyn, for she it was indeed, plump of person, fair of hair and happily good humored, save in her frequent and sometimes peppery bouts with Jessie—who had thrown the upsetting facts like a bomb into the midst of their contentment. "Only five minutes and all our folks gathering to say good-bye. We can't go without Lucy!"

"We won't have to," said Mrs. Wescott, calmly, then added, with a sharp ring in her voice as a general movement was made to scatter and find the runaways. "Don't you move an inch, any one of you."

The young people paused on the verge of desertion, looking from their guardian to the rapidly increasing crowds of their relatives and friends, uncertain, perplexed.

Evelyn had been right—they could not go without Lucile. Lacking her vivid personality the summer would be “Hamlet”—with Hamlet left out! But if the train came and she were not there—

“It is bad enough,” Mrs. Wescott was explaining, “to lose two of you, but I don’t intend to take the risk of losing the rest. Lucile will be here in time and we can’t better matters any by trying to find her. Above all—don’t get excited!”

However, the last admonition might have been addressed to the empty air for all the effect it had upon the girls and boys. Flushed faces, heated voices and a running fire of comment attested amply to their state of mind—and it must be admitted that Mrs. Wescott herself was far from feeling the calm conviction she had so admirably voiced.

She turned to her husband with a little despairing gesture and he offered a practical suggestion.

“I see Mr. Payton and Mr. Sanderson coming down the avenue. Perhaps the father of the young lady can give a clue to her whereabouts.”

“Oh, he wont know any more than the rest of us—no one can keep track of Lucile,” she said, conviction in her tones, adding nervously, “but do go—he might be able to help us. Oh, Jack—”

He gave her a sunny, reassuring smile and hurried off to intercept Mr. Payton.

At that moment, the raucous sound of an engine whistle smote their ears like the knell of doom and the great locomotive thundered around the curve.

A murmur of pure dismay rose from the assembled young folks—one might have thought by their faces that a trying ordeal, rather than a summer full of fun, lay before them.

Phil ground his hands savagely into his pockets and muttered something inaudible.

Jessie, surprised as always to find herself relying completely upon Phil in the case of emergency, looked up anxiously into his set young face.

“Can’t we find her some way?” she asked, feeling actually frightened, then added, staunchly, “if Lucy misses the train, I’ll miss it too. Oh, Phil, could anything have happened to her?”

For answer Phil pointed up the avenue, relief banishing the anxiety from his face.

“There they come,” he cried, while they crowded about him, following the direction of his gaze. “Gee, they will have to run some if they expect to make the train.”

Everyone agreed with him—that their tense young faces testified. It was very evident that the two runaways would have to break all records if they intended to win the race.

The locomotive had grumbled to a noisy standstill, people had begun to pour into the cavernous depths of the cars and the two graceful, racing young figures were still a block away.

“We’ll make ’em wait,” said Jessie, grimly, as she was half helped, half pushed into the car. “If I had a pistol, I’d hold up the engineer.”

Luckily, it was not necessary to resort to such extreme measures. Lucile and Jack, very much out of breath, but laughing triumphantly, were handed through the crowd upon the platform and pushed unceremoniously up the steps and into the car.

Jessie sprang at her friend and caught her in a rapturous embrace.

“Lucy, how could you,” she was beginning, when that cyclonic young person dragged her over to the window and poked her pretty head through the opening.

“Good-bye, Dad,” she called, in a musical voice. “Tell Mother I left Mary that new recipe for brown bread and tell her not to worry about Peter—Mary has promised to take care of him. Good-bye—good-bye!”

The train moved off amid a very snow storm of white handkerchiefs from the car windows and an answering flurry from the waving, shouting people upon the platform.

Flushed, excited faces were withdrawn from the windows and a general accusing rush was made upon Lucile and her runaway partner.

“Why did you do it?” Jessie was inquiring, imperiously. “You had us all nearly worried to death. What did you do it for?”

Lucile’s laughing, vivid face assumed an expression of injured innocence.

“Just hear her,” she appealed to the young fellow at her side, who was looking down at her with an expression of whimsical amusement. “Anybody would think we had been committing a crime, instead of saving them a whole summer full of bad luck. Do you really want to know what it was we risked losing the train for?”

“Of course,” they answered impatiently, while even Mrs. Wescott’s expression of disapproval relaxed into a tolerant smile.

No one could long resist the naivete of Lucile’s assumption that all her youthful escapades were excusable because of the undeniable innocence of the motives underlying them. Lucile was a law unto herself, but a remarkably enchanting one.

“What was it?” they asked again with more impatience.

Lucile opened the little bag she carried, fumbled a moment therein, then held up for their curious inspection a small round copper object, set in a frame of silver.

“Superstition is not one of my many faults,” she assured them, gravely. “But without this

lucky penny the summer would have been ruined. I'm sure of it!"

For a moment they gazed blankly at the little object which had been the cause of so much disturbance, then broke into a ripple of laughter.

"Just the same," said Jessie, eyeing her friend shrewdly, "you needn't tell me you risked missing the train for a lucky penny. We all know you're foolish but that would be too much."

"Thanks," said Lucile, whimsically. "What it is to have a reputation."

"Jack, you tell us," said Jessie, turning in despair to her cousin.

"Why," said the latter, smiling down at Lucile, "it seems Lucile had taken down the canary's cage to say good-bye to him and in her excitement had neglected to replace the animal, I mean bird, on his hook."

"Oh," said Evelyn, primly. "How cruel—I thought they only did that to fish."

"No, you are wrong," said Phil, with a grin, "I've seen them do it to actors on their first night."

“Oh, do be quiet,” cried Jessie, disdainfully adding as she turned to Jack, “and you went back just to put the canary’s cage on a hook?”

“Well, you see,” Jack explained, looking around at the expectant group, “there is a cat at Lucile’s who has an unnatural appetite—especially for birds—”

“And she was afraid,” chuckled Phil, “that the cat and Peter,” ‘Peter’ being the bird, “might merge into one.”

Lucile laughed up at them demurely.

“Exactly,” she said, adding whimsically, “you’ve no idea what a fancy that cat has taken to Peter!”

CHAPTER II

HURRAH FOR THE MOUNTAINS

“WHERE else in the world would you rather be?”

The question was addressed to Lucile but Phil took it up, quickly, answering without a moment's hesitation—

“In the dining car.”

Two pairs of girlish eyes were focused intently upon him for an instant, then dropped disdainfully.

“Snubbed,” murmured Phil, whereupon Jessie giggled and Lucile laughed up into Jack's eyes.

“At ninety, Phil will be the same,” she said, adding whimsically, “it makes me feel bad to think how much time I've wasted trying to reform him. Such earnest effort deserves some sort of reward.”

“Gaze upon me,” Phil retorted, with characteristic modesty. “Gaze upon the perfect specimen of

manhood I represent and receive your reward. Why I—”

“Hush, Phil,” Jessie spoke in the tone of one soothing a fractious child. “You are spoiling the view. It looks so calm and peaceful—that cow, for instance—”

“Flattery can no further go,” cried Phil, resentfully. “To prefer the contemplation of a cow—to me—”

“Hush, dear, hush,” said Jessie, in the same calm voice. “You shall have your dinner soon and then you’ll feel better. What time is it, Jack?”

Laughingly, Jack produced his watch and pronounced the hour to be high noon, lacking about fifteen minutes.

“You haven’t answered my question, yet,” he said in a lower tone to Lucile. “Where else would you rather be?”

Lucile drew a long breath and looked about her dreamily. The four young people were seated on the observation platform where they could enjoy the air, the sunshine, the beauty of the racing landscape better than in the heated atmosphere of the car.

And now, Lucile's eyes, returning from their lazy survey met Jack's ardent gaze and suddenly dropped.

"There's just one place," she replied, with a catch in her breath, "where I'd rather be."

"And that?" he queried, without taking his eyes from her averted face.

"A mountain lake," she answered dreamily. "With a background of dense woodland, with little white tents dotting its banks—"

"And a moon," he added, as she paused, lost in the contemplation of the picture she had conjured up. "There must be a moon."

"Naturally—and stars—and the glow of a camp fire in the distance—"

"And the smell of frying fish," said Phil, adding, in defiance of the withering scorn in Jessie's eyes. "Ah, what could be more beautiful, more romantic, more inspiring than the smell of frying fish. Words cannot describe—"

"Then why waste them?" Jessie cut in, exasperated, while Jack and Lucile laughed delightedly. "You're ever so much more attractive on the rare occasions when you're not talking."

“Just the same,” Lucile twinkled. “I’m not so sure he wasn’t inspired that time, Jessie, dear. Think how empty our mountain scene would be without the smell of frying fish. Then you can appreciate the real poetry of Phil’s idea.”

“Thanks, sweet sister,” said Phil, adding, ruefully, “I’m not so sure the mountain scene would be the only empty thing, either.”

Even Jessie dimpled at this and it was some minutes before Jack thought to ask, “now that we have a romantic setting for our story, let’s go on.”

Lucile opened her pretty eyes wide.

“How can we?” she said. “The setting is the only part we know anything about. The story will have to tell itself. Oh, Jack,” she lifted her arms above her head and breathed deep of the rushing air. “I can’t seem to bring myself down to earth at all. The whole wonderful scheme seems like a dream.”

“Yes, doesn’t it?” Jessie took her up. “To think that we could get them all together—dear little Margaret and Marion and all of them. Oh, it’s

too altogether good to be true. And Mr. Westcott was dear to leave his business and come with us to keep the boys in order—goodness knows they need it badly enough,” this last with a little mischievous glance into the eyes of the very self-possessed young man at her side.

“Well, I happen to know one of them that doesn’t,” he remarked urbanely, adding, with a significant glance at her impish face, “no one person can be expected to serve two masters.”

Jessie flushed as she did often in these days in her conversations with Phil, started to speak, thought better of it, and remained silent, her gaze fixed upon the racing countryside.

Lucile and Jack seemed also to have touched upon too personal subjects and the silence remained unbroken between them.

These four young people had for years been so intimately, so closely associated that silences were as frequent and as well understood between them as speech could be.

Suddenly Lucile spoke, plucking the idea, as it were, from mid air.

"Have you heard whether Marion's brother will be able to leave his practice long enough to join us in the mountains? Last I heard, he was rather uncertain."

"Is yet, I guess," said Jessie, shortly. "Nobody seems to know much about him—even Marion. I'm not lying awake nights worrying about him."

"Good," said Phil, heartily. "I'm the only one I'll let you do that for—"

"As if I would," Jessie was beginning when Lucile interrupted with a thoughtful question.

"Why do you dislike him, dear? He has always seemed to me a very likable sort of fellow—good looking and good natured. All the girls like him."

"Perhaps that's why I don't." The tone sounded unreasonably vindictive and Lucile and the two boys looked at her in surprise. "And perhaps," she added, meaningly, "it's simply because I'm so very fond of little Margaret Stillman."

Lucile gave a start and looked at her keenly. So Jessie had noticed it too—well, it wasn't strange.

Since that memorable moment the summer before when David Cathcart, Marion's brother and the hero of the hour, had staggered up the beach, a bedraggled but unmistakably heroic figure, little Margaret Stillman had just as unmistakably given her heart into his keeping.

During the year that had followed, Margaret had naively and unconsciously revealed herself in a hundred different ways to the affectionate and frankly interested girls, yet the silence upon the subject had remained unbroken until the moment.

David Cathcart himself seemed to be the only one entirely oblivious of the existing state of affairs. Several times during the preceding winter he had come to Burleigh with Marion to attend some little social function given by the girls but had never shown the slightest preference for Margaret—but on the contrary, had devoted himself almost entirely to Lucile—as much, that is, as Jack would permit.

Consequently, the girls had worried not a little and, having instituted themselves, ever since their first meeting with Margaret, a volunteer body-

guard to protect the little rich girl from all hurts as far as was in their power, had secretly concocted all sorts of plans to throw the two together and thus assure happiness for their pet protégé.

This object had been at the root of their invitation to the young lawyer to spend as much of the summer as he could spare from his rapidly growing law practice at their camp in the mountains.

It was of Margaret, Lucile was so intently thinking, yet Jack found himself wondering if, after all, she might not care for that young upstart lawyer. At the thought he clenched his hands savagely at his side.

"Oh, well," cried Lucile, and there was a little joyous tremor in her voice that somehow reassured Jack, "who cares whether he comes or not. A whole glorious camp fire summer is before us and nothing else matters. Oh, I'm happy, happy!"

"And think of the chance it gives us," Jessie took her up eagerly. "Why it's just exactly as we dreamed it—only better. Do you remember how we used to plan for a great big reunion of all our

camp fire girls, Lucy? And it never seemed possible till this summer."

"Do I remember?" Lucile's eyes were shining. "Why, when I think how the club has grown and realize that we were actually the founders of it, I feel like crowing. It's been a long time since that first summer of ours at Mayaro, yet it seems to me I can remember every little incident as though it happened yesterday. If this summer is only half as wonderful—"

"Well, I like that," Phil had been silent for an unusually long time—both he and Jack had been contentedly studying the lovely picture the two pretty, excited girls made for them and till now both had been reluctant to break the spell. However, Phil could never let a challenge pass unnoticed.

"I like that," he continued. "How can you compare the two summers when in one you had not the inspiration of our company and in the other you have? The difference is self-evident."

"That's why we have our doubts about this summer," said Jessie, serenely. "Goodness knows, we did our best to discourage you."

"All bluff," said Phil, grinning. "You knew you couldn't do it."

Lucile chuckled. "The only time we came anywhere near it," she remarked, wickedly, "was when Mr. Wescott suggested that if we camped too far from town it would be hard to get supplies. I'd give a dollar for one glimpse of your face as it looked then."

Phil rubbed his countenance ruefully.

"I never knew my looks were an asset," he said, to which Jessie promptly and cheerfully replied, "they aren't."

"Never mind, old man," Jack laughed as, in his chagrin, Phil whistled long and dolefully. "At that you're better off than I. No one ever offered two cents for a look at me—let alone a dollar."

"Oh, I'd give two cents any time," said Lucile, generously and was rewarded by a look that sent her blood racing. "That is almost any time," she added, hastily.

"Hello, you people!" As Marion Cathcart stood in the doorway, smiling round at them she was the very picture of happy, hearty girlhood. Certainly

the camp fire had worked wonders for her. "Mrs. Wescott wants to know if you don't intend to eat to-day."

Phil groaned, lifted Jessie to her feet and gently but very firmly propelled her through the doorway.

"And I always," he was saying in a tone of protest, "have given Mrs. Westcott credit for being a lady of unusual intelligence. How could I have made such a mistake?"

Lucile and Jack, alone on the platform, laughed into each other's eyes.

"He wouldn't be half as dear if he weren't so foolish." Phil's sister commented cryptically.

"Does one have to be foolish to qualify?" Jack countered whimsically.

"Not always," she answered, then added, wickedly as they started through the car. "But then, Jack, you know you are terribly silly sometimes!"

If they had only been alone then—but Lucile had seen to that!

CHAPTER III

BRANDENBURG'S BEST

"BETTER get your things together, folks."

Mr. Jack Wescott, looking scarcely a day older than he had five years ago on the memorable occasion when he had so informally and unexpectedly introduced himself to our girls, paused to smile down upon them.

At his announcement several pairs of bright eyes were focused upon him in surprise.

"Are we as nearly there as that?" queried Evelyn, breathlessly. "Jessie, what did you do with my things?"

"Goodness," retorted Jessie, eyeing her empty candy box resentfully, "I'm the one to ask that. Where did you put all my candies?"

"Where did you suppose I'd put 'em?" Evelyn returned, complacently. "In the hatrack?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Jessie, adding with a chuckle, "somebody dropped a chocolate

in the old maid's seat over there and she nearly sat on it."

"Yes, and if it had been a snake, she couldn't have looked more disgusted," Marjorie added, twinkling.

"You notice she ate it just the same when no one was looking," Evelyn put in with a chuckle. "Maybe the poor old thing thought it would sweeten her up some."

"Is that why you ate so many?" Jessie queried innocently, and almost had a book thrown at her.

At this propitious minute Lucile came flying through the car and, flinging herself upon the arm of the seat, laughed up at Mr. Wescott.

"There's a very pretty lady," she twinkled, "asking for you in the other car, Mr. Jack Wescott. If I were you I wouldn't keep her waiting—she's in a terrible hurry for something."

"Thanks for the advice, Miss Mischief," he mocked her. "As usual, it is well worth following."

Lucile watched his broad back out of the car, then turned to her companions excitedly.

"Girls," she cried, "there's a garage in Brandenburg and we're going to hire automobiles to carry us and our luggage to the lake. Think of it—an automobile ride of twenty miles or more, straight into the heart of the mountains. Oh, I can't sit still."

"But we couldn't ride all the way—"

"Of course not. I understand there's a rocky pass—isn't it romantic—leading from the road straight up the mountain side. Then there's the lake and goodness knows what besides. Good-bye, I'm off to help our guardian. She's having no end of trouble trying to keep track of everybody."

The girls looked after her pretty figure in its trim tan travelling suit, then turned to each other smiling.

"Isn't that just like Lucy," Evelyn commented, fondly. "She never seems to realize how awfully hard it is to keep track of her. And isn't she pretty?"

"She gets prettier all the time," said Margaret generously, although a wistful expression crept

into her eyes. "I don't wonder everybody loves her—they can't help it."

At this moment an effective end was put to the conversation by the arrival, in force, of the male members of the party. They all carried suitcases and looked decidedly warm and uncomfortable.

"Say," murmured Phil, putting his bag down and mopping his fevered brow with a large silk handkerchief, "make believe I won't be glad to escape from this oven. It must be a hundred and ten in the shade."

"Never mind," said Jessie, complacently, "just think of a nice cool mountain lake with trees all around—"

"If you don't get your things ready," Phil retorted unexpectedly, "you won't have a chance at that nice cool mountain lake. Do you happen to know that in just eleven and one quarter minutes by my chronometer we arrive?"

The girls cried out in mingled dismay and delight and for some time thereafter confusion reigned.

When, exactly ten minutes later, the train drew

in at the little mountain station of Brandenburg, depositing a very stream of expectant, happy-eyed young people, one could more fully appreciate Lucile's elation at being the founder of so splendid and thriving an organization.

The girls had long looked forward to just such a summer as this, a summer when all the members of the camp fire could get together for one glorious season in the mountains, when the lofty aims and high ideals of the organization could be brought to a fuller fruition.

It had been Mrs. Wescott's idea in broaching the plan to chaperone the girls for a limited period—not more than a month or six weeks at the outside, but Phil and Jack had promptly and despotically altered the plans.

“Why in the world couldn't they go as well as the girls? Wasn't camping primarily a fellow's sport, anyway and besides—suppose way up there in the mountains they should meet with a bear or something—what do girls know about shooting bears—” and so forth until, in complete weariness, Mrs. Wescott had been forced to listen to them and even promise to think it over.

That she had thought it over to a successful conclusion had been proven when, upon one eventful day, Lucile had received a letter from her, announcing that the plan was not, after all, impossible.

Mr. Wescott, sympathizing strongly in anything that interested the boys, very suddenly decided that a vacation was a necessity and volunteered to head the boys' camp, if they were really in earnest about the thing.

When an hour or so later Lucile, having called a special meeting, read the welcome news to a hilarious audience, even Mr. Wescott would have had no further doubt as to the sincerity and enthusiasm of their desire for the expedition.

So, it had been settled. All the boys who had sisters among the camp fire girls had been asked as a matter of course and a few others, chums of Phil's among the older boys, had been admitted to the magic circle.

There were only four, Jack, Jim, Dave and Ray—Jack's cousin—who were not residents of Burleigh. Jack, who had finished his junior year

at college with honors, had heartily agreed with his parents in their laudible surmise that a rest was just what he needed to "set him up" for his senior year—and so had signed his name to the list of the lucky.

Jim, who, as my readers may remember, had been studying engineering under the excellent guidance of young Mr. Wescott, was anxiously looking forward to joining them for the duration of his three weeks vacation. As for Dave, well, as Jessie had said, no one, least of all himself, knew whether he would be able to leave his work. With this one exception, the invitations had been answered heartily and unanimously in the affirmative.

"Oh, look at the old bus!"

It was Phil who uttered the irrelevant comment. His gaze was fixed in awed and fervent wonder upon the aged chariot that was being backed haltingly and with much coughing protest from the rickety building over which hung the antique sign—"Brandenburg Garage."

Jessie, following the direction of his gaze, giggled hysterically.

"It is absurd," she agreed. "If things gain in value in proportion to their age—"

"The thing ought to be worth a million," grinned Phil. "Hi there, Jack—do they really expect us to ride in that jitney?"

"As long as it holds out," Jack returned. "If what I hear is true that antiquated apology for a gasoline car is the *creme de la creme* of the whole outfit. Only the *élite* of Brandenburg are allowed to ride in it."

"Oh, heavens," groaned Phil. "And we have come two hundred miles for this."

"Phil Payton," Lucile rebuked him, striving to look severe, "you know very well, this is not what we came for. And anyway, it's going to be tremendously exciting. Just imagine stalling the engine in the middle of a mountain and sliding down backwards—it's almost sure to happen—"

"Well, if that's your idea of a good time," Phil was beginning when Mr. Wescott commanded attention.

"We have commandeered two cars," he said, "such as they are—for ourselves and two more

for the luggage, tents and other paraphernalia. Even at that, I'm afraid it will take a good deal of squeezing to accommodate you all—but as we have already exhausted the resources of the Brandenburg Garage that can't be helped. Come on, all of you—let's get busy."

Amid a great deal of laughter and happy confusion the packing was effected and the halting, sputtering machines were started off for their long run over mountain roads.

However, it was necessary to pass through the little mountain town before reaching the open road and the young folks were greatly interested by the quaintness and picturesqueness of the place.

"Isn't it darling?" Lucile cried, her eyes sparkling. "Why they have a little bit of everything," as they passed the pretty little hotel, set far back from the road and surrounded by immense shade trees. "It looks like the places you read about in the travel magazines."

"Lucy, look." Evelyn pointed excitedly through the trees. "Am I crazy, or is that a moving picture place?"

"Both," said Phil, wickedly. "However," he added, studying the queer little building with interest, "that is something of a poser. After this, I wouldn't be surprised to hear they had set up a nickette at the north pole for the benefit of the Eskimos. Gee, the world has gone movie-mad."

"But, the kind of pictures you would see there," said Jack, adding, with a twinkle, "camping so far from civilization has its advantages. Say, look at that view, folks—now we are seeing something!"

They had swung off into the open road and before them the narrow ribbon streamed away, densely bordered on either side, rising upward, ever upward till it seemed to merge with the gleaming azure brilliance of the sky.

Spicy, pungent odors assailed them from every side, birds serenaded them joyously, the rushing winds cooled their faces and the spicy mountain air went to their heads like wine.

"Oh, breathed Evelyn, devoutly. "If we only had a hundred miles to go instead of twenty—"

“Huh,” grunted Phil, the practical. “If we manage twenty miles in this old jitney we’ll be luckier than we deserve. Of course, it’s fine now, but just wait till we get our first break-down.”

“Phil, stop croaking,” Lucile demanded. “Nothing has happened yet—”

“But soon,” finished Phil, as they bumped amid an ominous rattling of ancient machinery over an uneven place in the road. “Say, I bet our chauffeur is the best little gambler in gay Brandenburg—the way he’s taking chances with this old hack! Whew, look at that hill ahead of us—hold your seats and keep your hats, folks—”

The girls giggled but found it very wise to follow his advice as the car flew and rattled and bumped down the steep incline.

As they reached the bottom the reckless chauffeur whirled them round a bend in the road and very nearly precipitated an appalling accident.

The driver of a wagon coming toward them pulled his horse sharply to one side, giving voice meanwhile to unprintable exclamations—the car skidded uncertainly on the very edge of a hun-

dred foot drop, then rallied and regained the middle of the road.

It speaks well for the girls and boys that not one of them uttered an exclamation—only the whiteness of their faces as they turned to each other testified to the terror of the moment. Instinctively the boys had thrown themselves before the girls as though to receive the shock of impact first.

“Lucile,” whispered Jack, leaning toward her anxiously, “were you hurt—you look pale—Lucile—”

Lucile shook her head and tried to smile, though her lips were still trembling.

“Not a bit,” she assured him, bravely. “Only a little frightened—that valley looked so terribly far off.”

“Hang the fellow,” Phil was growling viciously, as he gently patted Jessie's hand. “What does he think he's doing, anyway—running a marathon? I've a good mind to knock him into the middle of next week and take charge of the party myself. Gee, that was a close shave.”

"You said it," Jack agreed. "I don't mind a little honest danger, but when it comes to suicide—"

"He's slowing down, now," Evelyn interrupted in a quavering voice. "Perhaps he's decided to go more carefully the rest of the way."

"More likely he's run out of gasoline," said Phil, gloomily. "I've had a premonition all along that it would happen. Didn't I tell you?"

This last exclamation was caused by the sudden and complete stopping of the machine. The chauffeur turned a dolorous and bleary old face to them and to the others of the party, who had come up and were waiting in some surprise and uneasiness for an explanation.

"'Tain't no use," he said with an air of finality. "The durned thing's broke and ye'll heve ter wait while I go back to town for help."

CHAPTER IV

RECKLESS DRIVING

FOR a moment no one stirred. All were gazing in dismay upon the bucolic and decidedly unattractive countenance of the man who had made this startling statement.

"You mean," said Mr. Wescott, coming around to the front of the car, "that you will have to borrow one of the other machines, go way back to Brandenburg, get the damaged parts and then keep us waiting while you repair the thing? What time do you propose to get us to the lake?"

The indifferent Mr. Simms shrugged his shoulders carelessly and gazed speculatively up at the sky before replying.

"Can't be helped," he said, then. "The car's broke an' it's got to be fixed—that is, 'less you're cal'latin' to walk t'other fifteen miles. 'Tain't no other way that I knows on."

Mr. Wescott stomped up and down the road

for a moment, then broke forth impatiently.

“Very well, be as quick as you can with it, then. And please keep in mind the very important fact that we have no time to waste!”

The occupants of the second car jumped out upon the road and after a great many attempts during which the machine nearly turned a somersault down the side of the mountain, Silas Simms succeeded in turning it and heading it back toward Brandenburg.

“I might,” remarked Phil as they started off to explore the woods in different directions, resolved to make the best of their more or less indefinite stay, “I might, if I had a mean disposition, remark that I told you so. From the moment I laid eyes on that old bug—”

“Don’t you suppose,” said Jessie, in exasperation, “that we all felt the same way? Goodness, I was so shaken up by that near collision it seems good to be on solid ground again.”

Lucile chuckled. “Did you see the driver’s face as we went by?” she asked, dimpling. “It didn’t seem at all funny to me then.”

“What particularly impressed me,” Jack remarked, “was his wonderful command of the English language. For a while there, the air was indigo.”

“Gee, and I missed it,” said Phil, dolefully, adding with a sudden ray of hope, “I don’t suppose you could repeat some of it, Jack—”

“No,” he couldn’t,” said Lucile, collapsing on a stone near the roadway and looking up at them laughingly. “Whatever other faults Jack has, he is usually a gentleman—pardon me, I mean always, of course.”

“Much better,” said Jack, quizzically. “I wish you wouldn’t make so many slips. People might begin to think after a while there was a reason for them.”

“To change the subject,” said Phil, flinging himself upon the ground munching a bit of winter-green root, “I shouldn’t wonder if the weather were getting ready to add to our misfortunes.”

They looked quickly up at the leaden sky, then turned to each other with the resignation born of despair. Jessie sat down beside Lucile and put an arm about her.

"If it rains," she said, decidedly, "I will give up. Automobile wrecked, fifteen miles from camp, hungry as a wolf—"

"Or pack of 'em," suggested Phil.

"And a deluge threatening. Could anything be worse?"

"Lots," said Lucile, complacently brushing a spider from the skirt of her dress. "Suppose we had been a quarter of an inch nearer the edge of the road when the car skidded on the curve—"

"Lucy, don't—"

Lucile laughed whimsically.

"You asked me," she said. "Besides, if we believe that a poor beginning makes a good ending—"

"We ought to end up by finding a couple of treasures or something," Jack finished, adding, irrelevantly, "Gad, Phil you were right—it is going to rain."

As he spoke they espied Evelyn running toward them, breathless and excited.

"Mrs. Wescott wants you," she said. "We're going to find some place of shelter before the

storm breaks. Oh, hurry, they say these mountain storms are terrible.”

As they made their way over roots and undergrowth toward the road, Jack slipped his arm through Lucile's and held her back a little.

“You're not dressed for a storm, Lucile,” he said. “If you should get cold up here, there's no telling whether we'll be able to get a doctor in forsaken Brandenburg.”

“The chances are against it,” she laughed, then looking up and finding him quite earnest she added, “You're a dear to worry about me, Jack, but really you mustn't. I've always been most unromantically healthy.”

For a moment he studied the rosy cheek and the pretty way her dark hair curled, then said, irrelevantly, “Why don't you ever look at me any more?”

Lucile glanced up quickly, started to protest, then laughed mischievously.

“Why, I never knew I didn't,” she said whimsically. “Being modest, you probably wouldn't believe it, Jack, but—there are worse things to look at!”

She curtseyed to him merrily and before he could protest was off fleetfoot to join the others.

It might have comforted him somewhat had he guessed that deep down in her heart his accusation was to some extent absurdly true.

“But now,” she decided, with a vigorous little shake of her head, “now that he has noticed it, all such foolishness must stop—of course.”

And the decision and her excitement made her so amazingly pretty that even in their preoccupation her friends turned to look at her twice. However, as time and storm wait for no man, they soon forgot other considerations in the pressing business of the moment.

Mr. and Mrs. Wescott were giving directions fast and furiously and the girls and boys were scattering like bees to execute them.

If there were any place in the vicinity that might afford them shelter of any kind, that place, to quote Mr. Wescott, must be found without a minute's delay. The three rustic chauffeurs had been severally questioned but had offered little encouragement.

One of them had mentioned a "queer" house three or four miles along the road but that three or four miles could never be traversed in time to avoid the storm. If they could find some shelter near by—a barn, a hut, an overturned wagon, anything would do. And so the boys had rushed off in different directions upon a very vague but nevertheless engrossing errand.

At the end of five minutes, Mr. Wescott, according to a prearranged signal, blew his whistle and the company once more reassembled in the middle of the road, uncertain what course to follow.

"Not a thing in sight," was the verdict and Mr. Wescott turned with decision to the remaining automobiles.

"We'll have to pack in some way," he said, then turned to the three men who were standing in loose-limbed attitude against three convenient trees.

"Suppose you take us to that house you mentioned. I don't care how queer it may be as long as it's water-tight. Come on, girls, jump in—and boys, I guess you will have to make yourselves

more or less miserable on the running boards."

They clambered in happily and before they fairly got settled the rattling machines were travelling at breakneck speed over the uneven road.

"Hold on," cried Lucile, as they swerved perilously around a sharp turn. "Goodness, if we don't get killed this time it will be just luck. Boys, don't let them shake you off."

"They couldn't pry me loose with a lever," said Jack, resentfully. "Not while Phil's resting his two hundred pounds on my left foot. Try the right one, Phil—you'll find it a lot more comfortable."

"I'm just passing it on," grinned Phil. "I bet Barney Davis weighs three hundred without his overcoat. Gee, he added, with a chuckle, "I'd hate to be one of those guys just now who hang around the beaches and offer to guess your weight for a nickel. I'd guess old Barney's at about five hundred and lose his money. Say, that was some jolt."

"Oh," cried Jessie, who was sitting upon Lucile's lap and striving unsuccessfully to retain her

balance and her dignity at the same time, "I expect every minute to look up and see you boys sitting in the middle of the road."

"In view of the rather steep descent at our right," said Jack, cheerfully regarding a drop of nearly two hundred feet straight down the side of the mountain, "I should say you would be mighty lucky to see us sitting in the road. Gad, that would be a pretty fall."

The girls cried out and Lucile commanded him with a little shudder "not to say such things."

"It's raining," cried Jessie, gazing in dismay at a big glistening splash on the back of her hand. "I've felt half a dozen drops and there's a great big one on the tip of Evelyn's nose. Looks like a dew drop in the heart of a rose."

"If you are trying," said Evelyn, "to be poetical, all right—but if you mean to imply that my nose is red—"

"Not at all," denied Jessie, while the others laughed at Evelyn's ferocious expression. "The rose I had in mind was of an exquisite pure white variety, with petals of velvet and a heart of gold—"

"Jessie Sanderson," cried the exasperated Evelyn, "if you don't stop waving your arms around like the inmate of an insane asylum—"

"Don't blame her for acting natural," murmured Phil, while Jessie glared resentfully, and Evelyn went on unheeding.

"I'll just drop Marjorie over the side of the mountain and send you after her. A beautiful blush rose with a heart of gold—indeed!"

Marjorie Hanlan, who had been with our girls during the eventful summer at the seaside the year before and who was now reposing none too lightly upon poor Evelyn's devoted knee, looked alarmed.

"For goodness' sake, Jessie," she exclaimed, "stop acting natural. Just say something nice and sensible and calm her down. She's apt to carry out her threat and at this point it would be too easy to have any fun in it. Oh dear, we're going to get soaked."

"There are some advantages in being the under dog, Evelyn," Lucile chuckled. "At least they catch the rain first."

"Oh, so that's the idea." Jessie stood up indignantly but the next moment was thrown back upon Lucile with a force that was both undignified and disconcerting—a fact that was attested to by unsympathetic laughter from the boys.

"If you know when you're well off, young lady," Phil warned her, "you'll stay put. These roads are not like our roads in Burleigh. Say, fellows, turn up your collars—we're running into a flood!"

And indeed, from that time on, they forgot to joke in the effort to protect themselves in some measure from the fury of the downpour.

The owners of the Brandenburg Garage had evidently considered tops of any sort on their cars as mere frivolous accessories which could not, under any circumstances be made to serve a useful purpose.

The girls would have given a great deal for the protection of one now but—what was the use of grumbling? One could not expect all the comforts of city life in the mountains. Besides, they had come way out here to go camping and that meant that occasional hardships and mishaps were to be

taken philosophically and made the best of. Grumbling never did any good—one was always sure to remember and feel sorry when the sun came out.

So, when Lucile looked over at Evelyn there was a wry little smile on her lips.

“If rain water improves the complexion,” she said, “we ought to all be Cleopatras or Helens of Troy by the time we reach that house, wherever it is.”

“Huh,” grunted Jessie, refusing to be comforted. “I may look beautiful, but I must say I don’t feel it. Goodness, boys, you’re a sight.”

“Thanks,” grinned Phil, twisting about so he could look at her, “same to you—and many of them. If we don’t get to that confounded place soon, Jet, you’ll turn into a little puddle and run away.”

“I feel like one,” said Jessie, mournfully, forgetting in her misery to resent his remark. “I couldn’t be wetter if I stayed out here a week.”

Jack roused himself from an absorbed contemplation of a little dark curl that lay against Lu-

cile's wet cheek and waxed suddenly indignant.

"What did that old hayseed mean by saying it was only three or four miles to the house he spoke of? We've ridden at least six since then and we're still going. How about it, old man?" this last was delivered in a raised voice to the stooped back of the chauffeur in front. The weather is all that keeps this ride from being a thing of joy forever. Is it much farther?"

"'Bout a mile," said the man, indifferently. "Then I don't know's you can break in."

The girls looked at each other in consternation.

"Not get in," Evelyn was beginning when Phil interrupted impatiently.

"Don't let that worry you," he said, grimly. "If they don't let us in, we'll break in, that's all. Here's where we fellows take our first lesson in the art of housebreaking. Just watch our smoke."

"More slang," Lucile was beginning, but Jessie broke in fervently.

"Don't stop him, Lucy," she begged, adding, ecstatically, "smoke—just think of the visions evoked by that one short word. Why it makes

you think of a fire and warmth and dry clo—”

“And frying fish,” finished Phil, drolly. “I told you you’d see the poetry in that idea sometime.”

“Poetry,” cried Jessie, rapturously, “why, it’s more than poetic—it’s heavenly. Forgive me, Phil, I’ll never laugh at you again.”

“Is that a promise?” said Phil, eagerly.

Before she could answer, Marjorie gave a bounce that drew a groan from Evelyn, the long suffering, and cried out—

“Look—there’s a house—to the left through the trees. See, it’s got a white roof, green shutters, and—everything.”

In her excitement she bounced again, causing Evelyn to protest volubly but her voice was drowned in a shout of relief as the car swung out of the main road and up the narrow drive that led to the house.

“Say, I’m glad to be here,” said Phil, as he jumped from the running board to the ground at great peril to his neck. “Come on, Jack—here’s where we try our second-story job!”

CHAPTER V

THE "QUEER" HOUSE

THE house was a quaint little place in itself but its drawn blinds and general appearance of non-habitation availed little in raising the rather bedraggled spirits of the girls.

They followed the boys slowly and waited while they pulled the old door bell and listened for some response to its discordant jangling within the house.

None came, however and by the time the other members of the party had arrived, surrounding them with eager questionings, they were ready to do almost anything to gain admittance.

"What shall we do," cried Lucile, puckering her pretty forehead and turning, as ever to her guardian for advice. "The boys want to break in one of the windows but if anybody should live here—"

"It would look rather queer," agreed Mrs. Wescott, smiling. "However, anything is better than this. What do you say, Jack?"

"Oh, let the boys do their worst," voted Mr. Jack Wescott, impulsively. "I don't think the sternest judge in the county would convict us under the circumstances. Come, boys, let's try the doors and windows first."

With a whoop of delight the boys dashed off, resolved to find some way of forcing an entrance.

The girls and their guardian, left alone on the porch, looked at each other, smiled, then began to laugh merrily.

"Oh, dear," gasped Evelyn, "I wish I could get a picture of us now. I'd entitle it 'Wandering Waifs in the Woodland Wilds' or something equally euphonious."

"U-what?" queried Marjorie. "I don't mind being called a waif, but that other thing—"

"Can't blame me," retorted Evelyn. "I caught it from Jessie. She's always going off half-cocked that way."

"A ray of hope in the darkness," said

Jessie, prayerfully. "Just when I had begun to despair of ever teaching you anything."

"Step right this way, ladies." The door opened and Phil, wearing his best smile, stood before them. "Everything ready for the entertainment of motor parties—especially those caught in the rain. Accommodations of the very best—steam heat, electric light, running water, fresh headed chicken, parsley on the ear—"

"Phil Payton, get out of the way."

Jessie made a dash for the doorway and the other girls, released from the spell of his oratory, followed.

What was their surprise to find themselves in a small, but well furnished hall, with two low-ceiled rooms, also well furnished, leading off from either side. The owners, whoever they might be, had evidently left the place very recently for there was not a speck of dust anywhere.

The girls stopped uncertainly and looked at their guardian, while the rest of the boys, realizing that an entrance had been effected, crowded in behind them.

“What’s up?” cried one of them. “Get out of the way, girls—we want to see the show,” and they wedged in, excitedly exclaiming over their good luck.

“Say, this is ripping.”

“Couldn’t have provided a better half-way house myself.”

These and other comments made such a deafening uproar that Mr. Wescott was forced to blow his whistle to make himself heard.

“First of all,” he said, when some sort of order had been gained, “I might suggest that we adjourn to the kitchen somewhere in the rear where we won’t ruin everything with our dripping clothes.”

As they obediently followed the leader, Lucile grasped Jessie’s hand, while her eyes shone with excitement.

“This is an adventure,” she said. “I feel like Goldylocks breaking into the house of the three bears. If only the bears don’t come home, we may get out of it alive. If they do—”

“We’ll kill ’em and eat ’em for supper,” said Jessie, ferociously. “They say bear steaks make

fine eating and oh, Lucy, dear—I never was so hungry in my life before! If they don't feed me soon—"

"Well, here's the kitchen," said Lucile, practically. "And where there's a kitchen there's usually something to eat—"

"Now listen, all of you," Mr. Wescott was saying, "and stop prying into that pantry, Phil, until I've had my say."

Phil started, released the knob of the door and looked sheepish while the rest laughed heartlessly at his chagrin.

"I wasn't doing it for myself," he murmured, "but when a young and beautiful damsel calls for food—"

"I never heard of any old damsel," Jessie was beginning, dryly, when Mr. Wescott, with a twinkle in his eye, rapped for order.

"I can fully sympathize with your appetite, Phil," he remarked, "not having any too delicate a one myself, so, for all our sakes, I'll shorten my speech to a simple warning. Remember, that since circumstances force us to use someone else's be-

longings we must be doubly careful not to harm them in any way. Moreover, if anything happens to the place, we shall have to make restitution in money. That's all—I think I can leave the rest to your good sense. Just a minute," he added, as, with a whoop of approval the boys had begun to scatter, "we must first of all try to light some sort of a fire—wet clothes are not noted for comfort. After that, Phil—we'll look into the pantry—" this time there was more than approval in the shout that greeted his remark—there was pure and unalloyed joy.

"The boys are not going to have all the fun," cried Lucile, with a shake of her wet clothes that sent a little shower of spray all about her. "Camp fire girls are not supposed to sit and look on. Besides, there isn't a boy in the world can make a fire as well as we can."

"Hear, hear," cried Jack, returning from an intimate survey of the woodshed. "Hand over that soap box, Phil, will you? Lucile wants to make a suffrage speech."

Phil straightened up and looked dismayed.

"Don't do it, Lucy," he entreated. "Wait till we've had our supper—we can stand it better. Hooray, fellows, here's wood—barrels of it. Now for the classiest fire you ever saw in your life!"

"Come on, girls," cried Lucile, patting her pretty curls into place and joining in the fray with a will. "We'll have a hand in this or die in the attempt."

Laughing, squealing, ejaculating, the girls followed her lead and they travelled back and forth from the old-fashioned living room to the kitchen until Jack laughingly held up his hand for attention.

"Say, you folks," he cried, "we have wood enough here to build fires every day for a month. I vote we stop lugging and light it."

The vote was carried unanimously, but as Jack and Phil stooped to arrange the wood in the grate, Lucile intervened.

"Let me light it," she pleaded, eagerly. "Phil never would believe that I could make a fire and I'd like to prove it to him. Please, I never had any witnesses, before."

The boys looked up at the pretty, flushed, eager face and smiled at each other quizzically.

“Better let her do it, Jack,” said Phil, indulgently. “She can’t do any more than burn the house down and since it doesn’t belong to us, we should worry.”

“Such remarks,” said Lucile, dropping on her knees and beginning to arrange the wood skillfully, “we treat with the scorn they deserve.”

“Oof, crushed,” laughed Phil, sitting back on his heels and regarding his pretty sister fondly. “It’s funny how we poor worms get stepped on and then come back for more, isn’t it, Jack? What is it you wish, sweet sister? Matches—yes, matches are occasionally needed to light a fire. You wish some, or you wish that I would not talk so much? Both? Good—you shall have them,” and so on while the onlookers laughed at his nonsense and admired Lucile’s deftness and skill in the lighting of the fire.

She looked so pretty kneeling there that Jack forgot his own uncomfortable position and remained in it, watching the curls turn copper in

the fire light and the brightness of her eyes long after the first small flame had grown into a splendid blaze.

Lucile leaned back and regarded the dancing, crackling flames with naive delight.

"Now who says I can't build a fire?" she challenged and little Margaret rushed forward to throw a loving arm about her shoulders.

"You do everything beautifully, Lucy, dear," she said "and whoever says you're not the dearest thing in the world will have to reckon with me."

She gazed about her defiantly and Phil drew back in affright.

"Don't look at me, Margaret Stillman," he cried. "What have I ever done that I should be threatened thus?"

"Don't begin on the list of his sins, Margaret," begged Jessie. "It would take all night—and I'm so hungry."

"Gee," said Phil, starting to his feet in pathetic astonishment, "and it took a girl to remind me of it."

Laughingly they turned to follow him but as

Lucile started to rise, Jack gently but firmly set her back upon the hearth again.

“You are to sit here, little Miss Suffragette,” he said, calmly, “until you get your clothes dry and until you are warmed through and through.”

“By order of the Grand High Mogul,” said Lucile, laughing. “You call me a Suffragette, Jack—and then treat me as though I weren’t. What’s the answer?”

“That you’re not,” said Jack, laughing quizzically. “That’s why you are going to sit there and take care of yourself while we get you something to eat.”

Before she could retort, he had stalked from the room, leaving her alone.

With a wistful, wondering little smile on her lips, she turned again to the fire she had made.

CHAPTER VI

A SIGN IN THE DARK

IN the pantry the boys found everything they needed for the heartiest and merriest of suppers. There was cold ham and plenty of flour which Mrs. Wescott and the girls turned into the most appetizing of biscuits, quantities of cheese and, wonder of wonders, two freshly made huckleberry pies.

The house and its contents mystified them as it did their chaperones. People must live there, must have been there recently—yet there was not a sign of life about the place.

“It makes me feel positively creepy,” Jessie confided, as she helped herself to more ham. “Here we are in somebody’s house, eating somebody’s food and we haven’t the slightest idea who that somebody is. Oh, but this ham is good!”

“Suppose,” said Evelyn, complacently breaking her sixth biscuit, “the owner should be a fanatic

or a crazy man. I've wanted all my life to see a lunatic."

"Is she complimenting us?" queried Phil, winking at Jack and catching three biscuits, one after another with admirable sangfroid. "Or is she merely trying to be sarcastic?"

"She was looking at you when she spoke," remarked Jessie, "so of course it must have been sarcasm. Pass me the jelly, Marj—you needn't keep it all to yourself."

"Well, I don't care," said Marjorie, reverting to the former topic, "if only it isn't haunted—I have no earthly use for ghosts."

"Nor heavenly ones either," laughed Lucile, adding, as she attacked the huckleberry pie with fervor, "ghosts have never worried me since that night at Tanike when we laid the spirit of the haunted house. I never was so frightened in my life."

Jack looked across at her thoughtfully—he was wondering if she remembered as well as he what happened after they had found the ghost.

"That was some night," he agreed, aloud. "And

from the noise the wind is making, I shouldn't wonder if we were to meet its rival. It's mighty lucky for us we found this place."

As they listened to the shrilling of the wind and the driving fury of the storm, they heartily agreed with him. However, they were warm and dry, their voracious young appetites were satisfied and the storm had a soothing, rather than a disturbing effect upon them.

It was only when, an hour later, their guardian suggested that they repair to the upper regions to see what sleeping accommodations they could find that the girls began to feel a little restless and uneasy.

"If our guardian hadn't said it was all right," Jessie confided, slipping an arm about Lucile as they ascended the stairs together, "I'd feel like a sneak. Breaking into strangers' houses, eating up their food and using their beds isn't as big a joke as it seems. Suppose the people should come home in the middle of the night?"

Lucile chuckled. "They'd have the surprise of their lives, that's all," she answered, adding, more

seriously, "there really isn't a bit of harm in it, Jessie, dear. We're going to leave money enough to make up for whatever we've used and a little note of explanation, telling how it happened. Goodness," she finished, her old merriment bubbling over, "whenever I'm tempted to feel funny about being here, I think how much funnier I'd feel if we weren't here."

"Now you're saying something," remarked Phil, genially, as he and Jack passed them, taking the stairs two steps at a time. "I'd rather be shot for a perfectly honest burglar than drowned in a ditch. How about it, Jack?"

It was one of Phil's characteristics, that he always appealed to someone else for confirmation of his absurdities. Now, though they listened, the girls could not hear Jack's answer. He was in one of the small, low-ceilinged front rooms, helping Mr. Wescott to light an old oil lamp he had found there.

That every room boasted a lamp of this sort they soon discovered and the weird light furnished by their yellow, flickering flames had a depressing

effect upon the general atmosphere of the place.

Lucile, Evelyn, Jessie, Marjorie and Margaret were given the rambling, many-cornered old room at the back of the house. They were standing together, regarding the one big bed and narrow couch rather ruefully when their guardian joined them.

"What's the matter, girls?" she queried in her cheerful, matter-of-fact tones. "Wondering how four of you are going to manage in one bed? I admit it is something of a problem."

Lucile slipped an arm about her guardian and laughed softly.

"It will be all right for the ones in the middle," she said, "but whoever sleeps on the end is apt to find herself on the floor before morning."

Mrs. Wescott considered a moment, then called out to her husband who was passing the door with a lamp perched on his head after the manner of the Grecian water carriers.

At his wife's summons he stopped and peered in at the door looking so ridiculous as he stood there, arms raised and an expression of innocent inquiry

in his eyes that the girls broke into gales of merriment.

“If you will put down that lamp,” said his wife, severely, though her eyes twinkled, “and try to look sensible, I’d like to ask your advice.”

“Anything you say, my dear,” he acquiesced, disposing of the lamp and assuming an expression of extreme severity. “Now, if I look quite sensible enough—although it is my duty to remind you that looks are not everything—I am at your service. Fire away!”

So his pretty wife “fired”—the result being an extension of the bed by means of two chairs, an ironing board and some extra comfortables and blankets, brought to light by systematic rummaging. This, together with the discovery that two of the couches in the other rooms were capable of expansion, added to the general satisfaction.

“And we have room for one more,” cried Lucile, delightedly. “Let Marion stay with us, will you, guardian? She always seems so glad to.”

So Marion came to them, happy in the knowledge that she would be near Lucile. For, to her

as to little Margaret Stillman, Lucile had meant all that was good and fine and lovable in a girl. She was and always had been their idol and in every possible way they had striven to be like her.

So now when Marion, bright-eyed and almost pretty, rushed in upon them her first words as well as her look, were for Lucile.

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said. "I don't even mind the storm now I'm with you, Lucy."

"Goodness, she doesn't seem to see the rest of us," said Evelyn, ruefully, precipitating her plump little person upon the bed with a sigh of relief. "Never mind, Marion, you'll realize we're around when we all try to sleep in one bed together. Wonder who gets the ironing board?"

"Since you are blessed with more *avoirdufois* than the rest of us," remarked Marjorie, lazily removing the pins from her dark hair, "I guess it's up to you, Evelyn, dear."

"Well," said Evelyn, resignedly, "I don't mind the ironing board if you'll only keep Jessie away from me. She ate ten biscuits and experience whispers that a restless night awaits whoever

sleeps next to her. Oh, Lucy, are you ready so soon?"

Lucile, with her dark curls falling over her white gown, roses in her cheeks and the light of adventure in her eyes, had curled up on one corner of the bed and was smiling dreamily.

"No, I'm not ready," she retorted. "I only look that way. Oh, girls," she added, sitting up straight and clasping her hands about her knees, "I have a premonition that something wonderful is going to happen for all of us this summer. I feel as though we were running right into adventure—"

"Well, we'll be lucky if we don't run into trouble or jail," said Jessie, drolly. "We've been trying our hardest to do both since we started."

"Oh, you'd spoil any good prophecy, Jessie," said Marion, putting an arm about Lucile. "Anybody would think you heard the sheriff at the door."

Jessie shivered. "Goodness," she said, in mock alarm, "don't joke about anything so serious."

"Well, there's one comfort," chuckled Lucile, as she slipped beneath the covers, "if he comes

to-night he'll get mighty wet coming. Hurry up girls and put out the light. I'm nearly dead for sleep."

For the early part of the night they slept heavily, the deep healthy sleep of youth. It must have been nearly three o'clock when, for no apparent reason, Lucile opened her eyes and stared wide-eyed into the dark.

The storm had almost spent itself; save for occasional gusts of wind the night was calm, yet Lucile was terrified, with the inexplicable, creeping terror of one in a nightmare.

Something had been in the room, something had been near her, had bent over her, almost touched her—!

She lay still as though turned to stone, while her strained, quivering nerves waited flinchingly for some sound, some confirmation of her weird impression. She tried to speak, tried to touch Jessie, who lay beside her, but if her life had depended upon it she could not have moved a muscle. She was hypnotized, impotent, as completely under the spell of unreasoning terror as

though she were indeed living through a nightmare.

Then suddenly—she heard it! A sigh, a deep-drawn, quivering sigh, then the sound of descending footsteps on the stairs.

Either her trembling or the slight noise in the hall below awoke Jessie for at that moment she sat up in bed and cried in a loud whisper, “Lucy, what is it? What’s the matter?”

A loud crash from the hall below, followed by the sound of running feet, of the opening and closing of a door, answered her question.

Lucile, released at last from the spell that had bound her, sprang from the bed while Jessie tumbled out beside her, quivering in every nerve.

The other girls were awake now, in fact the whole house seemed to be. The boys could be heard calling excitedly to one another and the next minute the door was flung open and their guardian herself rushed in upon them.

“Girls, are you all here?” she cried, and they could see by the light of a lantern from the hall how white her face was. “Is anybody missing? No, you’re all here.”

She went out into the hall again and the girls followed her as far as the door, peering over her shoulder at the weird scene before them.

The boys were there, all of them, tumbled, dishevelled, yet withal tremendously excited—peering all about them, straining their eyes to pierce the darkness that shrouded the stair well.

“The noise came from the lower hall,” Jack was explaining, excitedly. “And whatever it was went out by the front door. Come on, fellows, let’s investigate.”

“Right you are,” cried Phil and they were half way down the stairs before a cry from Lucile made them pause.

“Boys, don’t go down there,” she said. “Suppose it’s a burglar—he may be lying in wait for you.”

“Far be it from us to disappoint him,” called Phil, cheerfully. And a moment later they were in the lower hall calling for a light.

“Hand down that lamp, will you, fellows?” Jack’s voice came up to them. “You can’t see your hand before your face in this hole. Be

careful—that's the time you nearly set the place on fire.

"Jessie, I'm going down," Lucile announced in a tense voice, although she was trembling with fright. "I'm not going to let Jack and Phil get killed all by themselves. Oh, listen—"

Her foot was actually on the first step when Jessie, running after her, caught her arm and held her back.

"Lucy," she cried, hysterically, "don't be foolish. Do you realize, you just got out of bed?"

Lucile, thus brought herself regarded her fluffy apparel resentfully.

"Of course I'd forgotten," she said, resentfully. "Who would remember such a silly thing at a time like this?" Oh, Jessie, I'm so frightened. Whatever that thing was, it was in our room—near enough to touch us."

"Oh, Lucy, how do you know?" Jessie gasped, wide-eyed. "Did you see it?"

"No." Lucile's voice was scarcely above a whisper and she was once more under the spell of that nameless horror. "I didn't see it and I didn't

feel it—I just knew it, that's all. For a long time I couldn't move—it seemed as though I couldn't breathe. Then I heard it sigh and creep stealthily down the stairs—still I couldn't move. Oh, Jessie," her voice broke and Jessie's arm went about her instinctively. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't spoken just as you did. What's that?"

"That" was a sharp and fervent exclamation from Phil as he stubbed his toe on an overturned chair in the hall.

"Look here, fellows," he called, a moment later, "this must be what made the noise just before we heard the door slam. Gee, if he hurt his toe as much as I did, no wonder he slammed the door."

In spite of themselves the girls at the head of the stairs giggled hysterically and from that time on the tension noticeably relaxed.

That whoever or whatever had entered the house had really gone and was not, as far as the boys could ascertain, lurking about the house or the premises, soon became an established fact and with this assurance they were forced to be content.

Mrs. Wescott, approaching the excited group at the stairhead, gently ordered them back to bed.

“We have a long hard day before us to-morrow,” she said, “and we have already lost too much sleep—don’t let us lose any more.”

In spite of this sound and sensible advice, the girls found it very difficult to master their excitement and relax sufficiently for sleep.

However, just as the morning greyness began to filter in at the windows, nature asserted herself and they sank into uneasy and restless slumber.

CHAPTER VII

NIGHTMARE DISPELLED

LUCILLE struggled through an abyss of unconsciousness, then awoke with a cry of terror.

"Don't touch me," she moaned, then opening her eyes, gazed straight into the loving sympathetic face of her guardian.

"Lucille, dear, what is it?" cried the latter, in alarm. "It is only I—your guardian. What is the matter, dear?"

Lucile drew in a sharp breath, then struggled to a sitting posture.

"Oh, guardian dear, I'm so glad," she said, a little breathlessly. "I—I had a terrible dream—"

"Never mind," said Mrs. Wescott, seating herself on the edge of the bed and smoothing back the dark hair with gentle fingers. "You're awake now, breakfast is ready and the sun is shining. That's enough to make one forget everything—even bad dreams."

Lucile caught her guardian's hand and held it tightly.

"Tell me just one thing," she said, earnestly. "It wasn't a dream—about last night—was it?"

"No, it wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare."

They turned, surprised to find Jessie awake and thoughtfully regarding them.

"If you had my headache," she added, "you'd know it without asking."

Both girls looked rather pale and heavy-eyed but their wise little guardian was by far too tactful to remark upon it. Instead—

"All the more reason," she said gayly, "why we must get out in the sunshine and fresh air. It's the most glorious day for pitching camp you ever saw—the air's like wine and the trees and bushes are full of dew diamonds. Add to that some delicious sizzling bacon—"

"Enough," cried Lucile, responsive as always to the call of cheerfulness. "Anybody who insists upon being doleful with such a guardian as ours, doesn't deserve her blessings. Oh, how the sun can change things."

"That's the prettiest philosophy in the world, little Lucile," cried Mrs. Wescott as she started for the door. "If we could only keep that fact before us always, unhappiness would become an unknown quantity in the world. And as the first step toward optimism," she finished, looking very young and girlish as she stood in the doorway, looking fondly round upon them, "is breakfast, I'd advise you not to lose any time. Hustle now."

With a laughing nod and a wave of the hand she disappeared, leaving behind her an irresistible atmosphere of happy good humor. The gloom, the mystery of the night before were temporarily forgotten in anticipation of the glorious day before them.

"There won't be anything to spoil our plans to-day, I know it," cried Lucile as she slipped a very much bedraggled skirt over her curly head. "The rain has stopped for good and if anything more happens to the automobiles we'll get out and walk, that's all."

"And if we get the tents up in time," Evelyn added, "we may be able to go in for a swim be-

fore dark. Oh," she stopped in consternation, struck by a dire thought, "suppose Mother forgot to pack my bathing suit."

"Evelyn," Marion was beginning, horrified, when Jessie broke in complacently.

"Don't worry, Marion," she said, twinkling. "That horrible suspicion always strikes Evelyn about this stage in her travels. We used to be worried, too, before we realized that she'd just about as soon leave herself home as her bathing suit. Not that she can help it," she concluded magnanimously, "it's just a sort of obsession, I guess."

Evelyn glared and was about to retort when Margaret poured oil on the troubled waters by remarking,

"Never mind, Evelyn, if you have forgotten yours, you may have half of mine."

"Goodness, don't be rash," said Marjorie, humorously. "There's hardly room for one in your suit, let alone another of Evelyn's bulk."

"You talk as if I were a coal barge," Evelyn protested, while Margaret flushed as the battery of

laughing eyes were turned upon her, retorting with spirit,

“I’m leaving something to the intelligence of my audience, foolish as that may seem—”

“Hey, what’s all the row?” As usual the voice and the slang were Phil’s. “All the rest are down stairs and I came up to see if you had gone to sleep again. All right, you needn’t all shout at once. I may be old and infirm, but I’m not deaf yet. Say,” he added, as there came a lull interspersed with chuckles from within, “you ought to see the mess that burglar chap made—muddy footprints all over the place. By the size of him he must have been a little guy.”

“Phil,” cried Jessie, pausing with her comb in the air to stare wide-eyed at the closed door, “then it was really a man who made all that noise last night?”

“Sure, what did you think it was?” returned Phil, genially, “a caterpillar? Hurry down, will you—we’re starving by inches.”

With which plaintive remark he was gone, leaving the girls to stare at each other thoughtfully.

"It seems hard," said Marjorie, slowly, "to think of last night as anything but a bad dream—especially on a morning like this. Yet those footprints prove that it was an actual experience."

"Girls," there was a quality in Lucile's voice that chained their attention, "I've read—I suppose we all have, time and time again of that sixth sense which warns us of some strange presence in the room, even though we can't see a thing."

"Yes," they cried and gathered about her eagerly, awed by her words and tone. "Did you feel that, Lucy?"

"Yes," she answered, tensely, "I didn't see anything, I didn't hear anything, yet I'm just as sure as I am that I'm sitting here with you, that there was someone in this room last night—"

"Lucile," cried Marion, her gray eyes black with excitement, "why didn't you call out?"

"I couldn't," she answered, with a little shiver, "I tried hard enough but I couldn't speak or move a muscle. But we mustn't think of it any more," she added, jumping up and flinging her arms out

as though to banish the weird, unwelcome impressions of the night. "It's all over now and we can't help it any by keeping the boys waiting for breakfast."

This philosophy was all very well for Lucile, but it suited the other girls not one bit. The revelation was by far too interesting and exciting to be brought to so abrupt an end, but as Lucile was already halfway down the stairs there was nothing left for them to do but follow.

Their reluctance to this alternative, however, ended as they reached the bottom step. Even the spell of mystery must give way before the sight of tempting viands and merry comrades. The latter welcomed the newcomers with a shout and fell to without further delay.

At this moment Jack, who had gone outside to prospect around and see what he could find, came back with news that was welcome to everyone.

"The old jitney bus is coming down the road," he announced as he sank into a chair and helped himself generously to everything in sight. "Now if it doesn't break down half a dozen times this

morning, we ought to be able to make camp by noon. How about it, Mr. Wescott?"

"Easily," said the latter, thus appealed to. "And I'm anxious to get you there to see how you will like the spot I've picked out. To me it's just a little bit of heaven set in the heart of the mountains."

"Of course we'll love it," said Lucile, happily. "What more can we want than the woods and the sky and a little lake tucked away somewhere?"

"And pleasant company," added Jack, looking very handsome in the morning sunlight. "Don't forget that part of it."

"They wouldn't let us if we wanted to," said Lucile, wickedly, adding as the wheezy old honk of a horn was heard outside, "oh, do let's hurry—it's criminal to spend any time in eating when we might be on the road."

It seemed that for once they all agreed with her, for after Mr. Wescott had consulted with his wife and some of the older boys as to how much money they should leave for the damage they had done, they all crowded out upon the porch, fairly dazzled by the brilliance of the sunshine.

Passing Lucile as she was fluffing out her pretty hair beneath a small white toque with a flaming red wing—the wing had come triumphantly through the storm of the day before—Phil put an arm about her and drew her up to him.

“You’re looking pale, little sister,” he said, solicitously. “Are you letting last night get on your nerves too much?”

“I’m trying not too,” she said, smiling up at him a little wistfully. “But it did frighten me pretty badly, Phil, dear. Oh, it’s nice,” she added, whimsically, “to have such a comfortable old bear of a brother—even if he does talk slang all the time.”

Phil grinned and was about to reply when they were hailed by Mr. Wescott in the doorway.

“Hi, there, break away,” he cried, laughing at them. “You’re holding up the whole party—you two. Come along, Miss Lucile—you’re wanted.”

“You just bet you are,” said Jack suddenly turning up from nowhere. “I’ve been trying for two whole years to tell you just how much.”

“Letters, letters,” cried Evelyn, running up to

them, much to Jack's disgust. "Three for you, Lucy, and two for you, Jack. Old Grouchy brought them from the village. Wasn't he lovely? I'm sorry I made so much fun of him behind his back."

They laughed at her, received their letters joyfully, then ran down the steps to take their places in "old grouchy's" machine. The other chauffeurs who had found comfortable enough shelter for themselves and the cars in the big rambling old barn at the back of the house, shambled up and began cranking the motors.

As the girls settled down contentedly, Jessie reached over and squeezed Lucile's hand.

"I'm glad we're going rather than coming to that house," she said as, with many sputterings and after numerous false starts the machine rolled down the gravelled drive, "I wouldn't spend another night there for a million."

"Nor I," said Lucile, emphatically.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GYPSY BOY

IN the joyous freedom of the open air all the mysterious happenings of the night before were forgotten. The road stretched before them, a narrow, winding white ribbon, now lost to view by the sudden jutting of a rock, now appearing abruptly before them, rising upward, ever upward as though it meant to touch the sky.

“What gets me,” Phil broke in upon a happy silence, “is how these old jitney busses manage the inclines. That sure is some steep hill ahead of us, yet we’ll probably make it. They must have powerful engines.”

“I don’t mind going up,” said Lucille, “but it’s the coasting on the other end that takes your breath away. If it didn’t bump so horribly it would be most as good as our scenic railway in Burleigh.”

Jack laughed, showing a set of splendid white teeth.

"Some day I'll take you on a regular scenic," he said. "People don't think they've seen New York until they've taken in the Island half a dozen times."

"Ooh," said Lucile, gleefully, "will you do that, Jack? It's terribly hard to spend all your life in the backwoods."

"If I had anything to say about it," said Jack, unexpectedly, "you wouldn't have to."

Phil who had been having an earnest conversation with Jessie overheard these last words and turned in time to see Lucile flush scarlet.

"Hear, hear," he grinned, "don't mind us, Jack. If you'll tell old Hickey to stop the car we'll get out till you've had your say. There are some occasions when two is all the car can comfortably hold. What say, Jessie?"

"By no means," returned Jessie primly, while the eyes she fixed upon Lucile were sparkling with mischief. "If Jack won't behave himself, we'll have to stay and see that he does. Everybody always said I made a good chaperone."

"I hate to call names," Phil was beginning

piously, when Jack interrupted him with a chuckle.

“That’s funny,” he said, his eyes twinkling, “but do you know what your mother said to me, dear little coz, the last thing before we started?”

“No—what?” said Jessie, curiously.

“‘Keep your eye on Jessie, Jack—and whatever you do, don’t let her get into any mischief.’”

“I love Mother,” said Jessie, maddened by Phil’s crow of delight, “but I’ll never forgive her for that. Phil Payton, if you don’t stop laughing—”

Phil’s face sobered into such instant and comical gravity that even Jessie was forced to laugh at him.

“It’s nice to have him trained like that, Jessie,” remarked Lucile, whimsically. “All Mother’s training and Dad’s authority never had such an effect upon him. It’s plain to be seen we’ve treated him too well.”

“Never mind,” said Phil, with a laugh, “every dog has his day—wait till I get mine.”

“Humph, what will you do with it?” There was curiosity as well as scorn in Jessie’s tone and Lucile and Jack evinced interest.

"Never you mind, young lady," he answered, mysteriously. "What I'll do will be plenty—you needn't worry about that."

"I'm not," said Jessie, elaborately stifling a yawn. "What you do in company with your four-footed brethren—"

"Thank you," murmured Phil.

"In that mysterious time you call 'your day' will not of course, affect me."

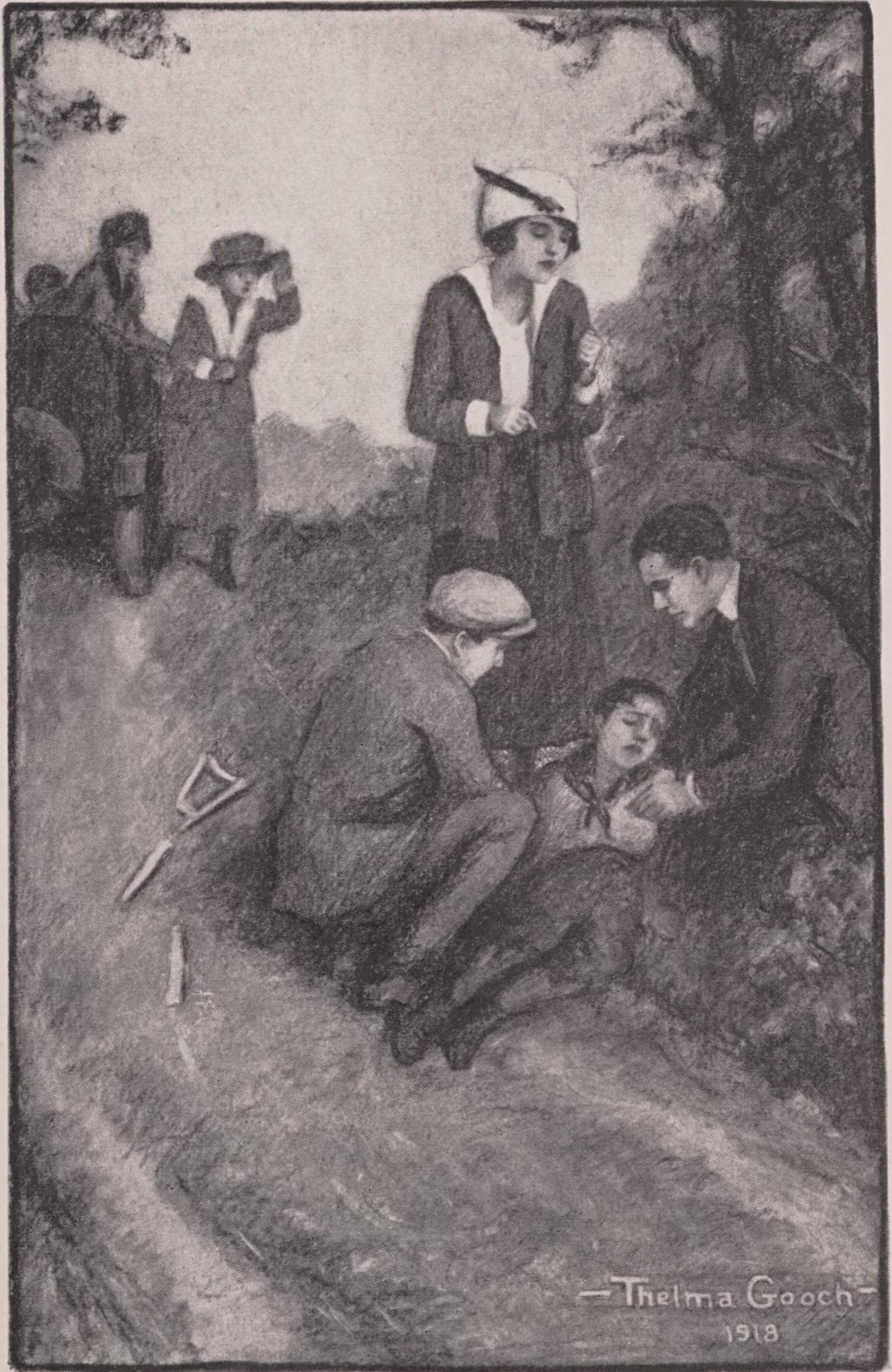
"Oh, won't it, though?" There was much fervor and determination in Phil's voice and such an eager light in his eyes that Jessie started and Lucile turned to Jack with a chuckle.

"Now, I guess it's time *we* left," she said, and Jessie gave a little bounce in her seat.

"Everybody's foolish to-day," she complained, flushing uncomfortably—Jessie was always uncomfortable when she felt Phil getting beyond her, as he did all too often, these days. "Let's talk about something sensible."

"Impossible," said Phil and received another withering glance.

"For you, yes," she was beginning when Lucile cried out in dismay.



—Thelma Gooch—
1918

“Is he killed?” cried Lucile. (Page 89.)

They had rounded a sharp curve in the road, travelling at their usual breakneck speed and were almost upon a boy in their path before the driver was aware of his presence.

Then, while they held their breath, the car swerved sharply and would have missed the lad entirely had it not been for the crutch in his hand. The front wheel struck it, ground it to pieces and the boy robbed of his support and frightened by the suddenness of the shock, rolled over into the ditch and lay there perfectly still.

A few feet further on the driver brought the car to a grinding standstill and the young folks alighted, running back fearfully to see what damage had been done.

"Is he killed?" cried Lucile as the two boys lifted the small, unconscious figure and laid it upon the grass by the roadside. "Oh, Jack, see how thin and white his face is."

Jack nodded gravely, then lifting his head, listened intently for a moment.

"There's running water somewhere in there, Phil," he said, instinctively taking command of

the situation. "Suppose you get some while I loosen his shirt. The poor little duffer seems to be all in."

Phil obeyed mechanically and as the other machines rolled up one by one and their startled companions gathered around, Jack made the explanations with a quiet ease and simplicity that made Lucile look at him thoughtfully.

At that moment Phil came back with the water which was dripping through a hat never guaranteed to be water tight and dashed it over the face and neck of the still motionless boy.

With a start and a gasp the child came to himself and gazed about him dazedly. Then, suddenly, with the motion of a terrified animal, he flung his hand before his face and staggered dizzily to his feet.

"What do you want with me?" he cried, his thin features contorted with fright. "I never did anything to you. Let me go, let me go I tell you." His voice rose to a wail and he would have run from them, but his crutch was gone and with a little cry he sank to the ground, burying his face in the soft moss at their feet.

"I ain't done anything," he whispered, piteously, "let me go."

In an instant Lucile was on her knees beside the quivering little figure.

"Why of course we'll let you go," she said, soothingly, stroking the poor little thin hand as it lay upon the grass. "We only want to help you, that's all. If you'll tell us where you live, we'll take you there."

The boy looked up unbelievably.

"You aren't going to hurt me?" he said, and Lucile felt the quick tears sting her eyes—his surprise was so terribly genuine.

"Of course not," she said, unsteadily. "Won't you tell us where you live, dear?"

"Live?" he pondered the question and the girls noticed what unusually large, black eyes the boy had. "I guess I don't live anywhere now—I—once—I—lived—"

A long clear whistle came from the depths of the woods and at the sound the boy struggled to his feet again, clinging to Lucile and gazing wildly about him.

“It’s him—he’s come for me,” he cried, trembling from head to foot. “Oh, don’t let him have me—don’t—”

From the forest sprang a gigantic man, black-haired and bronzed to the color of an Indian and even in that moment of mingled emotions his fantastic clothing, the red handkerchief knotted about his throat, proclaimed his gypsy blood.

With an oath he sprang upon the boy, tearing him from Lucile so roughly that she shrank back, sprang across the ditch and disappeared into the woods before they could more than gasp their surprise.

“Well, I’ll be blessed,” said Mr. Wescott, then, as a stifled cry came from the forest, indecision vanished and with a quick movement he had leaped the ditch and was crashing through the underbrush—the boys close at his heels.

“What next?” cried Jessie, despairingly. “Now they’ll never come back.”

But they did come back a few minutes later, hot panting and very much disgruntled.

“Not a sign of them,” said Mr. Wescott in re-

sponse to the chorus that greeted him. "If the earth had opened and swallowed them up, they couldn't be lost more completely. Say, I'd like to get my hands on that old bandit. I'd teach him to maltreat children—lame ones at that. Well, climb in, folks, we can't accomplish anything by staying around. Say, Helen, I wish we could have gotten that little shaver," this last was addressed to his wife and she nodded gravely as they walked toward the cars.

"It makes me feel faint and sick," she said, and her lips were white with pity. "A child doesn't act like that unless it is used to brutal treatment. I suppose there's nothing we can do, Jack?"

He pondered a moment while the young folks gathered around him anxiously.

"I can't think of anything," he said, shaking his head slowly. "The child probably belongs to that gypsy—"

"But he has no moral right," Mrs. Wescott was beginning, hotly when her husband interrupted her with gentle firmness.

"I was coming to that," he said, quietly. "Of

course, morally we have the right to take a child away from a brute who is maltreating it, whether the brute is its father or not. I hardly think we'd have any conscientious scruples about that."

"I should hope not," said Jack, grimly—he was still haunted by that pitiful cry in the forest and Lucile's white face worried him. "I should hope not," he repeated, more grimly than before.

"However," continued Mr. Wescott, "we have about as much chance of hunting down a gypsy in his familiar haunts as we would have of finding a trinket in a beachful of sand—just about. In the meantime," he made an eloquent gesture with his hand toward the sun which was rapidly climbing above their heads and they sighed in unison.

"Of course you're right," said Mrs. Wescott, turning away irresolutely. "Only—I had hoped —" she paused, then flung up her head in the old decisive gesture, saying in a cheery voice,

"Well, girls and boys, there's no use crying about spilled milk, is there? We'll hope that some day we will be able to find that miserable child and make him happy. Meanwhile, if we hope to

make camp by noon we will have to hurry and make up for the time we have lost."

The girls and boys accepted the mandate reluctantly and thoughtfully climbed back into the cars.

"I wonder what next," sighed Jessie as they settled back and the wind fanned their faces gratefully. "You sure knew what you were talking about when you prophesied an adventurous summer, Lucy."

"I should say so," Phil agreed, whistling softly. "First we have a bout with an unseen enemy, then run down a poor little beggar—lame at that—and give chase to gypsy bandits—whew, some full days, I tell you!"

"Altogether too much of a good thing," said Jack, frowning. "It's all right for us fellows but I don't like to have the girls mixed up in such things. I'll be glad when we reach the place and get the tents up. Also, a swim wouldn't go so bad—likewise, some eats. What say, Phil?"

Phil's face assumed an expression of beatific rapture and he sighed ecstatically.

"Ah, the aroma of frying fish," he said. "Do I smell it or is it all imagination—"

"Some people might be polite and call it that," said Jessie, cuttingly, and while he looked at her reproachfully his own sister launched a mortal blow, as he would have expressed it.

"I thought you knew Phil well enough, Jack," she was saying, "to let a sleeping dog lie."

"More thanks," he said, plaintively. "For the second time within a few short hours I have been likened to a four-footed canine—"

"No," said Jessie, scornfully. "I thought all canines were two-footed."

"Such ignorance," said Phil, condescendingly, "is more to be pitied than scorned. Now, if you had only had my advantages—"

Jessie was prevented from launching a counter attack by a loud summons behind them which made the chauffeur pause and glance around.

"Turn to the right," called Mr. Wescott. "You can take the cars almost all the way up. Stick to the road."

They started on again and Lucile looked at Jack with shining eyes.

“From which I gather,” she said, demurely, “that we are approaching our destination. A summer in camp, Jack—does it sound good?”

“More than that,” he assured her fervently.

CHAPTER IX

"A LITTLE BIT OF HEAVEN"

UP, up they went till it seemed as though they would never reach the top. The road, which at the best had not been of the smoothest, became almost impossible as they progressed and finally the cars stopped altogether.

"And from now on we walk," cried Lucille, springing from the car before any one could help her and running on ahead of them.

Over stones, rocks, roots she jumped and clambered, hat in hand, hair flying wildly, Diana, a creature of the woods in her freest mood.

Jack, taking the steep upgrade as though he were running a marathon on the level, caught up with her between a huge boulder and a giant tree, mercilessly cutting off her retreat.

"What do you think you're doing?" he queried, trying to look severe and failing utterly. "This isn't the path we follow; in fact, it isn't any path

at all. If I let you go will you behave yourself?”

“How can I tell?” she cried, laughing at him impishly. “I don’t make rash promises. Oh, Jack,” she flung up her head with the little gesture so pretty to watch and so peculiarly her own. “I’m so happy. I love them all, the trees, the grass, the springs, the birds, the smell of the ground—”

Something seemed to tighten in Jack’s throat and he leaned toward her suddenly.

“And where do I come in?” he asked.

A swift movement, the flash of something white, a little rippling laugh and Lucile had evaded him. A few steps from him she paused, turned and made him a little mock curtsy.

“You?” she queried, gayly challengingly. “Why, Jack—you come in the door.”

When they returned to the spot where they had left the folks they found it a scene of tremendous activity. All the luggage, utensils, tents and provisions were being unpacked, preparatory to doling out shares for the boys and girls to carry the short remaining distance to the camp site.

In vain had the boys gallantly insisted that alone and unaided by the opposite and more delicate sex they were capable of handling the whole show. The girls stoutly maintained their independence and declared they would carry something—if it was only a can of vegetable soup!

“The idea,” Marjorie was declaiming as Lucile reached her, “here we are, perfectly good camp-fire girls and the boys want to set us down in a corner with our hands crossed and look pretty—if such a thing were possible—which it isn’t for me—. No, Ray, you needn’t laugh—I wasn’t fishing—even though I don’t suppose you’ll take my word for it.”

Ray, who had been lifting a heavy load of canned goods to his shoulders during this unusually long and fiery peroration from one of Marjories easy-going temperament—grinned more broadly and remarked enigmatically,

“I’ll never again say girls can’t be reasonable. No, don’t fire, Marj—I’m sorry.”

Laughingly Lucile left them and made her way to the center of activity where Mr. and Mrs. Wes-

cott were busily handing down packages to those who had not already been provided with them.

Lucile was given a bundle of many shapes and angles, with whose contents she was vainly attempting to acquaint herself, when Jessie chancing upon her, caught her up in a wild embrace, whirling her round and round, regardless of many cornered packages and all other such trifles.

“Goodness, Lucy, what have you got there?” she cried when they had stopped for breath. “Looks like a potato masher or a bomb or something. Look out, it might go off.”

“Which, the masher or the bomb?” queried Lucile. “Come on, Jessie,” she added as their guardian beckoned to them. “Everybody’s ready and I’m crazy to see Mr. Wescott’s idea of heaven.”

Merrily they followed. The soft breath of summer kissed their faces as they passed, swaying branches brushed them gently, fearless, feathery little songsters swayed daringly on cob-web twigs above their heads and poured out wild sweet cadences, enveloping them in a flood of melody.

It was exquisite, primal, inspiring and the ex-

uberant, vital youthfulness of them answered to the call of it.

“We’re getting there, folks,” Mr. Wescott called back to them, pausing to fish out his great white pocket handkerchief and wipe his “fevered brow.” “Take a good look about you and see how you like it.”

Then suddenly they came upon it—a little bit of heaven, set in the heart of the mountains. It was all of that—and more.

Two rows of gnarled old oaks formed a natural entrance hall to the enchanted spot—trees whose branches twined and intertwined till in some places they had to bow their heads to pass beneath them. Under their feet the moss was thick and rich and soft, while on every side grew wild flowers, vivid hued, exotic in their gorgeousness.

The girls drew their breath sharply. They had thought their other camp site beautiful—but this—!

“Wait till you see the rest of it,” said Mr. Wescott as though in answer to their unspoken

thoughts. “Here we are—now look down there. How’s that for a view?”

He drew aside some intervening branches and following his gaze they stood rooted to the spot by the beauty of it—mute in their admiration. What they saw was this—

A long gentle slope, dotted with trees and boulders, carpeted richly with moss, colored brilliantly with patches of wild flowers like those in the aisle of oaks and beyond, half-seen, half-hidden by the dense of foliage, shone the lake, placid, beautiful, dazzling in its myriad point reflection of the sun.

“Say, Mr. Wescott,” murmured Phil respectfully, “this sure is class. I couldn’t have picked out a better spot, myself!”

They laughed and, laughing, broke the spell.

With shouts of delight they rushed forward forgetful of the packages they held, forgetful of everything save the irresistible lure of that shining water. They half-ran, half-tumbled down the slope, getting in each other’s way, dropping things, stumbling, picking themselves up, so mad with the

joy of the moment that mishaps passed unnoticed.

As usual, Lucile led them all and Jack had to run his swiftest to catch up with her. As it was, she was on "the very edge of the brink" as Phil would have expressed it when he caught her arm, calling laughingly over his shoulder to Phil to do the same.

"She's running amuck, I guess," he said. "Water always seems to have that effect upon her. Hold on, Lucile—you can't expect to make a fancy high dive in that rig."

"I could do it," she replied, dimpling. "Just let me go and I'll show you."

"No, no," said Jack, soothingly. "We'll take your word for it. Come on over here like a nice little girl and see your guardian. If she can do anything with you, it's more than I can." He took her by the hand and led her laughing and protesting to the spot where Mrs. Wescott had sunk down in relief upon the grass with the girls clustered about her.

"What's the matter, now?" she queried as Lucile flopped down beside her and looked up re-

proachfully at Jack. “Has he been teasing you, Lucy? If he has, he will have to answer to me.”

Jack looked down at the pair quizzically. He had always been a great favorite of the little guardian and he knew it, so now he drawled, with mock alarm, “You don’t say. Well, now, that does worry me—”

“Say,” Jack, get busy.” It was Phil’s voice, with an unusually peremptory note in it. “We’ve got to get the tents up so we can eat—eat, old man—do you get that? Gee, how can you stand there—”

But Jack didn’t and neither did anyone else. For the next hour everybody was busy, none wasted the quarter of a second—and the results were miraculous.

Tents were up, cots placed and provisions carefully stored in the mess tents—everything was ready for the preparation of their first meal in camp.

“I shouldn’t have thought it could be done,” said Jessie, as she and Lucile stood with arms intertwined, regarding the work with satisfaction. “The boys worked like demons—I never saw such energy.”

"Hunger," explained Lucile, gleefully. "Mr. Wescott knew what he was doing when he wouldn't let us eat beforehand. Hello, Evelyn honey—what you got?"

"Lots," said Evelyn, pausing and looking important. She was carrying something in a hat which she protected carefully from the soft vagrant breeze that rustled in the tree tops.

"Lots," grunted Jessie, scornfully. "That tells us a lot doesn't it? Lots of what?"

"Lots," repeated Evelyn, giggling wickedly. "I told you before, didn't I?"

"Now you be nice," Jessie was beginning threateningly when Lucile broke in with a laugh.

"She means to be taken literally," she explained. "What do we have to draw 'em for, Evelyn—to see who eats the first baked bean?"

"Just about," said Evelyn, shielding the fluttering slips of paper still more carefully. "The boys are having a terrible argument about who is to prepare lunch so Mr. Wescott suggested lottery as the best way to settle it. Come and see the fun—it's better than a show."

“Are they trying to get out of it?” asked Lucile as they walked toward the boys’ camp, which had been pitched quite some distance from theirs. “When we talked about it home they all seemed eager to do it. I didn’t think they’d back down when the time came.”

“Oh, they haven’t,” Evelyn chuckled, while they regarded her in surprise. “In fact, it’s just the other way. They don’t seem to have any faith in each other’s cooking.”

“Not that you can blame them,” Jessie murmured.

“Of course you can’t,” answered Evelyn, agreeing with her rival for the first time since the beginning of the trip. “That’s the funny part of it. Each one is sure that the only way he can get anything worth eating is to prepare it with his own fair hands. Listen to them—you’d think their lives depended upon it to hear them talk.”

At sight of the girls the boys stopped their heated argument and regarded them with flattering attention. Mr. Wescott took the cap from Evelyn, thanked her and then turned with a laugh to the boys.

“When we get settled,” he said, “we will of course be divided into squads—each squad to have a leader and certain duties assigned to it for every day in the week. But,” he added, stirring the bits of paper with his finger and looking about him amusedly, “for the present—hunger being rather rampant—”

“You said it,” they groaned in unison.

“This method seems the quickest and most satisfactory. Now, then—everybody ready?”

They assented with fervor and the cap was passed around amid an awed hush.

“I got it,” cried Phil, waving his blank slip of paper aloft. “Now, fellows, you’ll find out what a good lunch is.”

The others grunted skeptically while Phil and the other two boys who had drawn the lucky slips rushed off with a whoop to the mess tent.

Mrs. Wescott exchanged a glance of meaning with her husband, then turned laughingly to the girls.

“Come on,” she said. “We won’t draw lots

but we'll guarantee as good a meal. Call on us, boys, if you need any help.”

“Say,” Jack called after them wistfully. “You don't happen to have an invitation for a regular meal hanging around loose, do you? Because if you have—”

Only a mocking laugh greeted this appeal and Lucile paused a moment to fling over her shoulder one last retort.

“Them that makes their beds,” she said laughing, “must lie on 'em. Besides,” the last sentence came to them clearly through the foliage, “we only allow respectable people in our camp!”

CHAPTER X

LUCILE'S DISCOVERY

"Now what," said Mrs. Wescott, looking about the long table expectantly, "would you like to do next if you could choose?"

"Wash the dishes," said Amy Gregory, promptly.

Amy was one of the camp-fire's latest acquisitions and had already evinced a fervor for work that was quite inexplicable to the other girls. She was not pretty but her temper was so uniformly good and her devotion to the camp fire ideals so undoubtedly genuine that the girls thoroughly liked her. Now, however, her romantic suggestion evoked a storm of disapproval.

"Wash the dishes," sniffed Evelyn, scornfully. "Our guardian asked us what we'd like to do, Amy—not what we had to! Goodness, somebody suggest something quick or I'm going home."

"Well, if you can't suggest it yourself," said

Jessie, with asperity, "you deserve to. I knew what I wanted to do this afternoon three weeks ago."

"I wonder," said Lucile at this point and all eyes were turned toward her as she sat near the tent flap, gazing dreamily out toward the water, "I wonder just how deep the lake is and just how cold that beautiful blue and green water would feel. Who wants to go with me and relieve my mind?"

A shout of joy greeted the suggestion and Mrs. Wescott had all she could do to make her voice heard above the hubbub. When the noise had partly subsided, she said with a twinkle,

"I hate to check your enthusiasm, dear girls, but remember, business comes before pleasure. By the time we've hustled these things out of the way and unearthed our bathing suits we'll have earned our recreation. Come now—let's break our record!"

And break it they did. Within fifteen minutes water had been brought up from the lake, dishes washed and put away, provisions stored and a wild rush for bathing suits begun.

"At this rate," said Lucile, joyfully rummaging in the tiny steamer trunk containing her outfit for the summer, "we ought to get there before the boys. If we do they'll never get over it."

"We won't let 'em," chuckled Jessie, flinging her little black and white bathing suit over her shoulder and directly upon Evelyn's bowed blonde head, momentarily obscuring that young person's vision.

Accordingly, a howl went up and the unoffending bathing suit was redelivered with scant ceremony and considerable dispatch to its rightful owner. Jessie, receiving it upon the tip of one dainty ear, gently detached it and gazed thoughtfully from it to Evelyn and back again.

"What seems to be the matter with it?" she inquired, argumentatively. "It seemed to be a pretty good bathing suit before it left home—"

"Like its owner," said Evelyn, adding as she bent once more over her trunk, "everything is all right in its place but the place for your bathing suit is not upon my head—"

"Well, I should say not," said Jessie, indignant-

ly, "I thought I'd taught it to stay where it belongs—"

"Oh, you goose, do keep still," cried Evelyn, adding, as she once more dived frantically into the trunk, "I knew I'd forget something—"

Lucile and Jessie looked at each other, then darted forward, peering anxiously over Evelyn's shoulder. "What?" they cried.

"Nothing!" she answered, grinning up at them wickedly, then scuttling behind the trunk at the threat in Jessie's eyes.

"All right, don't shoot," she pleaded. "I won't do it again—hope to die if I do."

"You won't have to hope," Jessie prophesied, grimly.

"Girls, how do you like my new bathing suit? Stop your foolishness and look at me," and Lucile pirouetted before them, sweet and alluring as the spirit of summer itself.

The suit was plain and black with little touches of red here and there and perched on her dark curls was a little rakish hat of red and white, becoming as only Lucile's hats knew how to be.

She was so unusually pretty that these two friends of hers laughed in pure delight at the sight of her.

“Wait till Jack sees you, Lucy, dear,” was Jessie’s characteristic remark while Evelyn, cocking her head on one side like a speculative robin, said fondly,

“You’re never hard to look at, Lucy, but you’re less so at this particular minute. Are you going to wait for us?”

“About two minutes,” she answered, severely. “If you’re not ready then—”

But they were—incredible as it may seem, they were—and at the end of the prescribed two minutes three very attractive young mermaids stole from the tent and stood looking about them.

“Not a soul in sight,” said Jessie, disgustedly. “What do the girls think they’re doing—dressing for a dance?”

“No, here they come,” said Lucile, her eyes sparkling. “Now for the chance to show those boys a thing or two. Oh, girls, that water, that beautiful—sparkling—heavenly—water—” the ad-

jectives were strung out behind her as she ran pell mell followed by all the other girls down to the water's edge.

At the brink she stopped and motioned the others back.

"We don't know how deep it is," she explained, "and since some of you are just learning to swim we'd better wait and see what our guardian has to say."

Their guardian, appearing at that moment in her own dainty suit and only distinguishable from the girls themselves by that subtle, quiet air of authority which had always impressed and controlled them, she was instantly surrounded and dragged down to the water's edge amid a very babel of chattering tongues.

"Girls, girls," she protested, laughingly, "I may be able to answer you if I can ever find out what you're talking about. Of course you want to go into the water and equally of course you did quite right in waiting to consult me. Now, Lucile, suppose you and Jessie and Marjorie, all you older girls, in fact, who know how to swim

well, test the water for its depth. Go in slowly and look out for holes. They are one great danger in a lake like this. Now then, careful!"

Nothing loath, the girls slipped off the bank and into the water up to their waists. How clear and cold and deliciously fresh it was! They fairly crowed with delight as, hand in hand, strung out in a delightful and very attractive human chain, they slowly felt their way forward, experiencing something of the emotions of Columbus when he first set foot upon American soil.

"The first to find a hole," sang out Lucile, "gets the biggest piece of cake to-night."

"Thanks, Lucy," gasped Marjorie and the next moment they found themselves looking at a missing link in the chain where Marjorie had been.

"Goodness, I hope she comes up," Evelyn was crying, when, a moment later Marjorie emerged, sputtering but triumphant.

"Only about seven feet deep," she announced, swimming to a shallow place and shaking herself vigorously. "The boys ought to rig up buoys around here. It isn't exactly what you might call safe for the younger girls."

"But say, Lucy," she added, as they turned back to report to their guardian, "don't forget what you said about the biggest piece of cake. I have witnesses."

The witnesses were heard to murmur something about such coincidences being usually put-up jobs, but upon Marjorie's offering indignantly to go back and do it all over again for their benefit, they finally capitulated.

Mrs. Wescott was considerably disturbed by the report, for though she had warned against the possibility of water holes, she had fondly hoped her fears to be unfounded, but here was actual proof of them. She finally decided to await the advent of Mr. Wescott and the boys before venturing in with the younger girls.

"Shall we have to wait too?" asked Lucile, striving to speak cheerfully though a sudden darkening of the expectant light in her eyes showed her disappointment. "The water felt so awfully good," she added, longingly.

"Oh, go ahead," laughed her guardian, "I have confidence in your being able to take care

of yourself, Lucile, only, whatever you do, swim close to the shore."

With a shout of delight, Lucile plunged into the water, swimming strongly while the older girls, succeeding in obtaining like permission, one after another followed her lead.

Lucile, skirting the shore, had come almost opposite the boys' camp when she heard a shout from that direction, and glancing up, beheld a black-clad figure gesticulating wildly on the bank.

Presently the black-clad figure was joined by other black-clad figures and each in turn seemed to be imbued with the mania of the first, shouting and pointing at her as though she were some sea serpent or other curiosity, instead of just a very pretty girl in a very pretty bathing suit.

A moment later, some half dozen of the black-clad figures plunged head first into the water and Lucile knew herself to be pursued.

Redoubling her efforts with the instinctive desire of the hunted not to be caught, she swam about a huge boulder and into a narrow inlet, entirely invisible from most parts of the shore.

Down this she swam, feeling again and more strongly that strange wild thrill of the explorer—swam around another sharp bend of the shore, where branches from trees on either side formed a leafy canopy above her head and—found that the inlet and her journey of discovery had come to an abrupt end.

Land surrounded her on three sides—land as beautiful as the historic garden of Eden—and yet land—where she had wanted water.

But what were those three decrepit-looking objects on the bank, directly ahead. Blots on the landscape you, as a casual observer, might have thought them—but not so Lucile.

By the incredulous light of wonder and awe in her eyes as she swam nearer and nearer to them, they might have been some magically discovered chests of treasure or other equally acceptable gifts of the gods, instead of these disreputable, battered old row boats of ancient origin.

Eagerly she scrambled on shore and fell to examining them. On closer inspection they weren't so bad after all—a little patching and a coat or two of paint—.

"So you thought you could run away from me, did you?" a cheerful, masculine voice accosted her and she turned to find Jack striding toward her up the inlet. "The others thought you'd taken another turn but I had a sure hunch that led me to you. You can't fool your Uncle Jack."

But Lucile seemed scarcely to have heard him. She ran to meet him eagerly and pointed to her new discovery.

"Look," she cried, "we won't have to make rafts. Some thoughtful person has left us three whole boats."

"Boats," Jack repeated, following her and inspecting her find with a critical eye. "They look about as much like boats as that jitney bus we came up in looks like an automobile. Not quite so much, in fact."

Lucile pouted and turned away in disappointment.

"I thought you'd be as glad as I was," she said. "A little time spent on them would make them water tight but—oh, let's go back to the others," she turned abruptly and would have run from

him had he not caught her hand and held her back.

"No you don't," he said, severely. "I'll let you run away from me once a day, but no more—that's your allowance. Lucy, dear," he added, coming nearer and speaking to a provokingly tilted plaid hat beneath which a curl escaped rebelliously, "I didn't know you cared particularly about my liking the boats but since you do I'll swear that such a picture never before delighted the eyes of man—so far I'm right. No, I didn't mean it and please don't draw away from me as if I was 'a adder,' as ald black Andy used to say. I'm not, really I'm not—only a poor dumb animal,—"

"Oh, Jack," Lucile was dimpling now and looking up at him helplessly, "you're—you're—impossible—"

"Good," he cried, adding triumphantly, "didn't you tell me once you loved impossible people—"

No one knows just what Lucile would have said and just what would have happened next had not a cough disturbed the verdant stillness at that

psychological moment, accompanied by a very feminine giggle.

"Excuse us," said Phil as the two started, Jack glaring angrily and Lucile a little flushed. "We thought you might have struck some more holes or things and we came out to look for you."

"Jack looks as though he'd like to strike more than holes," grinned Phil as he handed Jessie up the bank. "Don't do it, old man, you might lose your temper and so hurt yourself more than you would me."

"I'd take my chance on that," said Jack, grouchy—feeling much the same reaction of a man who has been basking in the light of a beautiful fire and suddenly finds himself at the bottom of a well. "Confound it, why did someone always have to turn up just at the wrong minute? I'd take a mighty long chance on that," he repeated emphatically.

For the first time in their long and firm friendship the boys seemed almost on the point of quarreling but Lucile, as always, stepped in between.

"I don't believe either of you has noticed my

great discovery," she said, looking from Phil to Jessie. "And Jessie's actually sitting on one of them—it's very discouraging."

Jessie jumped up with a little scream and looked anxiously about her.

"Goodness," she cried, "what do you mean, Lucy? Was I sitting on a bug or a grasshopper—the woods are full of them—"

"Goodness," wailed Lucile, sitting down resignedly upon a little hummock in the earth, "worse and worse and more of it. At least Jack didn't call them bugs!"

"Oh, look at the old tubs," said Phil, joyfully, apparently noticing the boats for the first time. "Gee, they must have come out of the ark!"

CHAPTER XI

WEIRD MUSIC

THE morning dawned goldenly. Sunlight sparkled on the lake, birds sang, soft breezes whispered through the trees and still the boys and girls slept on—both camps were wrapped in silence.

The long journey, the excitement of the night before, the gypsy boy upon the road and last, but not least, the excitement of making camp and the long swim in the afternoon, had completely tired them out and they were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

Not that any one of them had admitted feeling tired—where will you find the young person who will? In fact, they felt greatly disappointed at not being able to have the big camp fire they had planned, but Mrs. Wescott had insisted and—there was an end of it.

“You will feel ever so much more in the mood

for it, to-morrow," she had said, "and meanwhile, we will have a chance to look the country over and have something of interest to tell."

So, reluctantly, they had obeyed, thinking in their disappointment that Morpheus had forever forsaken them, only to be wooed by that gentle god into the soundest and sweetest of slumbers—five minutes later.

Now, curiously enough, Jessie was the first to awake. Seeing Lucile still asleep, she cautiously screwed round to bring Evelyn within her range of vision and screwing too far, lost her balance, coming with a loud thud upon the floor.

Both Lucile and Evelyn opened their eyes, rubbed them and regarded Jessie with interest.

"Behold, the human alarm clock," cried Evelyn. "Falls out of bed every morning promptly at seven—"

"No, Evelyn, dear, you're all wrong," said Lucile, twinkling. "Jessie's just been reading that new book Amy brought with her on how to reduce. It says that falling out of bed has a great beautifying effect upon the figure."

"Evens off all the bumps and things, I suppose," said Evelyn, innocently. "Only I'd suggest that you wait till you get home Jessie—you'd have further to fall and so get results sooner. Look out—that's my best brush."

"You don't suppose I'd send you anything but the best, do you?" queried the tormented one, sweetly, while Evelyn dodged the flying missile with a skill born of long practice. "Lend me yours, Lucy—I'll have better luck next time."

"No you don't," said Lucile, hiding her own brush beneath the covers. "It cost my Dad a lot of money and I'm not going to have it wasted."

"Oof," grunted Evelyn, "that was a bad one. I'm going to decamp while there's still time. Jessie, hand me my bathing suit—there's a dear, good girl. No—not one stocking—I said the suit."

So after a great deal of pleading on Evelyn's part and a good deal of teasing on Jessie's the suit was finally acquired. As usual, their hilarity aroused the rest of the camp and shouts and laughter sounded all about them.

As they emerged into the brilliant sunshine, they

were joined one by one by the other girls and all started down to the water in the gayest of moods.

After the dip came breakfast and after breakfast, the serious matter of squad formation. Not one of the girl's present but would have preferred to make one of Lucile's squad, but she could not lead them all.

At last it was arranged—Evelyn, Marion, Margaret and Gertrude Church in Lucile's squad while the rest of the girls were divided up under the leadership of Jessie, Marjorie and Elizabeth Grey, another of the girls who had distinguished herself by enthusiastic work in the camp fire.

“Oh, I'm so glad, Lucy, dear,” said Margaret, surreptitiously hugging her idol. “I'd have been perfectly miserable under any other girl—although I love them all, of course. Now the summer will be just one long, good time.”

“I hope so, Peggy, dear,” Lucile looked fondly down into the flower-like face—somehow Margaret always seemed younger to her than she really was—“At least, I'm going to do my best

to make it the very happiest summer you ever spent. Oh, I love you, little Margaret.”

Margaret's eyes filled suddenly with tears and she hid her face against Lucile, clinging to her passionately.

“Oh, Lucy,” she murmured. It was her tacit confession of what the girls had so long suspected. “Oh, Lucy—I want to be happy!”

The little scene might have seemed strange to anyone not in the secret but Jessie would have understood.

The next hour was filled with busy preparation for their hiking expeditions. Each squad was to take lunch and hike at its leisure.

A committee from the boys' camp had waited upon them earlier in the morning to learn their plans for the day and upon being informed politely, but very, very firmly, that their presence would not be required till evening when they might be permitted to attend the council fire, had retired in high dudgeon, inquiring of each other whether that wasn't a nice note and muttering various ominous threats about getting even.

"Boys never can understand," Lucile had remarked, exchanging a glance of amusement with Jessie, "how girls can actually prefer to do things without them. It's good for their conceit to press the point home, sometimes."

Jessie laughed, then coming over, put an arm fondly about Lucile's shoulders.

"The only blot upon my happiness, Lucy," she whispered, "is the fact that we won't be able to go exploring together as we did that first summer. If it weren't traitorous to the camp fire, I'd almost wish I hadn't become a torch bearer. I won't know what to do without you."

"Well, that's part of the penalty we have to pay for being ambitious," said Lucile, whimsically. "After all, we'll meet at night and think of the funny stories we will have to tell. Is that our guardian calling? Good luck, Jessie, dear—and see that you behave yourself!"

After which amid a great deal of fun and mix-up of lunch baskets, the girls shouted gay farewells to one another and started off in different directions, carrying their very necessary compasses with them.

"For to be lost in the wilderness," remarked Marion, stopping to untangle a twig from her dark hair, "would not be very funny."

"It would be funnier for you than for the rest of us," said Evelyn, ruefully eyeing the lunch hamper Marion was temporarily carrying. "I can imagine lots of things sadder than being lost in a wilderness—with some lunch—"

"As long as the lunch lasted," chuckled Lucile.

"Which wouldn't be five minutes in the present company," added Margaret.

"Speak for yourself," Marion was beginning when Lucile called out a sharp warning.

"Look out," she said, "this place is full of poison ivy. We'll have to go around it." Suiting the action to the words she skirted the dangerous spot and came suddenly and unexpectedly upon a small brook almost hidden by the dense foilage.

It was a very pretty, modest little brook, pursuing its obscure way with a cheeriness and good humor that might point a lesson to many of us.

Birds came to drink of it and sing to it, squirrels chattered noisily in the branches of the trees above

it, sunshine danced in its ever moving, ever rippling water and the liquid murmur of its undertone seemed to chant eternal praises to the magic mystery of summer.

It was lovely, so lovely that the girls, ever attuned to the beauty of nature, stood still and gazed with eyes that shone and quickened breath.

"The beauty there is in the world for all of us," murmured Lucile, in a philosophic mood, "if we only know how to find it."

"If we are only taught to find it," corrected Margaret, softly, with that strange insight so far beyond her years which had always caused the girls to wonder while they loved her.

"There was a time," she added, taking Lucile's hand and rubbing her soft cheek thoughtfully against it, "when I wouldn't have seen anything beautiful in this. It would have made me angry—just because it was so perfect and I—wasn't—"

Lucile caught the girl to her with a sharp cry of protest, while the others gathered around with that softened expression that always came when Margaret spoke in that tone.

Margaret had been lame—they who had always been well and strong could know nothing of that. They could only sympathize and hope by unfailing consideration and gentleness to make her forget that such a time had ever existed.

“I thought we were going to forget that,” Lucile spoke reproachfully. “We agreed to, you know.”

Margaret shook her head slowly.

“I don’t want to forget it,” she said. “Why should I? Father said once that all happiness was founded upon comparison and when I remember what my life was before you girls found me and what it is now, I love you twice as much. So you see I don’t intend to forget it,” she finished, decidedly.

Lucile laughed unsteadily.

“All right,” she said, “have it your own way. Only tell me one thing—there isn’t one little bit of shadow in the sunshine to-day, is there?”

For the fraction of a second Margaret seemed to hesitate, then added, with a gayety that did not quite ring true,

“Why of course there isn’t. Why I haven’t seen any shadow in so long I wouldn’t recognize it if you labelled some and brought it to me.”

For the next hour Lucile was extraordinarily thoughtful and her thoughts were puzzled and a little unhappy. Why did things always happen just the last way you wanted them to, she reflected rebelliously.

Here was Margaret, whom she loved as she would a younger sister in love with David Cathcart, who, for his part had been at no pains to conceal a very decided preference for her own unworthy self.

“Though why in the world he should, I don’t know,” she concluded. “I’m no nicer to him than I am to anyone else—in fact, there have been times when I’ve been possibly rude to him but nothing seems to make any difference.”

And now if he came up to the camp this summer as he certainly would for the simple reason that she was beginning to wish he wouldn’t, matters couldn’t fail to be complicated.

If something would only happen to keep him in

town—she had heard that there was an epidemic of mumps in the city. Perhaps he would get them! She smiled to herself in spite of her trouble and reflected that in all probability he would come anyway—doctors always recommended country air for everything.

Well, if he did come it might be the best thing that could happen. Margaret would be disillusioned—even young vikings with leonine heads and shoulders couldn't keep their looks and the mumps at the same time—.

Then something that Evelyn said brought her out of her reverie with a start and she realized for the first time the trend the conversation had taken.

"I've wondered and wondered," Evelyn was saying, "but it never seems to get me anywhere. I even dream of it at night and wake up shivering. I never did like mysteries."

"It's gotten on my nerves, too," said Marion, "but everybody seemed so happy I hated to spoil the fun. It does seem mighty queer that the man, whoever he was, should come into the house at

that time of night and go out without touching anything."

"And Lucy's being so sure he was in the room with us," added Margaret, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, "makes me feel like the prince in 'The Prince and the Pauper' when he woke to find the mad hermit standing over him, sharpening his knife—"

Marion screamed and Evelyn clapped her hands over her ears.

"Margaret," she cried, "what an awful comparison. I won't sleep for a week now, thinking about it."

"We mustn't think about it." Lucile's voice was quiet but she had turned rather pale. "What's the use when there isn't any possible way of solving the mystery. Only—I suppose I oughtn't to say it—it sounds absurd—but I feel as if that midnight visitor of ours and the gypsy boy had something in common. Probably," she finished, with a deprecatory laugh, "it's simply because they were both mysterious."

"But there must be something that makes you

think so," said Evelyn, decidedly. "You're not apt to think things without some reason, Lucy."

"Perhaps this is the exception that proves the rule," laughed Lucile, anxious to turn the conversation into lighter channels. "By the way, who wants some lunch?"

If the suggestion was a ruse the effect was instantaneous.

"The lunch, the lunch," cried Evelyn. "Lucy, dear, you always were a mind reader."

"And here's a spot furnished by the gods for the purpose." Margaret gayly indicated a flat rock, ensconced in a setting of mossy bank. Flowers, too, smiled at them from unexpected places, drenching the warm, pungent air with their perfume, while the sunlight filtering through the trees made dancing patches of light and shade upon the ground beneath. It was indeed an ideal spot and the girls pounced upon it eagerly.

"Goodness, how romantic," said Ruth Church, who had recently discovered a poetic tendency in her nature and had immediately and unhesitatingly dubbed it the divine spark. "Let's make

wreaths of flowers and make believe we're all Dianas in an enchanted forest."

"You can do the Dianering for the whole party, Gertrude," said Evelyn, delving hungrily into the hamper while the other girls no less hungrily ranged themselves about her. "Here, Peggy, you spread the cloth while I help Lucy hand out things. Come on, Gertrude, which is it to be—Diana or the lunch?"

Much as we regret to admit it, poesy surrendered to appetite and Gertrude joined in with a will that did credit to her youth and health.

"Ambrosia, nectar, was never like these sandwiches," Lucile was declaiming, a sandwich clenched tightly in each hand, when there came the interruption which changed the whole summer for them.

Sweet and clear and exquisitely haunting—like the music of another sphere—there came to them on the wings of the perfume-laden air, the strains of a violin.

Gently, insistently, like moonlight shimmering on the vastness of the ocean came the deep, sono-

rous cadences, then, while the girls held their breath to listen, the music changed, became lighter, more joyful, broke into the exquisite freedom of a summer morning, swelled to the pride the glory, the passion of noonday. Then, suddenly the martial music ceased and in its place a pleading, minor melody, embodying in its exquisite plaintiveness all the tragedy of the universe.

The music fluttered, wavered and melted into silence.

Toward them through the trees, stumbling rather than walking, white head bowed, bow still upon his violin, came the musician.

CHAPTER XII

MORE MYSTERY

THE girls scrambled to their feet scarcely knowing whether to stand their ground or run away from this strange apparition. Instinctively they glanced at Lucile and her slight gesture meant—"stay."

The old man came on a little, seeming not aware of their presence, then, raising his eyes, stopped short in bewilderment.

Four half-startled young girls in this lonesome spot—how came they there? His slow gaze travelled from one to the other as though in each he hoped to find an answer to his question—while they, in their return studied him.

He was a picturesque figure, this old musician who had come so suddenly upon them out of the forest, and something warm and pitying stirred in Lucile as she looked at him.

Slight of figure, of average height, yet with a

suppleness and grace of poise that seemed only to belong to youth, one would have said. Yet he was old—white hair of amazing vitality and lustre glistened in the sun like strands of silver—hair heavy and thick and soft, falling from his Jovian head far below his shoulders—framing a face patrician in its purity of contour. From beneath a broad, high forehead shone eyes startling not only in the blackness of their color but in their curious sadness of expression—a profound melancholy which seemed to harmonize with the tragic sweetness of his music.

These same eyes, roving around the group of wondering young faces, stopped when they met Lucile's and smiled. As Lucile had never been known to resist a smile, the sunshine of her own broke forth and she spoke impulsively.

“You are—tired,” she said sweetly and a little hesitatingly, scarcely knowing how to address him—then added, with unerring tact, “your music charmed us so we forgot everything else. Would you—perhaps—rest a little—then—play for us—some more?”

Again the man smiled and something in the sweetness and pathos of that smile brought tears to the girls' eyes—they could not have told why—save that it contrasted so strikingly with the tragedy in his eyes.

“You liked my music?” he queried, taking a step forward and raising the violin to position. “Yes, I will play for you—what is there in the world but music?”

He raised the bow to the strings and for the first time the girls saw he was trembling with fatigue.

“Please—not yet,” begged Lucile, forgetting diffidence for the moment at this proof of weakness. “You are tired and perhaps—if you have travelled far—hungry. We—we have more than we want and—and—if you would help us—” her voice trailed off and diffidence returned overwhelmingly as the old man lowered his violin—gazed vaguely from her to the lunch she had indicated, then back to her again. Once more that strange smile in which the eyes took no part.

“Tired?” he said, as though considering. “Yes,

I have travelled very many miles and have not eaten—but I never think of that.”

Evelyn gasped audibly and her respect for the stranger rose a hundred points, to say nothing of her curiosity!

“But you will think of it now,” Lucile was pleading, with that pretty deference she always paid her elders. “We would all feel very badly if you refused. See,” she indicated a little moss-covered indentation in the bank which she had recently occupied herself, “nature must have known you were coming and prepared a place for you.”

The pretty compliment had its effect and the old musician moved forward slowly, while his eyes remained fixed upon Lucile’s pretty, pleading face.

“The pretty little lady is very kind,” he said, quaintly, sinking upon the grass and laying his violin and bow carefully beside him. “I did not know I was tired—I get lost in the music and—and—” he passed his hand across his forehead in a vague gesture of helplessness, “I seem to—forget—”

“Yes, music does that to me, too,” said Lucile, helping him meanwhile unassumingly to a chicken leg, two buttered biscuits and a cup of steaming coffee from the thermos bottle. “Music,” she continued, dreamily, delightedly conscious of the way the chicken leg was disappearing, “makes you forget everything that isn’t beautiful—makes you just remember the sky and the trees and the way the flowers grow—”

“Ah, little girl,” the old man leaned forward, his eyes glowing with enthusiasm, “you speak like—like—the spirit of music.”

Lucile flushed, touched and not a little embarrassed.

“That—that is the prettiest compliment I ever received,” she said, softly. “I shall never forget it. Will you—will you have another biscuit?”

From that moment began a deep and strong affection between this oddly assorted couple—the old wandering musician with the patrician face and tragic eyes, and the lovely young girl with the sweet mouth and eyes of enthusiasm.

For an hour the old man lingered while the

girls fell more and more in love with his quaint personality and he fell more and more under the spell of their gentle ministrations.

Then at last, his eyes happening to rest upon his violin, he scrambled hurriedly to his feet.

"I forgot," he said, passing his hand with that same curious, vague gesture across his forehead. "The children—they will be waiting."

"The children," Lucile repeated puzzled.

"Yes, the children," he agreed, simply, then, as though explanation would be superfluous, raised his violin and drew the bow gently across the strings.

"I will play for you," he said.

He played, and playing, seemed once more to be wrapped about by that strange forgetfulness of time and place. As though the girls did not exist for him—as indeed at the time they did not—he turned slowly about and walked hesitatingly, dreamily away from them into the forest—silver head bowed, bow still drawing magic music from the treasure of his violin.

Farther and farther off he went till the foliage

hid his slender form and gleaming head—on and on, till the sweet strains came to them like fairy music wafted on the fabric of a dream—on, on, fainter and sweeter still, till, merging in the song of birds, the rippling of the water, seemed suddenly become a part of them and fluttered into silence.

For a full minute after the music had stopped the girls remained motionless, lips parted, eyes wet, listening breathlessly for another note—then realizing that their new-found friend was really gone, turned to one another wonderingly.

“Lucy,” cried Evelyn, “who in the world do you suppose he is? We may never see him again.”

“Perhaps not,” said Lucile softly, a wonderful light in her eyes. “He must be a magician—no ordinary mortal ever made me feel like that.”

“No ordinary mortal could play like that,” said Margaret with conviction.

“Goodness, that’s nothing,” Evelyn retorted briskly, “I could have told you he wasn’t ordinary the moment he said that eating didn’t interest him. No, you needn’t laugh—that’s always a sure sign.”

"But he was so handsome," marvelled Lucile, "and he was certainly a gentleman. Oh, girls, I do wish we could capture him and take him to the council fire to-night. The girls might believe our story—but the boys—never."

"Methinks I even now can hear them scoff," Evelyn agreed. "However, all we can do is to tell them the truth—at least our guardian would believe."

"Bless her," said Lucile, fondly. "But, oh, girls, here's another mystery. I wonder if all mountains are as full of them as these."

"A wandering musician," said Margaret, dreamily, "who comes from nowhere to vanish into the unknown. He spoke of children, too. If it didn't seem awfully like prying into another peoples' affairs, I'd suggest that we follow him and find out who they are. Then we might have something even more startling to report at the fire to-night."

"They'll think we'd been dreaming," said Marion, with conviction. "And if it weren't broad daylight I'd be tempted to agree with them."

"Well, I wouldn't," said Evelyn, ruefully. "It was all very well for that old musician to say he never thought of eating but he didn't practice what he preached. I had my eye on that juicy piece of chicken and of course that was the first thing Lucile picked out to give him."

"Which—the eye or the chicken?" queried Marion, busying herself with the repacking. "I wouldn't be so careless with my eyes if I were you."

"Goodness, that joke came out of the ark," said Evelyn, good-naturedly. "If you'll hand me that cover Gertrude, I'll do up this box. When do we start on new adventure, Lucy?"

"Right away," said Lucile, springing to her feet. "Perhaps we'll find even more to tell them to-night."

But this time her prophecy proved wrong. Nothing more of interest happened to them during that long, delightful afternoon and it was not till toward the very end of it that they turned their eager steps once more toward camp.

A council fire—nothing more romantic has ever

been acknowledged in the heart of a camp fire girl. It was Lucile's picture of that afternoon on the observation platform of the flying train, about to come true.

The white tents, revealed flashingly, uncertainly in the weird fantastic light of the fire—the ruby glow in the water, the flickering stars, the moon, the whispering breeze—.

“And to cap it all,” breathed Lucile, voicing the general sentiment, “we have a wonderful story to tell them—”

“That's probably what they'll call it,” said Evelyn, ruefully. “With the emphasis on the story!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE GYPSY TRAIL

THE girls were surprised upon approaching the camp to find all the young people assembled and a general air of excitement prevailing. Two or three of the boys were gesticulating wildly and their audience was listening to the details of the adventure they were narrating with literally open mouths.

Screened by intervening foliage, the girls watched wonderingly for a moment the scene of confusion, then, led by Lucile, burst in upon it.

Their advent was greeted by a score of salutations and the group opened to let them in.

"Hello, girls," Phil explained. "You're just in time to hear the story of our adventures. You see," he continued, "Jack and I went further than we intended and just—"

"Please, Phil," Lucile implored, "don't tell the story now. Save it for the council fire, won't you?"

Phil hesitated, frowned, while the others looked disappointed.

"I don't see why," he was beginning when Mrs. Wescott, coming softly up behind them, took a hand.

"Lucile is right," she said gently. "A story gains a great deal by proper surroundings, just as a picture is enhanced by the beauty of its background. Besides, there is supper to be eaten and cleared away."

"As usual, my wife is right," observed Mr. Jack Wescott, sauntering up to them, hands in pockets and fun and good-fellowship emanating from every inch of his six feet two. "What's the matter with you fellows—have you forgotten its supper time—or are you sick?"

"Same thing," grinned Phil. "Also, speaking for my compatriots, I might say we are neither. How about it, fellows?"

Of course they assented vociferously and the boys and girls scattered to their respective camps. Jessie ran up to Lucile and the two girls met with as much fervor as though they had been parted a year instead of a day.

"Make believe you don't look good to me, Lucile Payton," said Jessie, holding her friend off and beaming upon her. "I guess this is about the first day in three years we haven't spent together. I missed you horribly."

Lucile hugged back with fervor and a little contrition. In the excitements of the day she had not missed Jessie as much as she ordinarily would have done—there hadn't been time.

As they entered the tent together she found herself wondering where Jack could be. He had not been in the group, he was nowhere to be seen and the fact vaguely troubled her. If he had wanted to see her very much—but she gave herself a little angry shake—she was actually in danger of becoming sentimental.

Two hours later a spark, the flickering of a light, the quick updarting of flames and the council fire was alight.

Softly, noiselessly, clad in their full ceremonials, the girls filed out from the shadows into the dancing forelight, singing the swaying mystic chant to fire.

It was a striking sight, a beautiful sight and the boys, seated farther back in the shadows, looked wonderingly on, seeming to see for the first time these girls that they knew so well.

It had been understood that they were not to join the circle until the preliminary rites had been observed, so they merely sat and watched, patiently awaiting their moment.

As a matter of fact, it came sooner than they expected, so absorbed were they in the pleasure of contemplation. Nevertheless, at the guardian's first words of invitation they joined the fire circle as though moved by some magic power. How a space of ten feet can be covered in the fraction of a second does indeed, give food for speculation. However, for the moment it suffices to say that the feat was successfully accomplished.

Then began what the boys would have termed "the real fun of the evening."

One by one the group about the fire were called upon to relate their experiences and one after another they merrily complied.

Some of the incidents were really interesting,

some merely funny, but none were tame—these happy young people had never learned the trick of being tame.

However, not till Phil started upon his narrative did they feel the first thrill of real excitement. Then they leaned forward eagerly, for Phil possessed the art of the real story teller.

“Well, in the first place,” he began, “we fellows were rather sore at the way you girls had thrust us upon our own resources as it were. We’re pretty tame, but somehow we didn’t relish the idea of being left home to wash the dishes while the gentler and weaker, albeit more charming sex,” this with a bow to the girl on either side of him, “packed off in search of adventure. Well, to continue. Not being satisfied—as I said before—with the conditions dictated by our charming neighbors, we resolved to do a little prospecting on our own account.”

“Well,” they queried, leaning forward with quickened pulses. “You found something?”

“Did we?” said Phil, his eager young face illumined by the firelight. “Well, I don’t know,” he

added, pausing to consider, "whether you could just exactly call it finding—seeing would be more the word. Finding with us fellows generally means keeping."

"You said something then, old man," said Jack, his hand seeking Lucile's under cover of the darkness. "What we find we keep."

Was it interest in Phil's story or mere indifference that made Lucile forget to withdraw her hand? We wonder!

"Well, we were just piking along," Phil was saying, in his usual easy slang, "when we heard peculiar sounds in the near distance and decided to investigate."

"How can a distance be near," Jessie objected. "It's just about as sensible as saying 'He stopped on the edge of the brink'."

There was a ripple of amusement and Phil looked truculent.

"You can say a far distance," he argued, "so I fail to see why the opposite isn't permissible. In fact, I contend—"

"Oh, get on with the story, Phil," Jack inter-

rupted. "You're getting off the straight and narrow path. If you don't proceed, I'll do it for you."

"Shake a leg, Phil," cried one of the younger boys. "I'll take care of Jessie."

For answer to this unspeakable impertinence, Phil merely glared, but it had the effect of melting the offender out of the lime light the fire made into the shadowy blur of the background.

Then amid another ripple of irresistible laughter Phil proceeded with his narrative.

"As I was saying," he began defiantly, "we were disturbed by sounds in the near distance and immediately set out on a tour of investigation. We had not gone more than three or four hundred yards when we came upon the outskirts of a gypsy encampment."

"Ooh, nice," gurgled Evelyn, the irrepressible. "Did you fine our gypsy boy?"

Phil turned upon her with an expression of mingled amusement and chagrin.

"There you go," he said, "spoiling my climax of the story by guessing the point."

It took them a moment to realize just what his words implied, then—

“Phil,” cried Lucile, and Jack could feel her fingers tighten in his as she leaned forward, “do you mean to say you actually found that poor little fellow we ran down on the road the other day? What luck!”

“I don’t know whether you’d call it that or not,” said Phil, ruefully. “Our advent seemed to be badly timed. How about it, Jack?”

At the direct appeal, Jack roused himself from a prolonged and happy contemplation of Lucile in her ceremonial dress. He had really not heard a word of Phil’s story; in fact, at the moment rather resented its intrusion upon his thoughts.

However, he roused himself long enough to reply, rather vaguely. “Very much so,” and immediately relapsed into his former state of semi-consciousness.

Phil, seeing his condition, like a true friend turned the general attention to himself by continuing the story:

“You see they were just on the point of removing their junk wagons from the vicinity.”

"You mean they were breaking camp?" demanded Lucile, then, without waiting for a reply to the first question, delivered another. "How in the world did you find our cripple, then?"

"Didn't," was the cryptic reply. "Just caught a glimpse of him as he was being pushed into a covered wagon by that big brute of a gypsy who was with him the first time."

"And you let them go?" cried Jessie, excitedly. "You let them get away without doing a thing to stop them?"

"What would you?" queried Phil, patiently. "We could hardly hold up the whole caravan, there being only two of us—unarmed at that. If they hadn't been hitting the trail, we might very possibly have thought up some scheme to spirit the poor little shaver away without attracting undue attention to ourselves. As it was, we were helpless."

"Did you let it go at that?" asked Mr. Wescott, speaking for the first time. "Or did you try for some clue to the gypsy's new location?"

"Did we try?" cried Phil, turning to his ques-

tioner. "Why, Jack and I trailed that confounded outfit for miles—that's why we were so everlastingly late getting back. It would take a mind-reader to tell where they were going but they seemed in an almighty hurry to get there. Jack and I had to run some of the time to keep up with them."

The listeners drew a long breath, then broke into a clamor of questions and surmises, only stopping when they had exhausted not only their imaginations, but themselves as well.

"Some time or other we'll hunt down that outfit," Mr. Jack Wescott decided with a grim setting of his jaw. "If only for reasons of humanity, it's up to us to get that little chap and make a life-sized, honest-to-goodness boy out of him, instead of a shrinking, terrified little animal."

"Hooray," shouted Phil, with enthusiasm. "How about it, fellows—any conscientious objectors present?"

The insinuation was hooted to scorn and immediately a dozen impossible schemes were proposed, by which the object of their humane inten-

tions was to be plucked from midair and in some mysterious way landed in their midst.

Of course it was all ridiculous but the red-blooded enthusiasm of the girls and boys in the project spoke well for the successful conclusion of it.

When order had been restored and the taking of reports once more begun, they listened with more or less marked inattention to the comparatively uninteresting adventures.

To them it seemed that the climactic point of the evening had been passed and their thoughts flew back again and again to Phil's graphic account of the gypsy band.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CURTAIN LIFTS

YET when Lucile spoke they instinctively listened, gathering from her first word that she also had something of interest to relate. It was strange how everyone listened at all times to Lucile. There was something magnetic in her personality, in the bird-like tilt of her pretty head, in the naive humor of her phrasing.

Margaret had once said of Lucile when in this mood, "Lucy sparkles so when she talks that half the time I forget to hear what she's saying, just for looking at her."

It may be added that Jack suffered markedly from the same complaint, often driving Lucile to depths of despair by answering "no" when it should have been "yes."

"You don't listen, you just look," she had pouted once, to which he had whimsically replied, "Blindfold me, little Lucile, and I'll listen to you forever!"

However, upon this eventful evening the young folks both looked and listened without interruption or comment till she had finished.

Even then, so graphic had been the recounting and so stunned were they with surprise at the strangeness and romance of it all that for a full minute no one spoke.

Then it was Jessie who broke the silence.

"Oh, Lucy, dear," she murmured, "if I could just have been with you."

"That sure does take the cake," cried Phil, while the others clamored approval. Jack, alone of them all, seemed to be struggling with some very different emotions.

"You don't go off on these excursions without me again," he said, gripping her hand fiercely, "Gad, Lucile, if anything should happen to you—"

She favored him with a little grimace and turned back to the tense group about the fire. Mr. Westcott had begun to speak and there was an unusual quality in his voice that commanded attention. His face, vividly illumined in the firelight, bore a curious expression; half quizzical, half-serious,

as though he doubted his own wisdom in broaching the subject at all.

“Girls and boys,” he began, “for a long time Mrs. Wescott and I have been piecing bits of evidence together, which have given us what may be—probably is—a purely fanciful result. However, fanciful or true, it is surely interesting and in view of what you have discovered to-day, I am going to give you a sketch of our theory.”

“Yes,” they prompted, eagerly, impatient of his pause.

“When I was up here before,” he began, unable to keep all trace of excitement from his voice, “I was thrown into pretty close contact with the country folk hereabouts and naturally came to imbibe a great deal of their folk lore, their myths and fables. So, at least, their stories seemed to me, for the cynical New Yorker becomes suspicious of the far-fetched tale and yearns, first, last and all the time, merely for the facts.

“However, Lucile’s strange encounter with the white-haired musician led me to believe that perhaps I was too quick to discredit their stories—one of them at least.”

"Then you knew there was such a person," Lucile interposed eagerly. "I'm glad of that."

"I didn't know anything about it," he corrected her, "not until your story corroborated that of the mountain folk. If his story is true—and I feel considerably more inclined to credit it than I did formerly—it is a very unusual, very pathetic one."

"Gee, Mr. Wescott, go on," cried Phil, the irrepresible. "This is better than the classiest baseball game going and when a fan says that he's saying something. What did the old codger do—kill somebody and take up the fiddle to keep people away? If he played it the way I do," he added with a chuckle, "he'd be safe for a lifetime."

"If you had seen him and heard him play, you wouldn't joke about him," cried Lucile, and they turned to her, wondering at her heat. "He is no mere vagabond to be sneered at and made the butt for jokes. If I have ever met a gentleman, he was one and his music was the kind that stirs, inspires, saddens all in a breath, all in the drawing of the bow across the strings. I tell you, he was wonderful!"

“Now, I’m sure the story was true,” said Mr. Wescott, leaning forward eagerly. “Just that conviction of yours, Lucile was the one little thing needed to convince me. Listen, you girls and boys and see if you blame me for doubting in the beginning.”

He paused for a moment—only the crackling of the darting flames, the sighing of the wind through the forest could be heard and these seemed rather to intensify than dispel the silence.

After a moment he continued, leaning forward to brush a glowing timber back into the flaming mass.

“This is the story as it was told to me by old Peter Bingle himself—an old weather-beaten, garrulous rascal who has constituted himself gossip of the mountains and who can never be seen without a hideous black pipe clutched in the place where his teeth should be. I shouldn’t wonder,” he interrupted himself, a gleam of amusement in his eyes, “if it was the appearance of the story teller, rather than the story itself which made me discredit it so completely. However—to continue.

“Old Pete has it that this mountain musician whom Lucile has championed so warmly, was once a famous musician in Venice. It seemed the Venetians adored him—they would gather in crowds at the mention of his name, to be moved to laughter or tears by the power of his music. He was a Venetian himself, possessed of a lovable personality which won him almost as many friends as his violin.

“Then, with his foot upon the topmost rung of the ladder of success, he met the beautiful young singer, who, after two short months of ardent courtship, he succeeded in making his wife.”

“Swift work,” murmured Phil, but no one heard him—all eyes were fixed intently upon the speaker. The sharp cracking of a fagot made Lucille start nervously but a firm pressure of Jack’s fingers reassured her.

“Well,” continued Mr. Wescott, warming to the story, inspired by the great and all-absorbing interest of his audience, “the thing happened that so often happens in a marriage of temperament after so short a courtship. The young wife was ambi-

tious—for herself—and the young musician, adoring her madly, sought to gratify her every whim.

“The first real break occurred when her eyes wandered from the narrow confines of Venice, across the broad Atlantic, to the great American republic where a rich and tolerant people would give her wider scope for the development of her genius.

“The poor young Venetian was torn by conflicting emotions. He had been born in Italy, had grown up there, won reputation, fame—his life was rooted in the very soil.

“Yet, if he stayed, his wife would go and while he adored his Venice, he adored his wife ten times more. So he said good-bye to everything he had known and came with her to the United States.”

He paused again and the girls waited with marked impatience for him to continue.

“Well, the ruin of genius is always sad,” he went on, musingly, “and if the story is authentic, his was doubly so.

“Shortly after they set foot upon American soil

their son was born—a sickly, delicate child from the first. Yet, as his wife with her new hosts of friends and flatterers grew away from him and he himself failed to have the successes of the old days, the young musician transferred all his affection to the boy.

“Well, the climax came when after a quarrel, provoked by her, his wife left him with scarcely a word of regret. They say it was then that his hair began to turn white.”

“Then,” cried Evelyn, excitedly, “that accounts for the strange impression we had of his being both young and old at the same time. His hair was white, the most beautiful white I ever saw, yet he carried himself like a young man.”

Mr. Wescott gazed at her curiously.

“Everything you say seems to bear out old Pete’s story,” he said, “yet I remember how incredulous I was at the time. It almost makes me ashamed of my skepticism.”

“Is that all?” interrupted Jessie, impatiently. “No, it can’t be for we haven’t heard yet how he

happened to come to the mountains. Please go on."

"You'd think he had had almost trouble enough," Mr. Wescott continued, obligingly, "but it seems fate hadn't gotten in all its innings yet.

"When the boy was ten years old he developed hip trouble and the doctor ordered out door life and open air as the only possible cure for him. Luckily the Venetian had had a good deal of money in the old days and he still had enough to support himself and the boy until such time as the lad's recovered health would permit their return to the city.

"It seems the boy had inherited his father's passion for music and for awhile the two were very happy. Father and son, playing together in the dusk of a summer's evening would draw people for miles around—both music lovers and those who came out of curiosity.

"Then one day the boy silently, weirdly, inexplicably, disappeared."

"Oh," they cried, pityingly, and Lucile added,

imploringly, "Oh, Mr. Wescott, that can't be all—they must have found him."

"Not a sign or a clue," he denied, gravely. "They say the musician became a little mad at that—the strain had been too great.

"He started out with his violin to find the boy and since then has been roving the country side on his vague mission. Before he left one of the neighbors, a kindly woman who had loved the two and was heartily grieved at this new misfortune, offered to keep the house in order and the pantry well stocked with eatables, in case the boy should come home."

"Oh, it's pitiful, pitiful," cried Lucile, while two tears, gleaming red in the firelight rolled down her face unnoticed. "My poor musician—no wonder his music made me want to cry. Oh, can't we find his boy for him?"

Phil, who had been closely regarding Mr. Wescott during the story, suddenly jumped to his feet with a shout that startled them all.

"You say that boy had hip disease," he cried. "That means, of course, he's lame—"

“Phil,” cried Lucile, trembling with excitement, “that boy—the gypsy—oh, it can’t be—”

Then suddenly, to all of them came the dawning of a great idea, like the lifting of a curtain upon the stage.

CHAPTER XV

JEDDIE IN A NEW ROLE

"I CAN'T make myself believe we didn't imagine it all, even yet," said Jessie, dreamily.

It was about a week after their momentous talk around the fire and the boys and girls were tramping through the moss-carpeted, flower strewn aisle of trees toward the road where one of Brandenburg's "old gasoline cars" was expected momentarily to arrive.

Mr. Wescott had left instructions in the village that provisions and mail were to be brought in twice a week, as it would be impossible, even for our boys to cover the distance in less than two days.

As this was only the second time they had received word from the outside world, even if it be via Brandenburg, our young folks were in a state of great and natural expectancy.

"Well, I know it couldn't have been a dream,"

said Lucile in answer to Jessie's remark, "for the simple reason that I've hardly slept for a week. I've felt right along that the summer was going to be full of adventure, but who would have hoped for a drama like this?"

"Gee, it's great," said Phil, enthusiastically. "If we could only make friends with the old man and then find his kid for him—"

"Hold on, there," Jack interposed, "if we go on taking things for granted, we're letting ourselves in for a lot of disappointment later on. How do we know that the cripple we ran down in the road has the slightest connection with the nut—I beg pardon, crazy musician, Lucile found in the woods?"

"We didn't find him—he found us," Lucile corrected, demurely. "Besides," she added, with more decision, "I won't have you spoiling our perfectly good intentions. You know, the boy's fright made us doubt all the time that he belonged to that old gypsy. Now I'm positive he didn't."

"Well, I sure hope you're right," said Jack,

earnestly. "The hard luck of that poor old fellow has actually made me feel bad. I hate to see a man kicked when he's down."

"But he isn't old," Lucile protested, stoutly. "He can't be over thirty-five, if he's that and he has one of the finest faces you ever saw."

Jack studied her profile in silence for a moment—then said, whimsically,

"Young, handsome and a maker of beautiful music. Now, I know I shan't let you go roaming around alone."

Phil and Jessie laughed, while Lucile with a little grimace, ran ahead to where the others were already assembled, awaiting the arrival of Brandenburg's best.

"Oh, let's go on and meet it," she cried. "There's no use waiting here. The car's probably broken down a dozen times and if we find it along the road we may be able to rescue some of the mail and a few of the eatables. Come on, don't be lazy."

Lazy, lazy—on a morning like this!

No one knows what cruel and unusual punish-

ment they might have meted to Lucile had she given them half a chance. As she was already half-way down the road—fleet of foot as any boy, they had no alternative but to accept her challenge.

Then followed half an hour when fun and good spirits were allowed free reign. With youth and health, the sun on your head and the wind in your face—what more is there to be desired? They could not have told.

Then, a little over two miles from camp they found the machine as Lucile had predicted, stalled, with the lanky chauffeur stretched on his back, vainly seeking the cause of his misfortune.

When Phil accosted him in familiar tones, he sat up, blinking at them miserably.

“There ain’t nothin’ the matter with the durned thing,” he exploded, querulously. “It jes’ stopt like a balky hoss an’ won’t go, nohow. I’m plumb sick of it.”

“Well, it’s a relief to know that there’s nothing the matter with it,” said Jack, gravely, while the others tried vainly to keep their faces straight.

“Strange how you get wrong impressions sometimes—”

“See here, young feller,” the rustic assumed a belligerent attitude, “ef ye’re tryin’ to make game o’ me—”

“Not at all,” Jack assured him, blandly. “In fact, I’m going to prove myself the best friend you ever had. If you will be so good as to remove your none too bulky person and allow me to insert mine in the vacancy thus made, I will endeavor to prove my ability in the starting of fliv—I should say—excellent machines like yours. Permit me—” and before the astonished and still truculent chauffeur could protest, Jack had shoved him to one side and had squirmed his way beneath the car, till only his long legs bore testimony to his whereabouts.

“Do be careful, Jack,” Lucile called, laughing with the others. Excellent machines like this are apt to be frisky—and you’re too young to die.”

“Don’t worry,” chuckled Phil, walking in front of the strange absurd machine and placing one foot in dramatic fashion upon the front wheel. “While I live he shall not die—”

“Phil,” cried Jessie, fearfully, “if it should start—”

“Such a chance,” said Phil, laughing at her while the others laughed at him. “Any fellow who can’t stop a flivver with one foot ought to be shot. How about it, old man—all right?” This to Jack as he emerged triumphant but dirty from his temporary retirement.

“Sure,” he announced, cheerfully. “That’s all right, provided something else doesn’t break down before the darned thing starts. Got plenty of juice?” this last to the indignant chauffeur, who, without deigning to reply turned his back upon them and climbed to his seat.

“Oh, wait a minute,” cried Lucile, suddenly struck by a happy thought. “Did you bring any mail?”

His surly grunt being interpreted as an assent, he was promptly commanded to hand over, which he did with a civility conspicuous by its absence. However, they were too absorbed in the delightful business of assorting and distributing the letters to notice its lack.

"Isn't this great?" Jessie hooked her arm in Lucile's and fingered her five letters happily. "Why does a letter in the country mean as much fun as three when you're home? I'm sure I don't know which to open first. Choose one for me, Lucy."

Lucile laughingly obeyed, then fell to with enthusiasm upon her own satisfying little pile.

The two from her father and mother she read over twice with a tender little smile on her lips. The others, though not as important, were interesting and they had already traversed three-fourths of the distance back to camp before she was aware of Jack walking silently by her side.

"Oh, hello," she said, smiling rather vaguely. "Didn't you get any letters, Jack?"

"Three," he admitted, holding them up for her inspection, then shoving them carelessly into his pockets. "I got a good deal more enjoyment out of watching you read yours than in reading my own."

after that, Lucile's eyes turned away from the

They walked along in silence for a little time

splendid young figure Jack made as he strode along at her side. They were alone, for Phil and Jessie had slipped quietly away some time ago, chuckling over Lucile's preoccupation.

"Wait till she wakes up and finds us gone and Jack there instead," Jessie had whispered gleefully. "If I didn't despise an eavesdropper, I'd be tempted to hide behind a tree and watch. Poor old Jack—he's having a hard time of it."

"Well, he isn't the only one," Phil had replied moodily, whereupon Jessie had promptly and diplomatically changed the subject.

Now the victims of the conspiracy were beginning a little drama all their own. Lucile, to whom restraint of any kind had always been irksome, finding herself often confused and positively speechless before this strange thing that had sprung up between her and Jack—a thing that she had vainly tried to combat by ignoring—grew restive and a little resentful.

Now she turned to Jack swiftly, the perplexity and irritation of her mood making itself felt in her tone.

“Oh, why don't you say something?” she cried, petulantly. “You never used to be so tiresome, Jack.”

“Am I tiresome?” he asked, gravely. “I'm sorry. Just being with you has been enough for me, Lucile, and egotism made me forget that I might bore you. I'll try not to do it again.”

Disarmed by his gentleness and penitently conscious that she had wounded him, she wished desperately to set herself right, yet scarcely knew how to begin.

“Jack, I—I'm a beast,” she said, after a minute, still not looking at him, but feeling her face grow hot. “I—I—don't deserve—your friendship—”

“Lucile,” he cried, pleadingly, “it isn't friendship I'm offering, don't you know that? It's—oh, Lucile, look at me—”

But she was off, racing recklessly through the underbrush—wondering at herself for running away—when in her heart she had wanted to stay—oh, how she had wanted to!”

Jessie was a little surprised and alarmed when she slipped her hand into Lucile's a few minutes later, to find it trembling.

“Lucy,” she cried with quick solicitude, leading her off to a more secluded spot, “did I do wrong to leave you and Jack alone? If he made you feel bad, I’ll kill him!”

Lucile gave a queer little laugh and patted Jessie’s hand reassuringly.

“Don’t you worry,” she said, “it wasn’t Jack’s fault—he was splendid. Oh, Jessie—” she hid her face against Jessie’s shoulder and the latter’s arms tightened about her.

“Lucy, dear,” she whispered, the joyful light of the successful matchmaker in her eyes, “did he—did you—you needn’t tell me unless you want to, you know—” she paused hopefully, but Lucile broke away from her in one of her swift changes of mood, tucked some rebellious curls in place and answered with a delicious little curtsey,

“You’d better be careful with your designing plots, Miss Jessie Sanderson. Some day I may hunger for revenge and then—look out!”

With which she evaded Jessie’s outstretched hand and precipitated herself into the midst of a newly-excited and jubilant mob.

“What do you suppose?” cried Marion, flinging her into the circle. “Evelyn had a letter from Jim, saying he’ll be here this afternoon. Oh, won’t we give him one reception.”

“This afternoon,” cried Lucile, “why it’s almost noon, now. Goodness, we’ll have to do some hustling to get ourselves and the camp ready for the arrival of—”

“Our successful New York engineer,” finished Jessie, poised daintily on one foot. “Rumor has it that we are soon to have some ‘punkins’ in our midst.”

“You said it,” Phil agreed, enthusiastically, for it must be remembered that he and Jim were friends of long standing. “Jim’s a genius, that’s what he is—and I’m mighty glad I was one of the first to shake hands with him.”

“You dear,” whispered Lucile, slipping one of her own little hands into his. “Did you see Evelyn’s face when you said that? I guess there’s no mistake as to her feelings in the matter.”

“It’s catching,” grinned Phil, giving the little hand a responsive squeeze. “Gee, it’ll be just

luck if any of us come out of these muountain fastnesses heart-whole and fancy-free."

"It's all according to how we came in," laughed his sister and was off before he could retort.

After that there was "racing and chasing on Cannobee Lea"—or rather, in the two camps, for both girls and boys were anxious to appear at their best for the expected newcomer.

However, as it turned out, they might have spared themselves a great deal of exertion for the camp was in order, to say nothing of themselves, for a full hour before the actual arrival of their visitor. And how long an hour can seem, when one's nerves are a-tingle with expectancy!

As it was, they were just turning disgustedly from their observation post on a gigantic rock near the roadside when Jack suddenly and effectively changed the trend of their thoughts.

"The flivver," he yelled, springing from the rock and giving a hand to Lucile. "Breaking all its records for deviltry. I bet old Jim never had a ride like that in civilized New York. Come on, Lucile, we'll be the traction cops and hold 'em up.

Say, you Jim, can't you say 'hello' to a pal?" this last as the car swung around a turn in the road and came to a sudden stop at sight of them.

From the tonneau sprang a broad-shouldered, splendid figure of a man whose doffed hat revealed a mop of crisp red curls and whose merry grey eyes twinkled with true Irish humor.

"Say, you're a sight to stir the heart of a man," he said, in a big voice which seemed admirably suited to the width and breadth of him. "How are you, Jack, old man? Gad, it's good to see you—and Lucile, why ye're bonnier than ever, darlin' with your bright hair and your rosy face—and if here don't come the whole army of 'em. Gad, my chest is gettin' bigger every minute."

Jim's Irish ancestry only made itself felt in moments of extreme emotion or excitement, when he spoke with the slightest suggestion of a brogue. The girls loved it and then and there decided to keep big Jim in a perpetual state of excitement.

"Ah, Evelyn," he was saying, and Lucile's eyes telegraphed delighted signals to Jessie at the undeniable softening of his voice, "here you come,

bringin' up the rear—and I thought you'd forgotten me entirely.”

He took Evelyn's plump little hand in his immense one and Lucile experienced a little thrill of alarm as she noticed how Evelyn's eyes avoided his gaze.

“Oh, dear,” she thought, in dismay, “I never realized before how completely not looking at a person can give you away. And Jack says I never look at him!”

Whereupon she firmly decided that hereafter Jack should be the object of her constant and unceasing regard.

Shouting, hilarious, the boys and girls surrounded Jim and were for carrying him off then and there to see the sights, when he raised his hand and roared for attention.

When the boys had hoisted him to a natural platform of rock, forming a semi-circle about him, laughing at him, crying “Speech, speech,” or “Order, you slaves—the great High Muckamuck is about to address you.”

Finally when order had been whipped out of

chaos, Jim swept the circle with his snapping grey eyes and began to speak.

At the moment it would have been hard, well-nigh impossible to find in this self-possessed, confident young city-bred man, a trace of the shrinking, heart-hungry boy our girls had first known.

It was a revelation of the magic of environment and the girls felt a thrill of exultation when they realized that the forming of the camp fire had been to a large extent responsible for the miracle. Their camp fire—what had it not done for them all!

“Girls and fellows,” Jim was saying, with a touch of earnestness in his tone that won instant response from them all, “the other day, or rather, night, when I found I would be able to break away and join you here, I got to thinking somehow, of old times—how much I owed you all—and suddenly an idea came to me,” he glanced about at their attentive young faces, and for the first time the girls recognized something of the old Jim in the wistful smile that curved the corners of his mouth.

"You see," he continued, more slowly, "the luckiest moment of my whole life came when little Jeddie ran away and introduced me to—Mrs. Wescott and you camp fire girls."

He looked around at them again, so much the old Jim now that Lucile felt the quick tears of sympathy stinging her eyes.

"I'm not going to tell you all that meeting meant to me," he continued, whimsically. "It would take me too long and besides, I never could express my thoughts half well enough. I only knew that Jeddie was my mascot that summer, and there was no reason in the world why he shouldn't bring us all luck again—so—" he paused and at the moment, as though at a pre-arranged signal, there came two short, imperative barks from the direction of the still waiting automobile.

For a moment they were surprised into silence by this amazing new development—but only for a moment.

With a little cry Lucile ran forward and flung herself upon a wicker basket which had, up to

this time, lain unnoticed on the floor of the car.

“Jeddie, Jeddie,” she murmured, undoing the clasps with trembling fingers, “come on out of there—you dog—”

With no perceptible hesitation, Jeddie came out, bounding straight into her arms and striving, as of yore to reach her face with his ardent pink tongue.

With the little black dog clasped tight in her arms, Lucile was ushered through the crowd amid cries of,

“Way for the mascot—the mascot comes,”—to be finally lifted upon the rock beside Jim where she turned and faced them.

“Girls and boys,” she cried, face flushed and eyes sparkling, “allow me to introduce to you the dog of the hour and the pride of our camp. He brought to us once the good fortune of a meeting with one of New York’s most promising and who received the ensuing ovation with a gravity-rising young engineers”—this with a bow to Jim—belied by the twinkle in his eyes.

“And,” continued Lucile, in true orator’s style,

“once having performed so signal a service—what may he—the dog I mean—not do in the future? I ask you, ladies and gentlemen—what may he not do?”

“Nothing,” cried one of the boys enthusiastically, to be immediately assailed with cries of—

“Down in front.”

“She wasn’t speaking to you—she said gentlemen,”—until he subsided in confusion and attention was once more focused upon Lucile.

“So,” finished the latter, holding Jeddie out in front of her where he barked in excited and friendly fashion at his audience, at the same time waving a frantic greeting with his tail, “having received the one thing needed to complete our happiness, we hereby resign the center of the stage and leave our mascot to speak for himself”—of which kind permission the little dog—excited by all the noise and confusion, availed himself without delay.

A few minutes later a very much pampered, very much petted dog followed the joyful procession back to camp—excitedly conscious of the

dignity and responsibility his new office imposed upon him.

He was a mascot now—and it behooved him to behave himself!

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEAR FEASTS

"But he's changed so, Lucy—he's actually become handsome. What are you laughing at—don't you think he has?"

Lucile straightened the corners of her mouth and tried to look solemn.

"Why, of course, he's awfully good looking," she answered. "If there's any doubt of that—ask Evelyn. What made me laugh was the remembrance of our first meeting with him on the platform of the Alosa station."

Jessie chuckled, and leaning down, pulled one of Jeddie's soft ears.

"If my memory faileth me not," she said, "Evelyn was the very first to poke derisions and mockery at the poor country boy. We wouldn't dare remind her of it, now—she'd have our lives."

"And they look so dear and funny together," Lucile went on, tickling Jeddie's nose with a piece

of long grass, till he sneezed and opened a reproachful eye upon her. "I have yet to see a great big overgrown fellow like Jim who didn't pick out a little bit of a girl he could put in his pocket."

"Well, I don't know about that," Jessie objected. "Evelyn isn't much on height, but she isn't exactly a bean pole. It would have to be a pretty broad pocket that she'd occupy. You know, Lucy," she added, apparently at random, "this camp is having a demoralizing effect upon us."

"Well, turn about is fair play," returned Lucile, wickedly. "You've done your best to demoralize it."

"Oh, is that so?" mimicked Jessie, with a little grimace. "Well, I'll just tell you that all my trouble has come from just watching you and Jack."

"What do you do it for then?" queried Lucile, reasonably. "I'm sure we don't need it."

Then, forestalling the retort she saw trembling on Jessie's lips, she went on hurriedly and with a slightly heightened color.

“You know, I have an idea the boys are planning to surprise us with something. They have acted very mysteriously, lately. I wonder if they could have found some trace of our gypsy boy or the musician. With Jeddie as a mascot, we ought to be able to bring them together.”

“Goodness, you couldn’t expect him to begin work so soon,” laughed Jessie. “Give him time. Just the same, I have noticed something unusual in the atmosphere. The boys never act that way unless they have something up their sleeves—pardon me—I should say, ‘in the offing’ or something equally Bostonese. Didn’t I tell you I was becoming demoralized?”

“Don’t say that, Jessie, dear”—Lucile had become suddenly serious—“because you know you don’t mean it. I know of course you mean it’s the romantic atmosphere that makes it impossible for you to snub Phil as much as you would like. I’ve noticed he’s becoming terribly dictatorial, lately.”

“Horribly,” assented Jessie, plucking a handful of grass and throwing it spitefully into the lake—one would almost believe that she would have done

the same to Phil, had it been possible. "Why, whenever I say anything to him, he only laughs and says, as you did just a moment ago—that I know I don't mean it. Things have come to a pretty pass when I need other people to tell me what I mean."

Lucile laughed softly.

"Never mind, dear," she said, putting an arm about Jessie's despondent shoulders, "Phil's just growing up, that's all—and you're not used to it yet. Anyway, you know you think a lot of him."

"I do not," Jessie exploded and Lucile's only answer was another laugh.

"Now you know you don't mean it," she said.

In spite of herself, Jessie laughed and put an answering arm about her tormentor.

"Oh, Lucy, Lucy," she murmured, "I wonder what is to become of me."

Lucile was about to reply when an unexpected sight made her jump to her feet, shading her eyes with her hand.

"Jessie," she cried, "look—can that be the boys?"

Jessie scrambled to her feet and a moment later was doing a dance step in her excitement.

"Of course it's the boys," she cried. "There's Jack and Phil in the front seat. But where in the world did they get the boats?"

Lucile did some rapid-fire thinking in that moment and came to a swift conclusion.

Of course they must be the boats she herself had discovered that first day in camp—the boats which Phil had called tubs and which Jessie had likened to a bug. Also, Jack's condemnation had been no less real because of his restraint in voicing it.

Of course, being so completely discouraged, Lucile had completely forgotten what had at first seemed to her a useful discovery and had naturally believed the rest had done the same.

And now here they were, all seemingly strong and watertight, being rowed across the lake as though on a wager.

"Where on earth did they get the oars?" Jessie voiced the same thought that was in Lucile's mind and they looked at each other in perplexity.

As they watched the boys progress, Lucile was not quite sure whether to be pleased or vexed. After all, it had been her find originally and the boys might have taken her into their confidence.

However, as her motto had always been—"when in doubt—smile," she immediately put it into practice.

"Let's call the girls," she suggested "and our guardian. They mustn't miss seeing the sights."

Accordingly, when Jack and Phil and Jim, who manned the first boat leaped upon the bank they found an enthusiastic company awaiting them. Jack who had paused for a moment to make the boat fast to an overhanging branch of a great tree, strode through the laughing group of girls to Lucile's side.

"With your kind indulgence," he shouted, making a megaphone of his hands, "I will, for a few moments hold the center of the stage."

"You bet your life it will be a few moments," cried Phil, derisively, "and the fewer the better—that's all I have to say to you."

He was greeted by laughter and a chorus of

hisses, into which Jack's voice broke threateningly.

"If any low personage in the audience wishes to dispute my right to occupy the center of the stage, I should be glad to argue the point in the only manner compatible—"

"He means I've got to fight a duel," said Phil, in mock dismay. "No sir—there's a law against carrying concealed weapons in this country. Go on, Jack, say your little speech and get it over with."

"Well, as I was about to remark," Jack continued, "and as introductions seem to be the order of the summer, I take the liberty of introducing to you our latest acquisition, 'Lucile, the discoverer'."

A murmur of astonishment and amusement went the rounds, while Lucile's pretty person, as she leaned against a tree, was the battery for a score of fond and curious glances which said as plainly as words, "Our Lucile—what has she been doing, now?"

“If it had not been for her, we should never have had the use of the noble and graceful craft you see before you—or beside you—or behind you—according to the position in which you are standing—”

Phil was heard to murmur something about “getting at him,” but several pairs of hands surrounded separate parts of his anatomy, and he was forced to submit.

“In conclusion,” Jack was declaiming, dramatically, “I might add, that, while Columbus discovered more—Columbus himself was not so much.”

This time Phil was not to be restrained and Jack was dragged from his lofty perch amid shouts of cheering from his audience.

After that nothing would do but the boys must take the girls for a row around the lake—but Mrs. Wescott interposed.

It was wonderful to see that exuberant crowd of young folks quiet down at her first words and see the expression of loving respect with which they listened to her.

Her husband saw it and smiled tenderly to him-

self. He had never grudged the time and thought she had spent on her camp fire girls, for he realized that had it not been for them, he should, in all probability, never have had his wife. As a result, his enthusiasm for the organization of camp fire clubs throughout the country was unquenchable.

"I don't know," she was saying, looking very attractive in her perplexity, "just what to do. I intended taking some of the younger girls into the woods for the afternoon, but, if we have our pleasure this morning, we'll have to sacrifice it later. Now, I have it," she smiled around at them. "Suppose you big boys take the younger girls for a row right away so we can get an early start this afternoon. And you, Lucile, and the rest, may clear up now and have your fun later. How will that be?"

The plan received unanimous approval and as Lucile passed her guardian she put an arm about her, asking, sweetly:

"If we are very good, guardian, dear, and clear up beautifully—might we be permitted to do up

some lunch so we can get an earlier start? It would be ever so much more fun that way."

The permission was readily granted and a few minutes later the girls were vigorously attacking the mass of piled-up breakfast dishes. So efficient had they become in the art of "clearing up" that they were dancing impatiently upon the bank—the hampers filled to the covers with good things—long before the first boat nosed its way about the turn in the lake.

However, as every good thing has to start sometime, they found themselves after a wait that seemed interminable, taking their seats in the boats—cautioning the boys not to drop the hampers overboard—a caution which the boys treated with the scorn it deserved.

"I bet this has some of Jessie's biscuits in it," grinned Phil, lifting the basket with apparent effort. "In fact, I'd be willing to bet my last cent on it."

"Why?" asked Jim, who had been separated from Phil long enough to be slightly off his guard. "Betting to your last cent is going some. I'd rather look inside, first."

"Just feel the weight of it and you won't have to look," Phil explained, to which pleasantry Jessie, lulled by the heat and the soft splash of the oars, vouchsafed no reply.

The others, too, had grown rather silent and when Jack spoke to her, Lucile brought her wandering thoughts, with a start, back to the present.

"Well, have you forgiven me?" he asked, and she looked up in surprise. She was always so pretty when surprised that Jack made a mental note to do it oftener.

"Forgiven you," she repeated, "what for—this time?"

"Repairing your discovery without taking you into the secret?"

"How did you know I didn't like it?" she evaded. "I wasn't cross, was I?"

"You never are," he assured her, fervently. "I simply know you so well that I saw you were hiding something, and guessed at the trouble. We should have told you, but Phil thought Jessie might be hurt if we left her out, and we were eager to surprise you. Now will you forgive me?"

"More than that," she answered and would have given almost anything the next minute if she had not made the admission.

"What more?" he was asking eagerly. "What more will you give me than forgiveness—Lucile—"

"Hey, Jack, look out there," Phil warned as they narrowly grazed a floating log. "What do you think this old tub is, anyway? Look out—we're afoul of another one—"

"Well, suppose you take the oars for a change, you lazy lubber," cried Jack hotly. "All you've done all day is tell other people how to work."

"Well," returned Phil, urbanely, "it isn't my fault if nature has endowed me with superior ability. Some day, when I have become famous, people will point to me, saying, 'Behold, there walketh the son of a poor working man—'"

"Ooh, you wait till I tell Dad," threatened Lucile, eyes brimming with laughter, but the "son of the poor working man" took no heed.

"Risen, as doth all genius on the backs of the working masses—"

"You'll rise on the toe of my number nine walkovers," cried Jack, rising in his wrath and exhibiting a foot of disconcerting proportions. "Get over there and grab those oars, sweet genius, before I throw you overboard."

"I protest," said Phil, rising in his place and tipping the boat perilously to one side. "I say," raising his voice, "I protest against the rude, insensate brutality of the hoi polloi—"

At this juncture, Jessie administered a gentle little push, thereby upsetting his equilibrium and dignity at the same time.

"Behold!" she cried, dramatically, "so hath genius fallen in the height of his ambition—even like to the shooting star—"

"Give me a pistol, and the star will have competition," grumbled Phil, picking himself up and climbing into the place vacated by Jack with an air of injured innocence.

"Just the same," he added, gripping the oars and joining sheepishly in the general mirth, "it's gratifying to be called a star by a young and beauteous damsel, even though you know she

doesn't mean it. Where to, sweet masters—my arm giveth out."

"So soon?" cried Jessie, scornfully. "Why, you've just begun. Besides—we want to row a long time before we eat."

"Oh, yes?" queried Phil, with suppressed bitterness. "Well, even I—poor slave that I am—may have something to say about that!"

"The way I feel now," said Evelyn, proying herself an unexpected ally, "making Phil wait for his lunch would be merely biting our own noses off. I'm famished."

"Hooray," cried Phil, then meeting Jessie's eyes, subsided with assumed humility.

"I meant—oh, horrors," he said.

His expression, more than his words, convulsed them all and it was some time before they had recovered enough to broach the subject of a landing.

"Really, people, I have to eat," cried Lucile, the lilt of laughter still in her voice. "We girls were hungry all the time we were putting up the lunch and it's more than an hour since then."

Look, there's just the place we've been looking for."

"Just the place" was indeed, a most ideal spot for a picnic—in fact, the girls had conceded since the first day of their arrival, that never had lake harbored so many romantic little dells and grottoes for enthusiastic campers like themselves. If they had had one made to order, they could not have chosen more happily.

Phil rowed in toward shore and the boys scrambled out upon the bank, holding out their hands to the girls—who indeed, needed little help, being as quick and agile as themselves—then made the boat fast to an overhanging bough.

The other two boat loads of young people had evidently not seen them land, for, although they waited some time, there was no sign from them and they finally decided to eat without waiting longer.

"It's good they have their own hampers with them," said Evelyn, as they fell to eagerly at the task of unpacking. "Otherwise we would have to wait for them and goodness knows what would become of me."



"It's a bear!" he shouted hoarsely. (Page 205.)

"Oh, give me some," cried Phil, eyeing the tempting assortment of delicacies ravenously. "I'm dying by yards. I say, old chap—what have we here?"

Then happened what no one of those girls and boys will ever forget.

Turning at Phil's words to follow his rapt gaze into the woods, they stood as though paralyzed—eyes and mouths wide open, staring straight before them. Jack was the first to find his tongue.

"It's a bear," he shouted, hoarsely. "Don't stand there like fools, you fellows. Get the girls in the boat and stand off from shore."

In what seemed to them a particularly bad and vivid nightmare the girls felt themselves half-pushed, half-carried into the boats while that great lumbering form in the background quickened its clumsy pace at sight of them—crashing noisily through the bushes and underbrush.

Had it not been for the food they had spread out on the rock the adventure might have ended disastrously—for they found how very much easier it is to tie a knot on the branch of a tree when

your head is cool and your nerves steady than it is to undo your handiwork with trembling fingers and the need of haste like a lash at your back.

The girls could have screamed with the horror of it, but in another minute Jack had whipped out his knife and cut the rope. Then, giving the boat a mighty shove, he tumbled into it himself, while big Jim at the oars pulled as he had never pulled before.

“Look,” cried Jessie, gripping Phil’s arm and pointing back to where the big black brute was calmly devouring their pile of good things, “it’s lucky we had the lunch spread out. If we hadn’t —” she shivered a little, yet could not draw her eyes away from the spot.

“Lucky,” grumbled Phil, the light of revenge in his eye, “lucky nothing—I’d almost rather let him eat me than that lunch.”

The girls laughed a little hysterically, for now that the danger was passed, the situation appealed to their sense of humor.

“Oh, but I was frightened,” gasped Lucile, the unsteadiness in her voice showing that fright had

not altogether disappeared. "He's such an immense thing and he came upon us so suddenly."

"What did you think he'd do?" growled Phil, his ill humor increasing in direct proportion to the rapid disappearance of the viands on shore, "send a telegram? Say, for two cents I'd swim in and take those sandwiches away from him. I thought I had an appetite—"

"You'll stay just where you are," Jessie said, firmly. "If you move an inch I'll jump overboard."

"Look at him now," yelled Jim. Attracted, no doubt, by the noise of the altercation, the bear reared slowly on its hind feet, assuming in their fascinated eyes tremendous proportions—then, slowly and majestically came to earth again.

Then, with calm impudence, he continued his feast where he had left off.

"Guess that's his way of saying 'howdee,'" laughed Jim. "Seems to be a good natured old codger."

"Who wouldn't be," growled Phil, "with all that grub inside him?"

CHAPTER XVII

PETER BINGLE

“You know, there’s something all-fired important we’ve forgotten about,” said Jack, and at the sudden seriousness of his tone they looked at him curiously.

“Oh, I know what you mean,” cried Lucile, going white. “There’s our guardian and the girls alone in the woods. Oh, we must find them—we must warn them—”

“Some of the boys are with them,” Phil was beginning, when Lucile impatiently cut him short.

“What earthly good would they be?” she cried, “they haven’t any weapons. Oh, don’t waste time in talking, we must act.”

She was trembling all over and without another word Jack seized the idle pair of oars and the two athletes pulled with all the strength that was in them.

“We ought to find Mr. Wescott first,” Phil sug-

gested. "He would know better than we where to find Mrs. Wescott. If we try to hunt them down this way, we'll be going it blind."

"You're right, of course," said Jack, pausing for a moment to look for some sign of the other boats. "You fellows keep a bright lookout and meanwhile we'll make enough noise to wake the dead. Now then—all together."

They shouted, and yodelled, and called Mr. Wescott's name until their voices were hoarse and they were just about despairing when their reward came in a shouted "hello" from the other side of the lake.

Then from around the little peninsula-shaped arm of land they espied, to their great delight and relief, the other two boats—evidently the rest of the party had kept together.

"Good," said Jack, and rowed the harder.

They met the other craft in the middle of the lake and poured their excited story into incredulous ears.

"Are you sure?" queried Mr. Wescott, still unable to believe, then with a queer note in his voice gave an order.

“We have to be back in the camp in five minutes, boys—can we do it?”

“You bet we can,” they answered and Mr. Wescott, gripping the oars so the knuckles showed white, said between compressed lips—

“Then row for your lives!”

The boys rowed like mad and before the five minutes was up the first boat had grazed the bank.

In much less time than it takes to tell, the boys and girls, led by Mr. Wescott, were racing through the woods toward the spot where Mrs. Wescott and her gathering should be.

It must be admitted that, during the running, tumbling, reckless journey, the girls allowed themselves frequent glances over their shoulders. If that huge, lurching form should take a fancy to pursue them—!

However, they met with no mishap and were beginning to breathe easier when Mr. Wescott espied his wife through the trees.

“Helen,” he cried, breaking in upon her in the midst of a lecture she was giving to an attentive and absorbed group, “thank Heaven you’re safe.

Are all the girls and boys here—none have wandered off into the woods—have they?”

“Why of course not,” she replied, gazing in bewilderment from her dishevelled husband to the breathless girls and boys that crowded in behind him. “Jack, what is the matter with you? You look as though you’d seen a ghost.”

“I wish we had,” groaned Phil. “Ghosts don’t have such appetites.”

The girls felt a hysterical desire to shout, yet there was something in the seriousness of the situation that prevented them.

There was danger lurking in the forest, danger in the form of a sinister black bear—danger which might even now be threatening them. Once more they all glanced nervously over their shoulders.

Mrs. Wescott noticed the involuntary movement and stomped her foot with impatience.

“What in the world—” she began, but her husband forestalled her by giving her a hurried account of the episode.

When he had finished, their guardian, pale of face and lips animated as always with a maternal

instinct of protection, gathered the girls to her, gazing apprehensively about.

“Jack,” she said, her eyes dark with fear, “what can we do? Why we haven’t even a gun about the place in case of emergencies.”

“Yes, we have,” said Mr. Wescott, grimly, adding hurriedly as though in answer to an unspoken question, “I packed a couple without saying anything to you, Helen—for I know how you hate firearms—but in the mountains, it’s always well to be prepared. It didn’t seem really necessary to me at the time for the simple reason that a bear is seldom seen in and around Brandenburg, but I thought it best to take no chances. So you see, under the circumstances, camp is a far safer place than this.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” cried Helen Wescott feverishly. “When I think what might have happened, and what still may happen it makes me tremble. Come, girls and boys, gather up your things quickly—there isn’t a moment to lose.”

They obeyed energetically, feeling meanwhile a half-pleasurable, half-fearful excitement. They

were just about to leave the place when a sharp crackling sound among the bushes made them stop as though shot.

"It's the bear," quavered Jessie, clutching Lucile convulsively by the arm. "I'm glad we're going to die together, Lucy."

Lucile gurgled hysterically—for she was the first to catch sight of the real cause of the disturbance, and the reaction made her giddy.

The next instant Mr. Wescott had seen and stepped forward with a shout of relief to greet the new comer.

"Old Peter Bingle, by my best Sunday hat," he cried, boyishly, and the parched, leathery face of the man thus addressed relaxed into a welcoming smile.

"Waal, waal," he drawled, "ef this ain't a real pleasure, I don't know one with a identy-ficashun card tacked onto it. Three years since I seen ye last, yet I ain't forgot a hair o' ye haid. Which is more'n ye can say for me," he added, with a grin, "seein' I ain't got none ter fergit."

"Just now," said Jack Wescott, whimsically,

“that old gun of yours is worth more to us than the finest head of hair in the country would be.

“Helen, this is the renowned hunter and trapper you’ve heard me tell about Peter Bingle. And these, Pete, are our camp fire girls and camping boys, whose high spirits and enthusiasm my wife and I are trying with indifferent success to curb.”

“Ye’re a fine one to be talkin’ about dampenin’ sperits?” the old trapper remarked, skeptically. “And anyways, I’d leave off tryin’ ef I was you—high sperits is a asset in this here wale o’ tears.

“I’m real pleased ter meet ye, ma’m—also the girls and boys. Ye was sayin’,” he added, while the boys and girls gathered nearer, examining him curiously as though he had been some strange new kind of animal, “ye was sayin’ suthin’ ’bout my old trusty bein’ a welcome sight, or words to that effect. Want ter commit suicide, or set up fer target practice—eh?”

“You said it,” cried Phil, irrepressibly. “Only, instead of a bull’s eye—we’re aiming for a bear.”

The old trapper’s eyes twinkled as they rested upon the fiery youth and he replied with a more emphatic drawl than before.

"Bear's eye—is it," he cried. "Wall, waal, what's the bear been doin'—tryin' ter git a meal off'n ye?"

"Worse than that," replied Mr. Wescott, before Jack could speak. "He ate all the lunch and Phil would rather have tendered himself."

Phil blinked and Jack punched him in the ribs, whispering, joyfully—

"They've got your number, old man—you can't get away from your 'rep'."

Phil's only answer was a grin which showed him unashamed.

"My, but that there's bad," the old trapper sympathized. "Thar's nothin' like the mountains ter give ye an appetite. But why didn't ye pot th' ole feller, son—bear steaks is fine pickin'."

"The only thing that kept us from potting him," grinned Phil, "was the lack of the wherewithal to pot."

"Gee, it would have been like taking candy from a baby," he added. "The old codger even reared up on his hind legs to give us a better target."

Their new acquaintance slapped his thigh and bent over double as though in enjoyment of a huge joke.

"I knowed it," he said, straightening up and twinkling at them. "I kinda 'spicioned from the first, an' now thar ain't no doubt. It's durned lucky ye didn't have no gun, seein's those little uns would a gone to bed broken hearted. My, it's lucky—yer not havin' no gun."

"You mean," said Mr. Wescott, a light dawning in his eyes, while the boys and girls just stared, "you mean that bear was a pet and we've had all our worry for nothing?"

"Jes' so," said the old trapper, hugely enjoying their chagrin. "All ye had ter do was jes' ter give him a clout on the nose an' say, sort a scoldin' like—

"'Naughty, naughty—stop eatin' that thar grub an' git about yer business like a nice, well-behaved animile'—an' he's 'a vamoosed gentle as a kitten."

Phil, whose dismay had been gradually increasing during this monologue, covered his eyes with his hand and groaned aloud.

“Oh, cruel fate,” he cried, staggering dramatically. “What trick is this thou hast upon us—the humblest of thy pawns on the chess board of life. Ah, ’tis beyond my power to endure—”

“Goose,” cried Jessie, while the others shouted with laughter and the old trapper was frankly dismayed.

“What is he—one o’ them acter fellers?” he queried, mildly. “I ’member a long time back some o’ that there tribe—‘Wanderin Players’ I think ’twas they called themselves—set up their panty-mime in Brandenburg. ’Twaren’t one amongst us objected to their wanderin’ but when they stopped—oh Lord,” he made an eloquent gesture and the young folks broke out into fresh gales of merriment.

“Not that I meant it as a inflection on the young feller,” he went on, hastily, thereby only increasing the general hilarity.

“Oh my, oh my,” cried Jack, when he could command his voice. “That’s one on you, Phil, old man, that you’ll never live down. ‘As long as you keep moving you’re all right, but when you

stop—oh Lord’,” and he went off into fresh paroxysms.

It was some minutes before they could gain sufficient command of themselves to think coherently—and even then, anyone happening to look at Phil would be affected with spasmodic gasping and coughing, from which he or she could only be relieved by strenuous pattings in the region of the spine.

However, they eventually recovered, or nearly so and all moved off through the woods in the direction of the camp. The old trapper was cordially invited to remain with them but he refused, saying that if he expected to “git that thar bear afore dark he would have ter do some almighty hustlin’.”

The boys and girls would not let him go, however, before they had extracted a promise from him that he would return before long and tell some of his immense stock of interesting stories.

“Hope you find the dancing bear all right,” Jack sang after him as he turned away in the direction the boys had pointed out. “If you can’t, we’ll be glad to help out.”

“Mighty kind o’ ye,” said the trapper, adding with a grin and a glance at Phil, “judgin’ from the grub ye say he got away with, I’ll prob’ly find him lyin’ round that thar picnic basket—gorged to th’ muzzle. Good day ter ye.”

“Gorged to the muzzle,” groaned Phil, adding, vindictively, “Gee, I wouldn’t ask anyone to trust me within shooting distance of that ‘animile’—even now!”

“Goodness,” said Jessie, “we haven’t had a square meal since—”

“Breakfast,” Lucile finished. “I have a grudge against the old bear myself but oh, isn’t that trapper a wonder?”

“Say Phil,” Jack interposed whimsically, “the old men seem to have all the luck around here. If we could powder our hair to a beautiful gleaming white—”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Evelyn, roguishly, “I’ll lend you some of my talcum powder. How will that do?”

“Fine,” they agreed, and Jack added, “maybe for once, we’ll know what it is to be popular.”

“Well, folks,” said Mr. Wescott, coming up behind them, “that bear was pretty much a joke on us, wasn’t it? If it weren’t for Mrs. Wescott and the girls,” he added, with that splendid enthusiasm that made him just a boy among the boys and gave him so much influence with them, “I’d be more disappointed than relieved to find we had nothing to worry about.”

“You said it,” Jack agreed, heartily. “A good bear fight would lend local color to the scene.”

“Mr. Wescott,” Lucile put in with apparent irrelevance, “that’s the same old trapper that told us the history of our wandering musician, isn’t it?”

“The same,” he assented, cheerfully. “And if he comes, as he promised, to spin some of his yarns—and he’s sure to do it,—being a loquacious old boy, he never loses the chance for a story—we might take him into our confidence and enlist his aid in finding the boy. He knows everyone for miles around and would be the likeliest person I know to locate the gypsy encampment.”

“Bully,” cried Phil, while the others beamed with approval. “We’ll have to get busy and

make some regular plans for the kidnapping of that little guy, fellows. And when we get him, we'll send old Pete off to find the musician. Say, think of the headline that would make in one of the New York papers—we'll be some punkins."

"And meanwhile," laughed Jessie, "camp looms before us and, in the offing, dinner."

"Oh," said Phil, eloquently and once again—
"Oh!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WAIL OF THE VIOLIN

QUITE some time passed after the incident of the bear and nothing of special note happened to disturb the happy routine of the day. They swam and ate and laughed the golden hours away until, one morning they found another surprise awaiting them.

Returning from a long hike through the woods, they were startled by an exclamation from Phil, as he suddenly darted on ahead of them.

Phil was with his usual enthusiasm, shaking hands with someone, someone whose back was turned to them and who had evidently just arrived, judging from the grip he carried.

“Who on earth,” Lucile began—then the stranger turned and they saw he was no stranger at all, but David Cathcart.

With a shout they were upon him giving him a jubilant welcome that almost took him off his feet

—alternately shaking hands with him and pelting him with questions, till he cried aloud for mercy.

“Give the boy a chance,” laughed Mrs. Wescott, coming to his rescue and welcoming him heartily. “Can’t you see he’s dusty and tired and probably ravenous—”

“He has nothing on me,” Phil murmured.

“Take him away, Phil, where he can wash up—he can tell us about himself at lunch. You are hereby,” she added, dimpling hospitably, “invited to lunch at the girls’ camp.”

With a shout and hurrah, the boys were gone, leaving the girls to blink over this sudden turn of affairs. There had been little chance for personal greeting—save as Marion would not be denied—in the general confusion, but now in the momentary lull both Lucile and Jessie instinctively glanced at Margaret.

The latter’s usually pale face was flushed and her eyes were big and dark.

“Lucy,” Jessie whispered, meeting her friend’s eyes in a long look of understanding, “suppose he’s foolish and doesn’t do the right thing. Suppose he makes Margaret unhappy.”

“He won’t,” answered Lucile, her pretty mouth set grimly. “We’ll find some way to make a sensible, regular person out of him—even if he is a lawyer!”

That night they had a camp fire.

After a supper that did credit even to our camp fire girls—who never turned out anything that wasn’t delicious—they gathered about it, preparing to enjoy its warmth and brightness to the utmost.

Everybody was happy except Jack. In some mysterious way Dave had managed to capture a place next Lucile, and, once more, all Jack’s vague forebodings quickened into life.

And Lucile, he moodily observed, was more lovely than ever and seemed in the best of spirits—perhaps because she had, to all appearances, forgotten his existence.

How he hated lawyers—all the smug, self-satisfied tribe of them. Instinctively his hand sought Lucile’s but with the most maddening of smiles she drew it away, leaving him to grip a handful of moss savagely.

He was a fool, he told himself, had always been a fool—always would be a fool—.

“Jack,” his name was spoken softly, but he glanced up to see Lucile smiling at him in a way that made his heart thump madly, “I—I’m sorry but don’t you think the—the—fire’s—unusually bright to-night?”

“Lucile,” he implored, but she had turned away to answer a question of Dave’s. Yet, the magic had worked and the future was radiant again. Had he said the world was made up of fools? How could he have made such a mistake!

“What’s the matter, Jackie?” said Jessie on his left, patting his shoulder fondly. “You act as though your thoughts were miles away. Is David monopolizing too much of Lucy’s attention?”

“Rather,” he answered grimly. “Guess the fellow thinks he’s talking on a wager. I can’t get a word in edgeways.”

“Never mind, old man,” said Phil, intending to be reassuring. “Lucile doesn’t like him anyway—she and the others have picked him out for someone else.”

"Hush, hush," cried Jessie, frantically. "If Margaret should hear, I'd never, never forgive you, Phil—you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am," said Phil, promptly, but there was real contrition in his voice. "I'm mighty sorry, Jet—I know I shouldn't have said it."

Jessie's eyes softened at the sound of the old, familiar name and she reached over and patted Phil's arm with unwonted gentleness.

"You're a dear," she murmured, very softly. "I'm almost beginning to be—fond of you—Phil—"

Phil's hand tightened spasmodically over hers, and he held his breath.

"Jessie," he implored, "will you come away—away from all these people? I've got to talk to you—I've got to. Will you come?"

"Silly," she chided, "how could I? They'd miss us in a minute. And besides—I'm not quite sure that I want to."

"Well, at least, you're not sure that you don't," he said whimsically, "and that helps. Jessie," he added, eagerly, "just tell me that you want to

and I won't ask you any more—not now, that is.”

But Jessie had recovered herself and made a little face at him.

“Which means that I have about five minutes peace,” she mocked him. “Please listen to what Margaret is saying. You'll find it interesting, if not instructive.”

So, over that circle of merry-eyed boys and girls fate was brooding, tender-eyed—gently molding the future for them all—a future rich in the promise of happiness, rich in the ultimate fulfillment of their dearest dreams.

“Let's sing,” said someone suddenly and the suggestion met with instant approval.

They had exhausted Dave with their questions, had told all the stories they knew; and now, upon a night like this—with the moon making a rippling path of radiance upon the water, and the stars drawing twinkling fairy points of light upon its surface, while the breeze in the tree tops crooned tender melodies to the drowsing birds, what more natural, what more altogether fitting than that they should sing to the quiet, the beauty, the mystery of it all.

And they sang—sang with all their full young hearts, making the woodland echo with the strains of all the dear old songs—songs old, yet ever new.

“And now we’ll finish up with Home, Sweet Home,” Mrs. Wescott suggested, soft-voiced.

With scarcely a pause after the last note of the song that went before, their voices blended in the sweet familiar melody. They sang it with exquisite feeling, for, before the inner vision of them all, arose a little group of home folks, own folks, whose love and fidelity was the one, unchanging fact of life.

The melody had faded off into the depths of the forest and still they all sat silent.

Then, suddenly, rending the deep stillness with a brutal clarity, there rose a wail—a sound so wild, so fierce, so terribly despairing, that their hearts grew cold within them and they shivered convulsively.

They had started to their feet, but a quick, authoritative gesture from Mr. Wescott motioned them back again. In a moment they realized his reason.

The wail rose higher and higher till suddenly it shattered into fragments of discordant notes and with amazement they realized that the voice was not human after all—it was a violin!

Lucile grasped Jack's arm convulsively.

“My musician,” she whispered, fiercely. “Oh, Jack, he's coming this way—toward us—listen—”

And while they sat motionless, the music melted to the strains of Home, Sweet Home—the melody they had sung with hearts full of happiness but a moment before. Yet, was it the same?

Yes, surely it was—yet so changed, so distorted that one would scarcely have recognized it.

It mocked, it danced, it chuckled fiendishly, then broke into a series of rasping notes, like the devilish crackling of some old crone—while ever and anon amid the raucous discord the melody of it rose eloquently, plaintively, passionately soaring to a frantic wail—then gasped and broke and shivered into demon laughter that pealed and pealed again throughout the silent woodland—and was still.

Forth from the bushes, straight toward them,

staggered the musician, silver hair disordered, eyes wild and staring, arms wide stretched and drawn face raised to the moon.

“Home, home,” he cried, gaspingly. “God—where is—home—” and with a little moan he slipped quietly forward and lay there with his face buried in the moss.

In a moment they had rushed to him, dreading they knew not what. They were trembling in every limb, yet their training stood them in good stead and there was little confusion.

“Oh, look out for his violin,” cried Lucile, softly, as one of them almost stumbled over it, “if he should lose that—oh, poor thing, poor thing—” the pitying exclamation was wrung from her as, very gently, the boys turned the musician till his head rested on a little rise of ground and his face was bared to the moonlight.

“He looks so white and still,” cried Margaret, pityingly, “Oh, can he be dead!”

“No,” said Mr. Wescott, gravely from his kneeling position beside the unconscious man. “He is breathing regularly. Over here, Jack—that’s the idea.”

All this time they had been speaking in whispers, a fact which none of them remarked upon, or even noticed till later.

Now Jack dashed a pan of ice cold water full into the face of the musician, and was rewarded to see the latter's eyes open slowly as if with great effort. His gaze slowly travelled from one to the other of the compassionate faces above him, then with a gentle sigh, he strove to sit up.

Jack's strong arm was immediately behind him, but when, feeling the support, the man tried weakly to rise, Mrs. Wescott ran to him, falling on her knees beside him.

"Please don't try to rise," she said, her sweet face so lovely in its compassion that Marjorie afterward declared she "looked just like an angel," "you are very tired and if you will let us take you near the fire and build it up a little, I am sure you will be a great deal more comfortable."

For a moment the man just sat and looked at her—like a man who, dying of thirst, sees rest and refreshment at last—then, reaching forward a tentative finger, touched her soft cheek ever so gently.

"Ah," he said, closing his eyes, "you are a good woman."

There were tears in Helen Wescott's eyes as she motioned her husband and the boys to move him closer to the fire.

"Run and get some of the cushions—the kind we use in the boats," she directed Lucile and Jessie; then turning to some of the other girls who were eagerly awaiting instructions, she added—

"Suppose the rest of you get something for him to eat and a steaming cup of coffee. I think his weakness comes more from hunger than fatigue. Hustle, girls."

Tremblingly they ran to execute her orders and when Lucile and Jessie returned with the boat cushions, the boys rose eagerly to relieve them.

They made an improvised couch fit for a king and helped the musician to it. Then, while the latter watched them wonderingly, yet unprotestingly, they heaped wood and underbrush upon the fire till it blazed up right merrily, crackling and dancing in a way to cheer the saddest heart.

Then, quite suddenly, the musician bethought

him of something, and, raising himself on his elbow, looked about him wildly.

"My violin," he cried, "where is my violin?"

In a flash Lucile was on her knees beside him, holding out both violin and bow.

"We took good care of them," she said, and the brook rippling over mossy bed was never more soft or musical than her voice at that moment. "We wouldn't have harmed them for the world."

This man with the silver hair and the young face took them from her, not looking at them, but at her as she knelt there, so sweet and young in the firelight, then a slow smile dawned about his lips.

"You are the pretty little lady," he said, quaintly. "I remember you—I have played to you often, since then."

Lucile flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said, impulsively. "I think your music is the most wonderful I have ever heard."

"Ah,—you do," said the musician, his face flushing, his eye brilliant. "It is long—ah, so

long since any one said that to me. If you will help me to rise I will play to you. I will play —” he was almost to his feet when Mrs. Wescott interfered again.

“Oh, please,” she said, softly. “We have prepared you something to eat. The girls will be disappointed if you won’t let them serve you.”

“It will be as you wish, madam,” he said, resigning himself with a courtly gesture, so strange in this wandering, half-mad musician—yet, considering his origin, so natural, after all.

The boys and girls about the fire exchanged significant glances and Jessie moved close to Lucile.

“Lucy,” she whispered, her eyes big and round, “look at my hand—it’s trembling!”

“So is mine,” said Lucile, laughing unsteadily, then added, with a quick intake of breath, “it all seems so unreal. And, Jessie dear—watch him eat. Why he must have been half-starved.”

And as he ate, the musician glanced about at the eager, solicitous young faces and gradually the tense lines of his own relaxed and there crept

over it an expression, peaceful, almost dreamy.

From time to time a smile played about his lips—the merest ghost of a smile, yet infinitely haunting. It spoke of the time when not only the lips but the heart had smiled when health, happiness, fame had been his, by right of his great genius.

After a time he set aside his plate and without a word lifted his eyes and began to play. Long years afterward the girls recalled that night, remembered it with a quickening heart and a catch in their breath.

The wonderful moon, the rippling water, the deep shadows of the woodland and the dancing glare of the flames playing upon the bowed white head and flying fingers of the musician, made a picture stamped indelibly upon their memories—never to be erased or dulled by time.

And oh, the music, the exquisite genius of his music. It held them, swayed them, made them captive to its every mood.

It must have been two hours he played on, unwearyingly, passionately, broodingly and when the

last silver note had died and floated off into the silver night there were tears in their eyes and a look of exaltation on their faces. It was as though, lifted high on the wings of melody, they had been given a glimpse of another world.

They were still motionless, striving to analyze the new emotions that throbbed within them, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of breaking the spell, when the musician himself rose abruptly to his feet.

In an instant they had surrounded him, pleading with him, begging him not to go, but he shook his head.

“No,” he said, the old sadness and wistfulness returning, “I will rest when I have found him—when I have found him—”

“But you will come again?” they cried.

He nodded, smiling his slow smile upon them.

“Yes, I will come again,” he promised. “My violin sings well to you.”

Then, without even a backward glance, he went from the bright light of moon and fire into the black shadows of the forest.

They stood for a moment gazing after him, then turned away, silent, thoughtful, still under the spell of that strange, exalted mood.

When at last the fire had been dimmed and Jack turned to say good-night to Lucile he was surprised to see tears glistening on her face.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, in answer to his startled look, and feeling frantically for a handkerchief. "I—I'm so silly, Jack."

"You're an angel," he contradicted fervently, producing his own big handkerchief. "If anybody's dared to make you unhappy—"

"Oh, hush," she cried, putting a hand over his lips, "I'm not unhappy—for myself, anyway. It's oh, Jack," she turned upon him almost fiercely, "if you care anything for me at all you'll—you'll find that boy—"

"If I care," he cried, making a quick motion toward her, then, checking himself, stood looking down upon her eagerly.

"And my reward, Lucile—my reward—"

"Do—do you need a reward for doing an unselfish thing?" she murmured, protesting.

“You bet I do,” the reply was shameless and masterful. “If I find some way to bring the boy here—that day—will you—Lucile—will you—look at me—”

“I won’t,” she said, rebelliously. “I won’t look at you if I don’t feel like it.”

“Lucile,” he cried, impatiently, pleadingly, “I don’t care whether you look at me or not as long as you let me look at you. I asked you a question.”

She glanced at him a little of the old mischief twinkling beneath the long lashes.

“You—you find the boy first,” she said. “And then I’ll—see.”

Then she was gone and Jack was left to gaze up at the moon with a face as radiant as its own.

CHAPTER XIX

A DANGEROUS PROJECT

“Lucy, let me in.”

It was Jessie's voice in a very wee whisper, close to Lucile's sleeping elbow. It was not a really sleeping elbow—Jessie had decided that, after watching it for a full five minutes—only a would-be one.

All of which means, of course that Lucile, while being awake—oh, very much awake indeed—was feigning sleep in the hope, now grown desperate, of being alone for a few minutes with some very happy thoughts.

However, with the first wee whisper at her elbow went the last wee shred of hope and she turned over with a sigh.

“What wouldst thou?” she murmured, drowsily.
“Wast not aware I slumbered?”

“No, I wasn't,” said Jessie, scrambling in and almost shoving Lucile out on the other side. “Par-

don, sweet maid," in response to a stare from the latter. "These cots were built for beauty more than comfort."

"You flatter yourself," said Lucile, twinkling. "All my lessons in modesty gone for nothing."

"Goose," said Jessie. "I meant the beds were built for beauty—not the gentle fairies that lie thereon. Now maybe you can explain why you were out later than all the rest last night," she added, fixing an accusing eye upon Lucile's flushed prettiness. "We heard you whispering—"

"I don't care if you did," said Lucile, defiantly, raising herself on one elbow. "I just made Jack promise he'd find the boy for our wonderful musician—whether he could or not!"

"Lucy," Jessie sat up with a start and eyed her friend with dancing eyes. "Of course, it's too ridiculous—but I made Phil promise the very same thing."

Lucile laughed a little rippling laugh of pure triumph.

"Now the thing's settled," she said, adding, with astounding irrelevance and a gleeful hug, "oh, Jessie, aren't we crazy?"

"Yes." said Jessie, adding with a chuckle, "and somehow I have a feeling that we're always going to be."

"Well, I don't know why you shouldn't," said a mocking voice behind them and screwing round they beheld Evelyn, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes sleepily. "You always have been and there's no use trying to reform now."

"Goodness, you're just as bad," retorted Jessie. "What is it about casting a mote from your own—"

"You mean a drawbridge," corrected Evelyn, indulgently. "Nobody ever casts a mote."

"This kind of mote hasn't a drawbridge, silly," corrected Jessie, witheringly. "There's more than one kind of a mote."

"Well, every mote I ever heard of had a drawbridge," Evelyn contended sturdily. "How do you suppose the old knights and squires and things ever went out to fight for their ladies eyebrow—it always seemed a silly thing to do, anyway—why they always cared so much about their old eyebrows, I can't imagine. And why anybody should fight for 'em—"

"But I didn't mean that kind—"

“And if there wasn’t any drawbridge,” Evelyn continued, unheedingly, “the knights would have to swim across and get their silks and velvets all wet. How long do you suppose they could afford that?”

They giggled and Lucile interposed, with a chuckle,

“I never knew that in the old days the knights went into battle with their court clothes on,” she twinkled. “But if you say so, Evelyn—”

“Oh, well, I don’t know about that,” said Evelyn, slipping out of bed and coming toward them, “but I do know you look altogether too comfortable.”

“Goodness, how deceitful looks can be,” murmured Jessie. “If you knew how near I am to destruction—Evelyn,” she wailed, drawing up her feet as that young person prepared to pounce upon them. “If you must sit somewhere, try Lucy—she’s much more comfortable.”

Lucile made a little grimace and clambered over the head of the cot.

"Since my room seems to be wanted more than my company," she said, whimsically, "I hereby tender you my side, Evelyn, dear."

"Goodness, she's not giving up much," laughed Jessie, eyeing the square inch of space recently occupied by Lucile. "At the rate you're gaining weight, Evelyn," she added, wickedly, "you couldn't get more than one foot in."

"I could too," Evelyn protested, hotly. "And I'm not fat—I'm not—"

"If you don't believe her, ask Jim," chuckled Lucile, then in a whirl of penitence caught Evelyn's plump little figure in a bear's embrace.

"Never mind, dear," she consoled. "We all tease but we can't help knowing you're just exactly right. Tell Jim we agree with him there."

"Jim never said," she began, then seeing two pairs of girlish eyes fixed upon her accusingly, dropped her own in confusion and flushed scarlet.

"Well, not just like that, anyway," she finished, lamely.

"Oh, oh, oh," they cried, joining hands and dancing about her. "She thought she could fool

her aunties, but she couldn't," adding, in a fiendish sort of chant—

"She gave herself away—she gave herself away—"

"If you don't leave me alone," cried Evelyn, desperately, "I—I'll—"

"We're not going to leave you alone," said Lucile, despotically. "Not until you tell us what we want to know."

Together they dragged their captive, half-protesting, half-laughing to the cot and sat her down between them.

Lucile held one hand and Jessie the other and although she looked longingly toward the tent flap which was open to the morning sunlight, there was no rescue in sight—so with a sigh of resignation she turned to them.

"Well?" she queried.

"Is he nice?"

"Who?"

"Jim, of course," their grasp tightened warningly. "Don't try any of that!"

"Well, of course, he's rather nice. Don't you like him?"

"That isn't the point—do you? Yes or no."

"Yes!"

"Good—does he like you?"

"H—how do I know?"

"Yes or no!" Lucile's voice was stentorian.

"Y—yes."

"Good—how much?"

Dead silence.

"How much? Answer!"

"How can I?"

"Why not?"

Evelyn's expression was demure.

"To a question of how much, shall I answer yes—or no?" she asked.

Disconcerted, the girls laughed and hugged the prisoner between them.

"The point is well taken," said Lucile, still in a hollow voice. "The prisoner is condemned from now on to life-servitude—"

"What kind?" queried Evelyn, innocently.

"Ask Jim!"

"Oh, do be sensible," she cried, but the girls only laughed at her and she was forced to accept the verdict.

“After all,” she mused as they hustled into their bathing suits a few minutes later, “it wasn’t such a terrible verdict—there might be worse!”

As they stepped out upon the dew-laden grass, and took in long breaths of the exhilarating air, they saw that it was very early.

The sun, new risen and low in the horizon, sent hazy shafts of light down upon the new-awakened world, touching trees and shrubs and water with a misty radiance. Birds twittered and chirped and trilled a welcome to the morning while a squirrel peeped at them behind the gnarled trunk of a great tree, then clambered nimbly up it, chatting noisily at this untimely disturbance.

A little molly cottontail, caught also unawares, scurried along beneath their very noses and looking neither to right or left, bounded off among the trees—its absurd mite of a tail bobbing defiance.

It was so sweet and fresh and virginal, that the girls stood still for a moment, drinking it in, revelling in it, while every nerve and fibre in them responded joyously. Just to be alive—.

Then their gaze travelled to the blackened em-

bers of last night's camp fire and instantly the same thought struck them all.

"It was beautiful," said Lucile, in hushed tones. "I'll never, never forget it. Girls," she turned to them, very pretty and very serious, "the camp fire's greatest law is to help others. So far we have lived up to it pretty well—if we fall down now—"

"But Lucy," Jessie protested, "we're not going to fall down. We'll try our best—"

"But that isn't enough," broke in Lucile, adding almost as though she were talking to herself, "if we could only do something— However," with a sigh, "of course we can't do anything till we consult our guardian, so come on—let's get the preliminaries over, anyway."

Then there was the twinkle of flying feet, three simultaneous splashes in the crystal clear waters of the lake and the preliminaries were begun.

"Oh, but it's cold this morning," said Lucile, shaking the water from her eyes and striking out happily. "It makes your blood race."

After breakfast a meeting of the clans was

called. When the young folks gathered around Mrs. Wescott they were so fresh and glowing that youth and health seemed fairly to emanate from them—yet an atmosphere of gravity surrounded them and their faces were unusually serious as they prepared to listen.

“Girls and boys,” said Mrs. Wescott, looking fondly about her, “I know we were all deeply moved by what happened last night.” There was a murmur of assent and they crowded nearer.

“We heard the romantic story of a poor Italian musician, who having home, fame, a wife and finally, his son—his solitary consolation in his hour of trouble, became an outcast, an object of pity wherever he went.

“After last night we must stop thinking of the story in the abstract—we must make it our personal business.”

“Hooray,” cried Phil, but immediately subsided beneath a look from Jessie.

“Probably we are the only ones who know of the presence of a crippled boy in the gypsy camp,” their guardian continued. “Therefore, upon us

rests the responsibility of finding out whether the boy really belonged to the big gypsy who maltreated him—or whether he is, in fact, the son of our poor musician. Toward this end we must leave no stone unturned.”

There burst another whoop of delight from Phil, and this time, so far from being restrained, it was taken up by them all in a hearty chorus of approbation.

“I knew just how you would all feel about it,” said Mrs. Wescott, when she could make herself heard, looking fondly round upon them. “Not every group of girls and boys would give up their personal enjoyment, especially when there is so little of the vacation left, to follow up a blind trail which may lead to disappointment in the end.

“Then it is thoroughly understood. We will give up everything else till we have satisfied ourselves that we have done our best to prove or disprove our theory. Is that right?”

There was a unanimous roar, above which Lucile's voice rang out, full and clear.

“If we didn't,” she said, fiercely, “we wouldn't be fit to live.”

There was another cheer, mingled with laughter and after this had died down, Mrs. Wescott concluded her little speech.

"Of course," she said, "it is necessary, first of all to find someone who knew the boy before he disappeared and enlist that someone's help. Mr. Wescott thinks the best one in this case would be old Peter Bingle. He has no ties of any kind and might be willing to join in the adventure."

"Hooray," cried Phil again. "When do we seek out the lion in his den?"

"Yes, when?" cried a score of impatient voices.

Mrs. Wescott looked demurely about her, pausing for dramatic effect.

"Mr. Wescott advises," she said, gravely, "that we start at once!"

"Hooray," cried Phil, released at last from all restraint. "Hooray for Mrs. Wescott and hooray for Mr. Wescott—hooray for everything. Come on, fellows—give 'er a tiger!"

From which it may be gathered that Phil's spirits were ascending!

CHAPTER XX

REINFORCEMENT

NOR were Phil's spirits alone in the ascendant. To lend a helping hand had become so much a part of our girls' characters, through daily association with the lofty ideals of the camp fire, that their happiness had become largely to depend upon the happiness they could bring to others.

Now that fate had given them an opportunity greater than they had ever had before, was it any wonder that faces glowed and breath came quickly in anticipation?

Yet the prospect of adventure was not so alluring as to blind Lucile to other, and in her mind, almost equally important interests. Dave was still amazingly attentive to her and seemed, in like proportion, unaware of Margaret's existence.

"He doesn't seem to see her," she said to herself, exasperated by the dark shadows beneath Margaret's eyes and the pathetic cheerfulness of

her smile. "If he could only see her just once as we see her, he couldn't help falling in love with her. I've got to do something—I won't have her hurt!"

But what that something was to be, Lucile was at a loss to imagine. When one began to meddle, she mused, they usually made things ten times worse than they were before.

She sighed and Dave, who had been covertly studying her profile, laughed at her teasingly.

"Why so doleful, fair lady?" he chided. "One so beautiful should be proportionately happy. A penny for your thoughts."

"They wouldn't be worth it," she answered crossly, struggling with an almost uncontrollable desire to take his two broad shoulders and shake him into some degree of reasonableness. Why would he be so blind?

"Let's hurry," she added, abruptly, realizing that they were being left behind.

Then, as though fate had at last decided to take a hand in this difficult game, something happened to open Dave's reluctant eyes.

Just as the latter, protesting vigorously at her haste and Lucile, tantalizingly pretty in her impatience with him, overtook the others of the party, a sharp cry from Margaret made them all pause and turn to her.

There she was, all crumpled up in a pathetic little heap upon the ground, trying bravely to smile through white lips.

"Margaret," they cried and ran to her.

"It's nothing," she deprecated as they clustered anxiously about her, and Dave stooped to lift her to her feet. "I stumbled over a root and—turned my—ankle a little—I guess."

She was standing now, with Dave supporting her but as she attempted to step on the injured foot, a little "oh—h" of pain escaped her.

Then Mrs. Wescott pushed them all aside and set Margaret down upon the grass, preparing to examine the little ankle to see how badly it had been hurt.

The boys strolled off, looking anxious, for Margaret was a favorite with them all. It was strange to see how every one persisted in regarding

her as a little girl and could not see how rapidly she was growing up.

The hurt was not serious, though at the time, and perhaps for several days to come it would be very painful and the girls with their first aid kits always at hand, had soon made the little patient as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

When the boys came back the girls were just lifting her to her feet and Dave once more offered his assistance.

"I guess I can walk all right now," said the little patient, waving him aside—though her face flushed vividly at the touch of his hand. "Anyway, I'm not going to spoil the party just because I was silly enough to stumble. Oh—I—can't—" the cry was wrenched from her and she would have fallen had not a dozen hands reached out to save her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, thinking as always of the others and never of herself. "I didn't want to spoil the fun. Perhaps if someone would help me I could walk it anyway."

There was a general protest and the next mo-

ment, before anyone could realize what was happening, Dave had lifted her up and was striding on ahead of them.

"Margaret Stillman," Lucile had heard him say, as he passed her with his brilliantly blushing little burden, "you've got the spirit of your father—and more than that I couldn't say for anyone."

With trembling lips and starry eyes she turned to Jessie who had been watching the little scene with an interest only second to her own.

"Jessie," she whispered, "it's happened. He's really seen her—seen our Margaret as she really is. Now if he doesn't fall in love with her I'll give him up."

"Oh, he will, don't worry," said Jessie gleefully. "What with your snubbing and his pity and admiration for Margaret—oh, the rest's bound to follow."

"And it all came from a simple, little fall," Lucile marveled, adding, whimsically, "I'm going back and tie a ribbon around that blessed old root!"

For some little time longer they tramped on,

unwearied by the miles they had traversed and Dave apparently not conscious of Margaret's slight weight, until suddenly Mr. Wescott held up a warning hand.

"Just a hundred yards more," he said, "and we'll be upon the clearing. You girls have marched as well as the boys. Never again will I wonder when my wife waxes enthusiastic over the camp fire. Look," he added, pointing to where a thin column of smoke could be seen through the trees, "we've been lucky enough to catch old Pete at home."

They rushed forward eagerly and soon came to the clearing, in the center of which stood a very ugly log hut. The sound of something sizzling and a savory odor caused Phil to sniff longingly and quicken his pace.

Before they reached the cabin, Mr. Wescott gave the call of a curlew, twice repeated. The signal seemed to be a familiar one, for immediately the old hunter appeared, holding a disreputable looking frying pan in one hand and a fork in the other.

“Waal, waal, how be ye?” he greeted them, smiling his toothless albeit hearty grin. “I’m mighty glad ter see ye, Mrs. Wescott and the boys an’ gals. Ye’re jes’ in time fer a bite o’ lunch.” He indicated the frying pan, in which several luscious slices of bacon were still sizzling.

“Why, you see, Pete, we brought some of our own,” Mr. Wescott explained, indicating the promising-looking hampers. “Come, bring your bacon out here and we’ll pool the lunch.”

The hunter grinned delightedly.

“Seein’s I ain’t tasted nothin’ but my own cookin’ this ten year back,” he said, “which ain’t nothin’ compared to what you ladies allus turns out,” with a bow to Mrs. Wescott, “I hereby except the pleasure, as them there weddin’ invitations says. Sorry I ain’t got no chairs to offer ye,” he added, apologetically. “I’m the proud possessor o’ one what only has three legs—count o’ th’ kiddies’ trick bear settin’ onto it.”

The girls giggled, recalling the incident of the trick bear while Mrs. Wescott assured the old

trapper that they had not used chairs in so long they wouldn't know what to do with them—which, while not being strictly true, was certainly permissible under the circumstances.

Long accustomed to the delight of picnicing and very skillful in the art of hurrying, they had everything out and ready by the time old Peter had finished frying his bacon.

The latter, happy at the chance of having someone to talk to, began straightway to tell them "the sweet story of his life" as Phil afterward said, while the young folks, their hearts set upon one thing and one thing alone, grew more and more impatient as time went on till they could hardly sit still.

At any other time they would have found his anecdotes extremely interesting and amusing, but at the moment he bored them excessively and they wondered why Mr. Wescott couldn't in some way find an opening.

Finally the garrulous old voice stopped for a second and Mr. Wescott promptly seized his opportunity. After that, all sense of boredom vanished.

The old trapper listened attentively to the graphic story, then getting to his feet so abruptly that a couple of biscuits and a glass of jelly went rolling over into the grass, began to pace up and down excitedly.

“By gum,” he cried, slapping his leg and turning about while they watched him breathlessly. “By gum, ef I don’t think thar is somethin’ in that thar tale o’ yourn. Gypsies, ye say? Funny I never hitched on to that thar idea afore. Nice a little kid as ye ever see, too—ef, as ye say they stole him, they must a stole his fiddle along with him—”

“Why, of course they did,” cried Lucile, her eyes shining. “The boy could play and that, with his being crippled, could bring in more money for them.”

Old Pete nodded thoughtfully.

“More’n likely ‘twas that,” he said. “An’ say, that thar kid could play—fair to bring tears to yer eyes, ’twas. Wish’t I’d see the kid ye run down.”

“That’s just the point,” Mr. Wescott put in

quickly. "If we rescued the wrong boy, we'd let ourselves in for a lot of trouble. You're the only one who could identify him—" he paused suggestively.

The old trapper's parchment face lightened eagerly and his eyes snapped.

"Ye're a-askin' o' me ter go into it along with ye?" he asked.

"Will you?"

They leaned forward, all eyes fixed anxiously upon him.

"Go into it," he cried, "go into it—why, ye couldn't keep me out with one o' them thar new fangled torpedoes—nice little toys I hear they be. We'll git that thar kid for his ole man, ef we hev ter shoot the last durned gypsy. Thar's my hand onto it!"

CHAPTER XXI

THROUGH THE NIGHT

A WEEK passed and still the boys with old Peter's aid had found no trace of the gypsy band. Then suddenly, one day, they had come upon a clue.

Deep in the heart of the forest they had met an old man who remembered having seen a caravan pass that way a few days before and had shown them with a sweep of his hand the general direction it had taken.

Eagerly the old trapper with the boys at his heels followed up the trail and, in the end, came upon the object of their long and tireless search.

Glimpses of the fantastic clothing of both men and women came to them as they lay concealed among the trees. Then, when darkness had fallen and they could do so without attracting any undue attention to themselves, they stole silently away, filled with a tremendous excitement and the joy of triumph.

So now, on this day, just at the edge of dusk both camps were waiting tensely for the arrival of an auto from Brandenburg which would bear them swiftly on what might indeed prove to be a dangerous mission.

"If it were only ourselves," Lucile was saying, tremulously, "I wouldn't care—but it seems as though I couldn't let the boys go. Jack and Phil—"

"Good evening."

The girls turned with a start to find the boys looking gravely down upon them.

"Oh, I—we—I was just speaking of you," she stammered, incoherently, while Jessie's gaze wandered off to the far horizon and remained fixed there unseeingly.

"Boys," she continued, looking up at them pleadingly, "you will take care of yourselves, won't you? If anything should happen—" her voice broke and she turned her head away.

"Oh, don't worry about us, little sister," said Phil, striving to speak in his usual light tones. "We're not worth it, and besides, nothing's going

to happen to us—only regular guys get come up with. How about it, Jack?”

“The truth at last,” said Jessie, turning upon them with a flash of her old spirit. “Some day when you’re posing as heroes, we’ll remind you of it. What’s that—” She paused while the others listened breathless.

“It’s the old bus all right,” said Phil, with his usual irreverence. “Say, I wish it didn’t rattle so confounded loud. It’ll put the gypsies wise to us a mile away.”

“Here comes old Pete,” announced Jack, gazing down the dusky tree-bordered path. “Gad, he sure does look like business, with good old trusty slung over his shoulder.”

“Oh,” cried Lucile, with a little shudder. “I forgot you had to carry rifles. Suppose they should go off.”

“It’s to be hoped they do,” said Phil, jocularly. “Guns are usually made with that idea, you know.”

“Don’t be so silly,” said Jessie, cross because she couldn’t help being nervous. “This isn’t any time for joking.”

"All right," said Phil irrepressibly. "I'll cry if it will make the company feel more cheerful. Say, Jack, let's be getting along."

"All right," Jack responded, then, turning to Lucile, whose face he could scarcely see in the fast-gathering dusk, he said, softly, "don't worry, little Lucile. We'll be back in a few hours with the boy and never a scratch to show for it. We won't even have the fun of looking heroic—"

"Don't," cried Lucile, in a stifled voice.

"And if you're tired," he continued, still more gently, "try to get a little sleep and by the time you wake up—"

"Wake up," repeated Lucile, in a very little voice, "why, do you suppose I could sleep—"

"Does finding that boy mean so much to you?" Jack demanded in a strange tone.

"Oh," returned Lucile naively, thrown completely off her guard. "I wasn't thinking of him at least—at least—not then—"

"Then who was it?" he demanded, towering imperiously above her. "Hurry, I hear them coming—who was it—"

"Oh, very well," she said, straightening up and speaking with a mixture of demure defiance and sweetness in her tone that sent his blood pounding madly to his head, "if you must know, his name is—"

"What," he demanded, leaning forward to catch the whispered word.

"Jack—" floated back to him—and in his moment of delirium Jack marveled that he had never known the wonderful possibilities of his name before. Uttered there in the darkness by the girl who had been his ambition ever since their eyes had met, it seemed sweeter than the sweetest music—more potent than the breath of spring.

"Lucile," he whispered, unsteadily, "I won't have to wait till I come back for my reward, Lucile, give it to me now—"

"There isn't time," she answered, softly. "They're calling you, Jack—you've got to go."

"Oh, I'm going," he cried, squaring his shoulders joyfully and breathing in deep breaths of the dew-scented air. "But, remember, I'm com-

ing back again—soon—Lucile, where are you?”

“Here.”

“Give me your hand.”

Breathlessly she obeyed and just for a moment he pressed it to his lips.

“I’m coming back,” he whispered fiercely and strode off into the dark to join the others.

Left alone, Lucile pressed her hand to one soft cheek and leaned against the great gnarled trunk of a nearby tree.

“Jack,” she whispered, into its friendly bark, “take care of yourself—for my sake.”

CHAPTER XXII

SNATCHED FROM CAPTIVITY

THREE, four, five hours passed and still no sound to break the uncanny stillness of the woodland. In the open space between the camps danced the sputtered and gleamed a huge fire, an occasional leaping flame sending a lurid glare far into the shadows beyond.

And around the fire in every conceivable attitude, lounged in sleepy thoughtfulness or sat in moody meditation or fidgeted in frank restlessness our camp fire girls and the boys who had not been allowed a share in the adventure.

Mr. and Mrs. Wescott sat together at one end, conversing in low tones, but on their faces was an expression of strained expectancy and they paused to listen often.

"If anything should happen to them," Mrs. Wescott whispered, "we should never forgive ourselves. You know, Jack, we are responsible—"

“But they’re of age,” her husband protested, looking immensely uneasy, even as he strove to sound reassuring. “Besides,” he added, rather lamely, “all boys bear charmed lives—”

“Listen,” cried Mrs. Wescott, and the sibilant hiss of the word went about the circle, jerking the girls and boys to attentive attitudes as though she had pulled a string.

Far away, yet distinct and unmistakable, came to their straining ears the soft put-putting of a motor, growing louder with each moment—the rapidly increasing crescendo showing the speed at which the machine must be travelling.

For a moment there was a silence so intense about the fire that the crackling of a twig jarred upon their nerves like the report of a cannon and Lucile put up her hand impatiently, as though to brush the sound away.

Then suddenly, as if the louder purring had galvanized them into action, they sprang to their feet and with a shout they rushed blindly through the underbrush toward the gleaming stretch of road.

The moon had risen and shone upon them pale and cold, making the scene as weird and unreal as the fantastic figment of a dream.

So far, not a word had been spoken—their feverish excitement, the mystery of the moment, held them in a spell they were powerless to break. Always their eyes were straining tensely down that stretch of moon-illuminated road.

“Ah-h-h,” the exclamation escaped almost like a sigh and spread about the group. They crowded nearer to the road.

Over the brow of a hill about a quarter of a mile distant had flashed two brilliant glowing eyes—the headlights of an automobile.

That sudden welcome flash broke the spell that bound them as easily as a cord is snapped. The boys cheered hoarsely while the girls pressed forward, watching eagerly for another glimpse of that gleam through the night.

“They’re coming, they’re coming,” whispered Evelyn, a tear rolling down her face and another resting upon the tip of her upturned nose. “I knew they’d do it. Why, Lucy,” she added, star-

bled by the coldness of Lucile's hand as it slipped into hers, "what is it, dear—you—you frighten me."

"Nonsense," said Lucile, striving valiantly to still the quivering of her lips. "A—rather horrid thought struck me, that's all—"

"What was it?"

Jessie put a gentle arm about Lucile's shoulders and Evelyn, doing the same, brought the three friends very close together.

"A horrid thought, Lucy?" Evelyn prompted.

"Oh, it wasn't anything," Lucile answered, her voice scarcely above a whisper. "Only, I'm so horribly afraid of those rifles—"

"Oh, don't you worry," said Jessie, patting her reassuringly. "If any of those guns went off they were pointed toward the gypsies, that's a sure thing—"

But just at that moment the bright lights swung round the curve and there was no further time for fears or doubts or speculations.

With a great shout the boys and girls raced out upon the open road, while the car, jolting and

bumping at perilous speed over the uneven road, dashed down to meet them.

Two flying figures leaped from the machine before it had time to stop and landed almost in the arms of the noisy, excited group.

“Hey, give a fellow a chance, can’t you?” was Phil’s characteristic greeting, shouting to make himself heard above the clamor. “Gangway, gangway—room for the triumphal march. Hey, Jack, are you there, old chappie?”

“I am yet,” Jack shouted back. “Gad, it’s about time someone rescued the rescuers. Let go my toe there, Charlie—you don’t need it.”

“But did you get him?” cried Jessie, shaking Phil’s arm impatiently, while Jack shook himself free of Charlie, one of the younger boys, and approached Lucile. “Phil, did you?”

“Come and see for yourself,” said Phil, the vibrant ring of pure triumph in his voice. “Gee, make believe we haven’t enjoyed ourselves.”

As they all surged forward toward the machine, which had stopped some distance down the road, Jack slipped an arm through Lucile’s and looked down on her joyfully.

"Well, we did it," he said.

"Oh, I'm glad," she cried, fervently. "And you weren't hurt, Jack?"

"Were you frightened?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"Most awfully."

Jack threw back his head and laughed triumphantly up at the stars.

"Oh, you big fool moon up there," he cried, his voice a-thrill with gladness, "you think you're a lot, don't you, but I'm more in the clouds than you to-night."

Lucile laughed up at him, her face bewitchingly dimpled and mischievous in the silver light.

"And like the moon," she added, whimsically, "I have a feeling that we're never, never going to come down to earth," and she was off to join the others gathered around the auto, leaving Jack to follow on feet that refused to touch the ground.

"Look, Lucy," cried Jessie, catching her about the waist and wedging her into a square inch of space so that she might see the outlandishly-garbed, shrinking little figure in the center of the group. "Isn't he the most pitiful little thing you ever

saw? His eyes are the only thing about him that seem to be alive."

Mrs. Wescott with a compassionate cry had run forward and gathered the child to her, looking down in pitying wonder at his emaciated figure and pale little face in which, as Jessie had said, only the eyes seemed alive.

Then suddenly she looked up and began issuing orders in her old authoritative manner.

"Well," she said, with a smile that showed her pretty teeth, "I know you're all dying to know how Mr. Bingle," with a bright glance at old Peter that made his parchment face crack into a million wrinkles, "and our boys did this wonderful thing—"

There was a general murmur of assent and a scraping of impatient feet.

"But," continued their little guardian, inexorably, "we must first get back to the fire and build it into the finest blaze you ever saw. Look, the child is shivering. Besides," she added, with rare diplomacy, "the girls have prepared sandwiches and coffee—"

"Oh, boy," cried Phil, ecstatically, "if we'd known what was coming we'd have wiped out the whole gypsy band. Come on, you fellows, see that you do just exactly as Mrs. Wescott says. Don a move, as we Englishmen say—eh, what?"

In spite of their disappointment in not getting the story immediately they laughed—everybody had long since gotten over trying not to laugh at Phil—and on their way back, Jessie turned up her little nose at him.

"I believe," she said disdainfully, "you would laugh at your own funeral."

"Sure I would," he answered promptly.

"May I ask," she retorted with elaborate politeness, "just what you would find to laugh at?"

"Myself," he answered, adding with a sudden fervor that took her breath away and quite shattered her pose of inquisitor, "I'd laugh at myself for being such a fool as to die when I had everything in this great old world to live for. Gee, you bet I'd laugh."

"Oh-h-," said Jessie, thankful for the darkness that kept her from betraying all she felt. "I—I—never thought of that."

CHAPTER XXIII

AROUND THE FIRE

A FEW minutes later the woods were ringing with the shouts of the girls and boys as they threw branches and twigs upon the dying fire, coaxing it into a snapping, dancing, roaring blaze that sent its ruddy light far into the shadows beyond.

Then our girls brought out the sandwiches and thermos bottles of steaming coffee which they had prepared so many ages—or was it only hours ago.

Then the little wasted slip of a lad, occupying for the time the undisputed center of the stage, placed in the seat of honor next Mrs. Wescott, they settled themselves breathlessly to listen.

“Well, now,” said their guardian, when it seemed they could stand the strain no longer, “I guess we’re just about ready for that story. Will you tell us about it, Mr. Bingle?” again the sweet smile that made the old trapper beam delightedly.

“Waal,” he began, with, for him, remarkable modesty, “seein’ as how the boys done most o’ the plannin’ an’ I was sort o’ what you might call a ‘also ran,’ as the racin’ feller what got snowed up here one night was tellin’ us ’bout—I reckon as how the boys here ought to hev the spinnin’ o’ th’ yarn.”

“No, siree,” cried Phil, adding enthusiastically, albeit disrespectfully, “if it hadn’t been for old Pete firing those shots just in the nick of time, we wouldn’t have come off so easy. How about it, fellows?”

The answer was as enthusiastic as the compliment and old Peter beamed anew. Inwardly everyone was thrilled by the mention of the shots—that was beginning to sound like something!

“Waal,” drawled the trapper as they leaned toward him, expectantly, eager not to lose one word, “I reckon the fun begun when we wuz ’bout half a mile from th’ spot whar we see the gypsy camp t’other day.”

“Gee, my interesting part began long before that,” Phil interrupted. “Jim was seeing gypsies

staring at us all along the road and from the confounded noise our jitney was making I more than half thought he might be right. Most of the time my hair was standing up so straight I had to carry my hat."

"Hey, down in front," cried one of the boys while they laughed despite themselves. "Who's telling this story, anyway?"

"Yes, who do you think you are?" Jack queried, vainly trying to keep his face straight. "I had more sense than you, anyway—I didn't wear a hat!"

There was a fresh burst of laughter and it was some time before the narrator could continue. However, the sight of the little stranger in their midst gazing at them with wide, half-frightened eyes, did more to sober them than anything else could have done. Suddenly they realized the full import of this thing they had done.

They had grown to mean to this little lad the difference between happiness and misery, and the more they looked upon the boy, the more they marveled at the courage which had led them to the undertaking.

So, more intently, more earnestly than before, they listened as old Peter continued.

“When we wuz jest 'bout to th' point whar we met the hermit t'other day,” he was saying, “we stopped th' old gasoline wagon we was joggin' in an' hitched it to a tree. No, I reckon that ain't jes' exac'ly what I meant, neither, seein's them wagons don't generally need no hitchin' like the old-fashioned kind.

“I was allus sayin' to mother when she was alive, that fur's I could see, that thar was 'bout th' only advantage them new-fangled contraptions has on th' old kind—they don't need no hitchin' an' they ain't allus sniffin' in yer pockets ater sugar—”

The girls moved restlessly and the boys coughed with obvious suggestion. However, hints had no more effect upon old Peter Bingle than thirty-two caliber bullets have upon the hide of an elephant.

The old man puffed at his pipe for a full minute—while in the bright light of the fire, every line in his gaunt old face stood out with startling distinctness.

“Waal, as I was sayin’,” he drawled at last when, as Jessie confided later, she was ready to scream, “we got down off’n the bus an’ begun sneakin’ along that last half mile o’ trail, like Indians hot on the scent o’ a hos-tyle tribe. Then, all o’ a sudden when it seemed like we’d crept ten miles ’stead o’ half o’ one, we seen some lights flickerin’ through the trees that looked durn like fireflies—only redder—an’ we knowed that that was the camp, sure ’nough.”

“Ah-h-h,” burst from them involuntarily and more than one turned to glance fearfully over his or her shoulder into the shadowy woodlands beyond.

“Well?” they added breathlessly.

“Waal,” the old trapper returned, smiling into the fire and puffing vigorously on his old black pipe, “right then an’ thar our hearts popped into our mouths an’ I reckon th’ only thing as kep’ us from swallowin’ ’em was that our throats was closed up so tight ahind them.”

“Were you afraid?” queried Marjorie, wide-eyed.

"No, we were only so frightened," Phil put in, dryly, "that our hearts hammered in our ears like the alarm clock when you put it under the pillow to stop its ringing."

"I reckon thar's such a thing as bein' frightened an' frightened," the old trapper continued slowly. "I faced many a rearin' giant c' a bear without bein' feared, no siree—but somehow, when ye're fightin' for somebody else it's different. Yer blood gits hammerin' in yer haid, like the young feller said, an' yer knees feels queer. Ye're jes' clean skeered fur fear ye won't live up to yer expectations."

The old man paused and for a time there was deep silence. For the first time the girls and boys were realizing the true nobility of this man, old and gaunt and garrulous as he was.

He was about to begin again when Lucile interrupted him by pointing to the boy. The latter, in his ragged blouse, tattered blue trousers and gaudy sash, had fallen asleep against their guardian's shoulder. Soothed and warmed by the heat of the fire, well fed for the first time, probably

in months, exhausted by previous ill-treatment and the excitement of the last few hours, he had succumbed like all creatures of the wild, when well fed and warm, to the urgent call of sleep.

Something rose up in the girls' throats as they realized how very much he resembled their musician—it was strange they had not remarked it before. In sleep the strained lines of fear had disappeared and even in his emaciated condition the boy was beautiful. What treatment he must have received to change him so!

“Waal,” continued old Peter, “we crep’ up silent as sperits tell we could see what was goin’ on in that thar camp, an’ when we see they wuz eatin’ we set down ter wait.”

“Was the boy in sight then?” asked Evelyn.

“No,” said Peter, shaking his head, “the kid he wuzn’t nowhar in sight an’ we begun ter think we might o’ found the wrong camp arter all, when we see him comin’ through the trees along o’ the bigges’ giant o’ a man I ever see. Waal, the big gypsy was hittin’ the kid as they walked an’ the kid he was whimperin’—I tell ye, I had to

hold on purty strong to these here fellers to keep 'em from jumpin' at him right then an' thar an' spoilin' the whole game."

"I'll always be sorry all my life I didn't do it," muttered Jack, hands clenched tightly at his side. "Gad, it makes me sick to think of it, even now."

"Waal," drawled the old trapper dryly, "I reckon as how my bullet wuz more o' a argyment to that thar ole rascal than yer fists would a-been, young feller, even with th' all-fired husky punch they got ahind them. Anyways, by hangin' on to 'em with all o' my might I managed to make 'em lay still an' we went on watchin'."

"That was the worst job I ever had," murmured Phil. "I was lying on a twig and I had to keep on lying for fear it would sit up and make a noise. That darned twig had me more scared than a regiment of gypsies."

"Reckon it was kinda tiresome like," agreed the narrator, "but it made us all the spryer when th' time come fur us to act. We watched that thar gypsy an' the little kid till they all climbed into the wagons an' thar was nothin' but a heap

o' ashes whar the fire had been burnin'. Fur a long time arter that we waited till we could hear some o' the old gypsies snorin' an' then we knew 'twas time to act."

For a moment he paused and the silence was so intense that an owl's mournful hoot far off in the forest came to them distinctly. Lucile shivered a little and drew nearer to Jessie.

"Waal," he continued, knocking the ashes from his pipe and refilling it with painful deliberateness, "we crep' along, almos' flat on our stomachs, till we wuz purty near on top o' the wagon we see the kid an' his keeper disappearin' into, an' up to that thar minute I reckon thar hadn' been a peep out o' none o' us. Everythin' was that thar quiet, ye could a heard a pin drap, 'cept fur the noise some o' the gypsies made with their snorin' an' we picked up courage ter look inside o' that thar wagon.

"Waal, we see the kid an' after givin' the young fellers some dy-rections, I clumb aboard."

They drew closer to the fire, scarcely daring to breathe.

“Waal, o’ course we wuz expectin’ a fight an’ lots o’ other things, an’ our good old trusties wuz held ready in case they was needed but, Lord, it was easier’n takin’ candy from a infant thet thar first time.

“Jes’ by luck I managed to crawl past thet thar big gypsy an’ found th’ little feller without disturbin’ nobody. I see by th’ flickerin’ light o’ th’ fire outside thet he wuz wide awake an’ starin’ at me—but I reckon th’ poor little scamp was jes’ so plumb skeered, he couldn’t a made no noise, nohow.

“Waal, I jes’ kneeled down aside him, whisperin’ thet I was a friend o’ hisn an’ liftin’ him up like he was nuthin’ ’tall, got clean o’ thet thar wagon with all the speed I knowed how.

“The lads wuz waitin’ fer me outside an’ I could see by their faces ’twas all they could do ter keep from yellin’ when they seed thet wide-eyed shiverin’ little kid in my arms.”

“But suppose the boy had made a noise,” Mr. Wescott queried, speaking for the first time. “The get-away wouldn’t have been quite so easy.”

The old trapper stretched out his long legs and looked at Mr. Wescott reproachfully.

“Ye don’t suppose I didn’t think o’ thet thar,” he said, plaintively, adding, as his gaze again sought the fire, “Lord, thet wuz jes’ th’ a b c of the game. The young fellers an’ me, we talked it over on the way up to thet thar camp an’ we had a big han’kerchief ter gag th’ little kid ef we had ter.

“But when he didn’t yell when he fust see me I figgered thar wuz no use wastin’ valuble time thataway—’twas ten chances ter one the kid wuz jes’ plain paralyzed with fright.

“Waal, ye never see sech a quick get-away as we made from thet thar place an’ in a few minutes we reached th’ gasoline wagon where we left it. One o’ th’ young fellers,” with a little nod of the head toward Jim, “wuz ter git thet thar car started when he heard a hoot of a owl, three times over. So when we got to the road we found the ole engyne snortin’ away, friendly as ye please an’ everythin’ runnin’ smooth as silk.”

“And all this time the boy never made a

sound?" Lucile was incredulous as she leaned toward him in the firelight.

"Nary a yip outa him," Old Peter acquiesced, "thet is, not till the car begun ter move. Then he gasped out suthin' an' we shut off th' exhaust to see what 'twas. Seemed 'twas jes' his fiddle he forgot—yet I reckon thet thar wuz more than his life to the little shaver an' he wuz tremblin' like he had the chills an' fever.

"Waal, nothin' would do but this feller here," with a nod toward Jack, "must hike back an' git th' missin' ar-ticle, spite o' all the danger he wuz runnin' into."

Everybody looked at Jack with new admiration but while Lucile felt proud she shivered at thought of that danger. Again she heard the mournful hoot of the owl far off in the depths of the forest.

"Waal, right thar's whar our trouble begun. Seems th' young feller got the fiddle and was jes' stealin' away joyful when some animile instinct woke that great lout o' a gypsy an' he come stumblin' out, rubbin' his eyes, jes' in time ter see th' young feller disappearin'. Then he raised such

a shout as I never heered afore, suthin' atween a screech an' a roar.

"Whar we wuz we heered th' hullabaloo as nat'rally the gypsy camp did too, an' we wuz shure 'twas all up.

"We grabbed our guns an' wuz startin' off ter help him when we see the young feller stumblin' toward us, purty nigh spent, I kin tell ye, with the gypsy feller hard on his heels."

"Oh-h-h," they breathed, and once more glanced apprehensively over their shoulders.

"Th' young feller would a made it all right, bein' as good a runner as I ever see, but the fiddle caught on a low-hangin' branch an' wuz tore clean outa his hand.

"We wuz yellin' at him ter leave it lay, but like a pig-headed young scamp, he stooped to pick it up an' with a roar th' big gypsy sprung at him with a knife in his hand."

"Oh," they cried again and Lucile cried, "Jack, why did you do it?"

"He did it," cried Phil, his eyes sparkling, "because there isn't a yellow streak in him and

he was going to finish his job if his job finished him. Gee, it was great."

"Waal, it warn't any fault o' hisn he didn't git finished," the old trapper continued, dryly, "but seemed like the big gypsy warn't reckonin' on us, nohow. We'd been growlin' at the moon all the way up, but now we wuz mighty glad to hev the light uv it.

I slung old trusty here ter my shoulder an' potted thet sledgehammer arm o' hisn right above the wrist. It wuz jest in the nick o' time, too, fur while he wuz cussin' an' swearin' with the pain uv it the young feller had time ter duck an' jine us in the car.

"Waal," he concluded, drawing deep puffs from his ugly black pipe, "I reckon thet thar ain't much more ter tell 'ceptin' the hull mob chased us roarin' an' cussin' fur a quarter o' a mile, more or less, then guv up an' turned back.

"Nuthin' happened arter that, till you all cum ter meet us in the road, an' the rest yer all know without my tellin'."

They sat quite some time lost in meditatio~~x~~

while the fire had died down to a ruddy glow. Then suddenly Lucile spoke:

“Mr. Wescott,” she said, “I just thought of something else you told us about the house that was always kept ready for the boy—if he should come home.”

The others gazed at her in amazement for a moment. Then the light of understanding dawned in their faces.

Phil sprang to his feet with a shout, startling the boy into full wakefulness.

“Our mysterious stranger of the muddy footprints,” he cried irrepressibly, adding with one of his inimitable dramatic staggers: “And with the solution of the mystery staring us in the face, we never guessed it. Oh, ‘what fools we mortals be.’”

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE HEIGHTS

NEVER had morning dawned so gloriously. The rain that had fallen overnight had restored to the trees and shrubs and flowers their gorgeous coloring, forming rainbow backgrounds for the myriad shimmering points of dew that lay upon them. The air was spicy with the odor of damp earth and perfumed flowers. Birds sang joyously and little woodland creatures scurried noiselessly here and there, happy in the new awakened splendor of their world.

In spite of the late hours and the excitement of the night before, both camps were astir betimes, eagerly discussing the exciting drama that lay before them.

“Did old Peter say positively he could find the old musician?” asked Marjorie, for exactly the eleventh time—she had asked it so many times, in fact, that everyone had ceased to notice it, and

went on all chattering at once exactly as though she had not been speaking.

For the first time since their arrival at camp Mr. and Mrs. Wescott had to fairly use force to get the girls and boys to eat breakfast. Even then there arose a heated discussion as to which side ought to have the little new arrival at their table—the girls holding that his rescue had been primarily their idea and the boys, with equal vigor, declaring that since the actual work of rescue had fallen to them and since the object of discussion was himself of the masculine gender he should most assuredly breakfast with them.

The boys finally won the debate but as the defeated party turned merrily away, Jessie sent one parting shot over her shoulder.

“If the boy had been allowed to choose for himself,” she laughed, “and had tasted just one of the meals you cook, there wouldn’t have been any doubt as to which one he would choose.”

“Ours, of course,” sang back Phil, who seemed to be in as unquenchable mood as the morning itself, and Jessie merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Methinks," said Lucile as they strolled along after the others, arms interlocked, "that you are going to have trouble with Phil ere the day is done."

"Goodness, I was hoping I had been mistaken," said Jessie, ruefully. "But if you've noticed it too—oh, Lucy, dear, he's begun telling me I don't mean it again, and that's an awful sign."

Lucile laughed happily, with a little care-free lilt in her voice that made Jessie look at her sharply.

"I've noticed you've run away from Jack every time he's come near you this morning," she accused, adding with a twinkle, "I don't see how you can, either—he's so unusually handsome to-day."

"That's just why I do it," Lucile answered, ruefully adding, with a little impulsive hug, "oh, Jessie, dear, if you want to keep me from being most terribly silly to-day, just keep close to me, that's all."

"Well, I don't mind if I do," said Jessie, fondly.

"Goodness, I hardly slept all night," Evelyn



They had pulled aside a great deal of intervening shrubbery.

was saying as they gathered around the breakfast table a few minutes later. "I kept having the most awful dreams about gypsies and caterpillars—"

"May I ask," said Jessie, with the utmost politeness, "just what gypsies and caterpillars have in common?"

"Well," said Evelyn, considering, "they both live in the woods, don't they?" adding, in defiance of the general laugh, "anyway, they both make me creepy."

"Will you pass Evelyn another egg, Marj?" asked Jessie concernedly. "That may make the poor child feel better."

Marjorie amicably complied and Evelyn received the proffered egg with a drollery that added to the general mirth.

"Goodness, if talking nonsense brings me this," she said, breaking it open with great relish, "I'm not going to talk anything else."

"Take it back," cried Jessie, wildly. "Oh, fool that I am to wish such a curse upon us—"

"I agree with the first part of your sentence,"

Evelyn replied, eating calmly on, "but the first only."

Jessie gave up and happily laughed with the rest at herself.

"Oh, well," she said resignedly, "what's one egg more or less, on a day like this? Pass me another one, Evelyn dear—one good act deserves another."

"You don't deserve it," said Evelyn, hesitating, then added with a resigned air, "but then if you only got what you deserved you'd never get anything—and I'd hate to see my worst enemy starve."

Jessie received it with an eagerness that made Mrs. Wescott laugh indulgently.

"You girls used to say excitement took away your appetite," she said, "but I haven't noticed any lack of it this morning."

"Oh, well, when you're at camp you're always hungry," said Marion, as though that explained everything.

"The only thing I'm worrying about," began Marjorie, for the eleventh time, when the girls, led by Lucile, broke in—

"Suppose the musician doesn't come—suppose

the musician doesn't come," until Marjorie, surprised at first, joined weakly in the laughter.

"I didn't suppose anybody heard me before," she said. "You certainly didn't seem to."

"That simply shows what good actors we are," Lucile assured her demurely and they laughed anew.

"What time did Old Peter promise to bring our musician?" Margaret asked, as they started to leave the table.

"Why, he couldn't promise," their guardian answered, puckering her brows. "Our musician naturally doesn't act according to rule but it seems he's in the habit of playing for the children with the trick bear somewhere about this time and Old Peter thought he could locate him."

"Then it isn't any more settled than that?" they cried in dismay, and Marion, struck by a dire thought, said suddenly,

"Suppose he should come when we weren't there?"

With this they rushed eagerly into the open, glancing from right to left, but the space was deserted and they breathed freely once more.

“Lucy, dear, I feel so strange,” Jessie confided, as the two friends stood very close together, expecting they scarcely knew what. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I seem to be trembling inwardly all the time. I feel sort of, sort of—awed—”

Lucile laughed unsteadily—her face was flushed and her eyes black with suppressed emotion.

“Jessie, dear,” she said, very softly, “don’t you suppose it’s because we sort of feel things being taken out of our hands? Up to this time we’ve been so busy doing things that we haven’t had time to feel—to feel—well, trembly, as you said. But now that we’ve done all we can and we’re just waiting for other people to do things—and we’re not quite sure what’s going to happen to us. That’s what makes us feel f-frightened—”

Jessie nodded, and her arm tightened spasmodically.

“Oh, Lucy, dear,” she said quickly, breathlessly, “whatever happens—you and I—are going to be always friends—Lucy, dear—”

Lucile gave her a fierce little hug and whispered, more unsteadily than before,

“Don’t talk like that, Jessie, dear. Don’t you see I’m doing my best not to c-cry—”

Just then the boys came sauntering from their mess tent—it might be interesting to note the only thing the boys never sought to excel in was the eagerness with which they left their favorite meeting place!—bringing the little Italian lad with them.

In the strong morning light, washed and well fed, the boy was remarkably beautiful and his great dark eyes seemed to mirror faithfully every thought and emotion of his heart.

The boys and girls were so friendly, surrounding him with such an irresistible atmosphere of happiness and affection, that his shyness and diffidence soon thawed and he even favored them with a faint little smile.

That smile they regarded as a veritable triumph and beamed upon him with such happy good humor, the girls beguiling him as only our girls in their present mood could beguile him, till the first wee smile was followed by another and still another till there was danger of them all becoming hilarious.

Then someone suggested that he play for them and Jack, who had disappeared a few moments before, produced the violin apparently from nowhere and handed it to the little stranger.

At sight of the beloved instrument, the boy's face glowed, and he swung it unhesitatingly to position—then with a sweep of his great eyes round the circle, raised his bow and began to play.

Softly the sweet strains stole out, wavering at first, uncertain, then mellowed, strengthened, filled the air with pulsing ecstasy, rose to heights of passionate entreaty, then broke sobbing into silence.

The boy stood with drooping head and drooping figure, hands hung limply at his side, then, suddenly—it happened.

Somewhere in the forest came an answering appeal, more passionate, more masterful, the entreaty of a man who, hoping, dares not hope, praying, dares not pray—then—the musician stood before them.

“My God!”

With a crash the violin dropped to the ground

and he was on his knees beside the boy, fondling him, crushing him to his breast, murmuring endearments in Italian they could not understand.

"Dios mio, Dios mio," he cried, face to the sky, tears streaming from his eyes unchecked—

Blindly the girls turned from the spot and stumbled away into the forest. It was too sacred, this meeting—father and son must be left alone.

Lucile did not know how long she had stood with her head against the tree, with her little crumpled handkerchief crushed tightly in her hand. She only knew that, turning with a sigh, she saw Jack looking down upon her.

Then at the look in his eyes panic seized her and she would have run away had he not checked her with a word.

"Don't," he said.

Something seemingly not of herself made her pause and she looked shyly up at him.

"Well," she said, demurely, "I—I'm here, Jack."

"Lucile," his voice was husky and his hands

trembled as he held them out to her. "I've waited so long, dear—can't you—won't you—"

After several minutes during which it had not seemed necessary to speak, they were startled by a masculine cough and a very familiar feminine giggle and looking up saw Phil and Jessie beaming in upon them. They were on the other side of the great tree and had had to pull aside a great deal of intervening shrubbery and branches to gain an uninterrupted view.

"From which I gather," Phil grinned while Lucile flushed brightly, "that congratulations are in order. How about it, Jack, old man?"

"Put back those bushes," growled Jack, but Lucile, who had been receiving telegraphic messages from Jessie, interposed.

"Don't you dare," she said, her eyes dancing, "not till you've told me it's true. Phil—Jessie—is it?"

"How did you know?" Phil cried, with usual lack of insight of the male in such matters, but he was pushed aside with no consideration by Jes-

sie, who stretched out her arms to Lucile, crying,

“Oh, Lucy, dear, come here—I’ve got to hug you.”

“And this,” she added, just before Phil let fly the branches to their former position, “this,” with a radiant glance at Lucile and the thrill of triumph in her voice, “is the girl who once scoffed at romance.”

“Did you?” asked Jack, accusingly, when they were once more alone.

“Well,” she said, looking up at him whimsically, “I wasn’t very much of a scoffer, even at first, and it didn’t last very long. I—I—got converted—”

“Lucile, Lucile,” he cried, catching her to him and raising his face to where the sun gleamed downward through the trees, “I’m happy—happy—happy!”

The robin singing to his mate, the soft breeze whispering through the trees, the murmuring of the water as it swept on toward the sea, all sang in tune to one great potent word and that word—happiness!

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