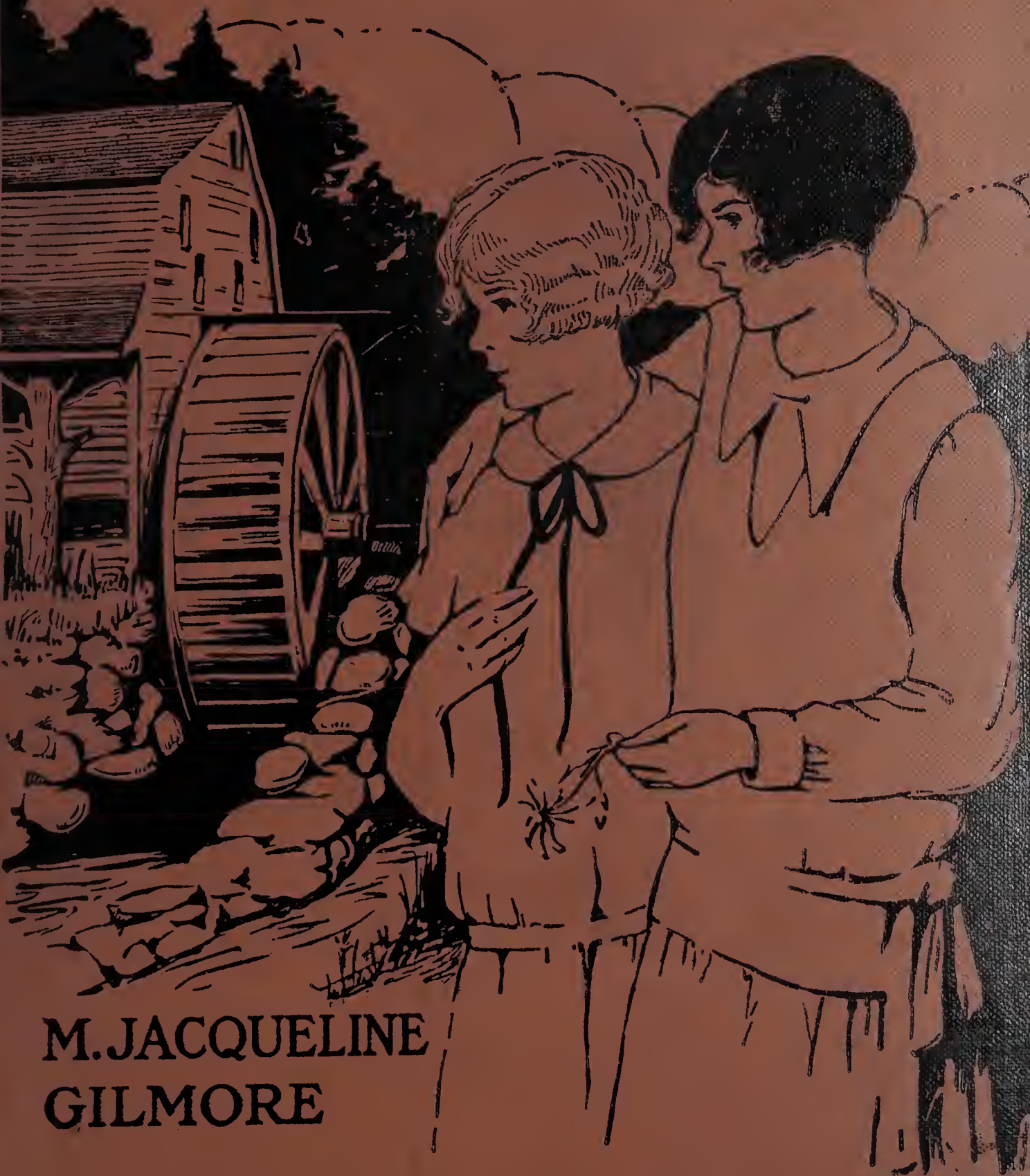


The
SECRET
of
SCARED ACRES



**M. JACQUELINE
GILMORE**



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THE SECRET OF SCARED ACRES



JOAN CLUTCHED MARY ALICE.—Page 224.

THE SECRET OF SCARED ACRES

BY
M. JACQUELINE GILMORE

Illustrated by
JEAN ARMINGTON



BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

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To
My Mother and Father

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THE SECRET OF SCARED ACRES

CHAPTER I

SCARED ACRES

IT was a happy Joan Kellogg that came in from the Adirondack camp one summer afternoon. As she reached New York City and took the subway shuttle-train, she was utterly oblivious of the crowds that pushed and jostled in their continuous rush. She was also oblivious of the fact that many of the hurrying thousands paused a second to look at her radiant face, with its fluffy golden bob of hair and its care-free blue eyes and frankly smiling lips.

For Joan was living in a little world of her own, a completely perfect little world. And isn't it enough to make any sixteen-year-old girl happy to have her chums choose her for their next year's class president? That was what had happened to Joan when her particular little group of girls had spent the week-end at the mountain-camp of one of the number. Not, of course, that that

meant Joan was sure to be president, but the entire group of girls was going to Mrs. Haddon's School in Tarrytown, just north of New York City. Mrs. Haddon's was a small school, and Joan's chums would undoubtedly compose half of the freshman class. The others would be girls from different parts of New York State, and from scattered cities throughout the country,—an entirely unorganized group,—so Joan was confident that she would be president of her class.

She continued to smile as she caught the west-side subway at Times Square, and was still smiling as she got off at the Columbia University station and walked over to Riverside Drive.

The closer she got to her home, the faster she walked, and when she finally turned into the apartment house she was fairly running. Then came a few tantalizing moments when she had to stop, put down her traveling-case, and hunt around in her purse for her door-key.

Finally she opened the door and jumped in with a great bounce, her lips framing the little whistle that was just for her mother. But the cheery signal died away in amazed silence as she saw her father. Barely three o'clock, and her father home from work! Despite the sun glaring

through the front windows, she glanced at her wrist-watch, half expecting the tiny gold hands to have moved up to six, so accustomed was she to her father's regular hours.

"Your mother wants you, Joan. She is in her room."

Mr. Kellogg spoke without glancing up from the litter of papers that covered his wife's dainty mahogany desk until only four dark legs showed under a sheaf of white. Joan's bewilderment grew at the abrupt dismissal. Of course, her father was always abrupt, but it was not like him to let her come home from a three-day absence without any greeting. With a hurt feeling Joan turned away, and walked silently down the hall and knocked at her mother's door.

"Is it you, Joan?" her mother's voice called. "Come in, dear."

Joan opened the door, and was more bewildered than before. The window-blinds were drawn, but she could see that her mother's pretty lavender-and-green bedroom was a stack of dresses and shoes and hats.

"Why, Mother!" she gasped, her eyes finally resting on a yawning wardrobe-trunk by the dressing-table.

“Come on in, Joan, and close the door. My room is quite—quite a mess, isn’t it?” Mrs. Kellogg’s laugh was not natural, and Joan thought she saw tears in her eyes, but the room was shadowy and she could not be sure. She waited for her mother to continue, but Mrs. Kellogg was silent. Joan had to speak.

“Somebody’s going somewhere,” she asserted blankly.

“Yes, three somebodies! In fact, the whole Kellogg family is going to travel!”

“What are you talking about?” Joan cried. “I—I don’t understand at all!”

“I know that you don’t, Joan. And I wish you would read this letter, first. It will help me to explain.” Mrs. Kellogg took a letter from the top of her dressing-table and slowly handed it to Joan.

Gingerly Joan took the small white envelope, and, reluctant to open it, looked long at the outside. The address read “Mrs. Lily Kellogg,” and seemed strange to her, because she was accustomed to “Mrs. R. V. Kellogg” on her mother’s letters. Then, too, it was postmarked “Fame, Kansas.” But her mother was waiting for her to open it, so she drew out the single sheet and read:

DEAR LILY:

I am very sorry to hear of Mr. Kellogg's ill health, but I feel confident that the trip will do him a great deal of good, and while he is getting well you can enjoy Europe.

I am alone here at Scared Acres, and the prospect of having Joan stay with me is delightful. I had always hoped that some day you could visit me, and having Joan will be the next best thing to having your own dear self.

You write that you are not planning to be back before the first of the year. I wonder why you do not arrange to have Joan enter the small college at Fame the first semester. I imagine freshman college work is much the same anywhere, and she can go right along with her class at Mrs. Haddon's School the second semester. At least, she will be kept busy and interested, and won't get too lonesome.

Let me know when she is coming, and I will meet her in Fame, for Scared Acres is about twenty miles from the town. And I cannot tell you how happy I am that in your difficulties you turned to me, and the small assistance I can give you is going to be all pleasure for me.

MAY KING.

Scared Acres—college in Fame—Europe—ill health—ran through Joan's head in a jumble.

"Mother, what has happened? What does this strange letter mean?" she stammered.

"First of all, it means a vacation for your father," her mother answered slowly, as if she

were carefully choosing her words: "You know, Joan, how he has put all our money into this new magazine, and how hard he has worked for three years to build up the circulation department. He hasn't spared himself a minute, and would not allow anything to be done without his supervision. He must have worried a lot, too, Joan, although he hasn't let us know it." Mrs. Kellogg's voice was trembling a little, and Joan felt her own throat tighten. "And now—well, the doctor says that it is overwork, and that a long trip abroad, with the ocean voyage and change of scene, is absolutely necessary."

"You are going all the way to Europe?" Joan gasped fearfully. "Is Daddy so very bad, then?"

"No, dear," her mother quickly reassured her. "Don't be frightened. But we have to get your father a long distance from his work, or he will sneak back to it when we aren't looking. You remember last year when we went up on Lake Champlain how he was constantly coming down to New York and sending telegrams and writing letters and worrying all the time?"

"Yes, and I remember that cross old stenographer he took with him."

"Instead of the cross stenographer I am to go,"

Mrs. Kellogg replied, with a smile. "He is able to go alone, but the doctor is afraid that he will fret about the office. In fact, he said that your daddy is one of those unfortunate men who never have learned how to play." Joan's mother faltered a little over those words, but she went on hastily: "I'm to make him lie on his back in the sunshine and take long walks and riot in laziness for six months. Then I'll bring you back a new daddy, as strong and well as ever."

Six months! Joan thought again of the letter.

"And—and I'm to go to Kansas and stay with this May King that I never heard of?" Joan wanted to be as brave as her mother, and when a tear splattered on the letter she was still clutching in her hand, she got up hastily and slipped down on the floor beside her mother, to conceal her face.

"Yes, dear. You are to go to Kansas and stay with May King, and I'm going to tell you about her now. She was a college friend of mine—probably the dearest friend I shall ever have. She came to New York many years ago, a reserved, much older girl, to attend Mrs. Haddon's School. At that time the head of the school had a very adroit way of putting the gay girls with

the staid ones, and the slow ones with the brilliant; so, since I was a lively youngster slated for freshman-class president, May was put with me ——”

“You were freshman-class president?” Joan interrupted eagerly.

“I was president of my class for four years,” her mother answered calmly.

“Oh-h-h,” breathed Joan; “oh-h-h, I’m so proud of you, Mother.” Then she became very quiet and still at her mother’s feet. She couldn’t be class president at Mrs. Haddon’s if she were away out in Kansas ——

Mrs. Kellogg smiled tenderly at her daughter’s praise, and then, sensing that something was wrong, she reached down and took her hand while she continued:

“So May and I were roommates, and became the best of friends. She spent all of the winter vacations at my home, but despite our friendship I never knew much about her family, for May was very reserved. I learned, though, that her father —she had only a father, and he was a morose, silent man on the one occasion he visited the school—was a wealthy cattleman in Kansas.

“But one year—I am going to tell you the

whole story, Joan—he had a lot of reverses. Everything came at once, it seemed. At least, I remember something about a heavy investment in Texas cattle, a drought ruining his corn and pastures, and then a drop in the cattle-market when he sold. Anyway, when the second semester approached, all his money was tied up in a new lot of cattle, and he found that he couldn't pay May's tuition. He sent for her to come home. That was her senior year, and she was expected to be valedictorian of the class, and in several ways it seemed a shame for her to leave; so my father paid the tuition. Of course Mr. King paid the money back the next season, and the favor was really only a kindness; but May was proud, and she always begged for a chance to do something in return."

"What became of her afterward?" Joan questioned, forgetting for a minute her own woes in her interest in the brief drama of May King's school days at the same institution she was to attend.

"She went back to Kansas immediately and managed her father's house, and then, when he died, took charge of the ranch itself. We didn't write often,—somehow May wasn't the sort of

person who writes letters,—but I'm sure that both of us have always felt that our friendship is just as strong as ever. Now, when I have no relatives, and my New York friends haven't room in their apartments for a big girl for six months, I feel that I can turn to May King for help," Mrs. Kellogg finished quietly.

"And I'm to go out there alone?" Joan cried. She had never been west of Philadelphia, and Europe seemed much closer to New York than Kansas.

"Yes, dear. But you are a grown-up girl now, and you know how to travel. And it will be fun, too; think of all the interesting things you will see along the way." Mrs. Kellogg's voice was wistful, but Joan was so unhappy just then that she did not realize that her mother was unhappy too.

"But, Mother," she went on, her eyes on the letter, "May King lives twenty miles from a town, and on a ranch named Scared Acres! Scared Acres—what a horrible name!" Joan paused in wonder. "Why would any one name a ranch 'Scared Acres'? Do you know, Mother?"

"Why—no," Mrs. Kellogg said. "It never occurred to me before that the name is peculiar."

I have always heard it called Scared Acres, and the name was so familiar to me that I never thought about it."

"It seems to me that somebody took a lot of pains to be disagreeable," Joan talked on, for she was dreadfully afraid that if she stopped talking she would cry. "Why couldn't it have been called Sunny Acres, or Pleasant Meadows, or Pretty Hills?"

"Those names do sound more cheerful," Mrs. Kellogg laughed. "But Scared Acres is more interesting. And it will be fun to find out where the ranch got its name."

"Yes, it will be fun, but not so much fun as— as ——— Oh, Mother, why can't I just stay there until school begins and then come back to Mrs. Haddon's? Somebody will be sure to invite me for Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations, just as you invited May King."

"I only wish it could be done that way, dear." Mrs. Kellogg's hand caressed Joan's hair, as if she were trying to ease her words. "But Mrs. Haddon's is a very expensive school—it means not only tuition, but nice clothes, an allowance for tickets for both opera and theater, riding-lessons, and many things. What hurts me so much is

that your father and I have to spend on this trip the money that was laid aside for your college expenses.”

Suddenly Joan realized that she had been very selfishly thinking of herself, and that, by complaining, she was adding to her mother's trouble. When she saw a little crystal tear steal through her mother's lashes before Mrs. Kellogg could brush it away, she braced up and tried to hide her unhappiness at the thought that all the joyous plans her friends were making would go on without her. But her mother must have understood, for she put her arms around Joan and whispered: “You and I have to be brave, Joan. Your father is very unhappy because he can't send you to school this winter, and we must not worry him by letting him see that we are very much disappointed.”

So Joan kept up her courage through the long afternoon and evening while she helped her mother sort out her wardrobe into three piles: one to be cleaned or mended or washed; one to be thrown away; and one to be stored, for the Kelloggs were giving up their apartment and storing their furniture. It seemed to Joan, as she laid out serge and flannel dresses to take to Kansas

with her, that she was to be gone for a long, long time.

Finally night came, and she found herself in her little room in the midst of the confusion of packing. It was harder when she was alone, and she crawled wearily into bed, repeating sternly to herself: "Joan Kellogg, don't you dare cry. You're doing this for your daddy, your poor sick daddy."

But in spite of her resolution, one or two salty tears crawled down her cheeks before fatigue caught her and sent her to sleep, to dream that a huge herd of cattle was chasing the ranch—which, strangely enough, was a girl just like Joan—around and around until she—or was it the ranch?—was so scared that she could run no farther.

CHAPTER II

“THE MAKIN’S OF A GHOST”

A WEEK later Joan was on the train. The days had been so filled with the preparations for the two journeys that she had not had time to think of her own trip. And now, after she had said good-by to her mother and father in the Grand Central Station, she did not have much more time to think about it, for there were so many things to see on the way. There were cities and States passing by that she had read and studied about, and there were lovely glimpses of the Great Lakes and hasty views of farmhouses and men doing the chores. Then, too, she never wearied of watching the people on the Pullman. No girls of her age were on the car, but there were several adorable children who came back to her section and brought their toys, and several nice old ladies who shared their magazines and boxes of candy with her.

But by the time she had changed to the last train, the one leaving Kansas City for Fame, she was very, very tired and dirty. It was late after-

noon when she left Kansas City, and, listless and weary, she leaned her head against the towelled back of the Pullman seat and stared dismally from the window.

“That’s the Kaw, or Kansas, River,” the man in front of her was explaining to his neighbor.

She watched the broad shallow stream meander its muddy way along the tracks. She watched it and wished that it were the placid Hudson, and that the clumps of willows were the beautiful Catskill Mountains. And how she wished that her visit was over, and that her train was slowly approaching the Grand Central Station, where her mother and father were waiting to meet her ——

“Fame,” bawled the porter from the Pullman door. He picked up Joan’s bag and disappeared with it, and Joan hastily put on her hat and gloves and followed him out.

It was nearly dusk when she stumbled off the train, still half asleep, and there was no friendly red-cap to grab her bag and say, “Follow me, Miss,” as there had been at Chicago and Kansas City. In fact, there wasn’t any one at all. She had been the last person off the car, and while she stood there staring regretfully at the train dis-

appearing into the sunset, the other people had scurried away with all the agility of the White Rabbit of Alice's adventures.

Joan and her bag were alone on that long, narrow platform. She gave a great gulp and wished frantically that she had not left the train, but had just gone on and on and on — Then she shook her head to drive away the sleepiness, and tried to think. She was big enough to take care of herself; her mother had said so. She mustn't cry the first minute something went wrong.

Maybe she had got off at the wrong place; but no, there were the letters, F-A-M-E, painted on the side of the station. Maybe, then, they didn't let the people come down close to the trains. Still there were no chains or bars to keep them away, but maybe, Joan thought hysterically, people were more polite and better-behaved in Kansas, and if they weren't supposed to crowd around the trains, they didn't have to be shut out with guards and iron bars!

Just then she saw a loaded baggage-wagon moving down the platform. And there, perilously balanced on the very tip-top, was her trunk. It was the only friendly thing she had seen, and she

decided to follow it. But her traveling-bag was heavy, and when she was half-way across the platform the wagon disappeared into the baggage-room. She struggled on, though, the heavy bag rubbing against her legs at every step, and by the time she reached the baggage-room a man was locking the doors.

"My trunk," she began; but her voice was only a whisper, because she was out of breath, and because she was beginning to be a little frightened by the loneliness of the place.

The bulky man in faded overalls carefully drew a long key from the door before he looked around.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"My trunk," Joan repeated, and this time her voice was clear, because the man looked friendly, and as if he wouldn't object to helping a lost girl.

"Your trunk? You want to take it this evening?"

"Why," said Joan vaguely, "I'm not sure. You see," she confided frankly, "I don't know whether or not I have any place to take it."

"Well, you'll have to make up your mind quick," he answered. "I want to lock up the station and get home to supper."

"Lock up? Lock up the station?" Joan

gasped, forgetting everything for a moment in the face of the idea that a railroad-station was ever locked up.

“Sure,” the man chuckled at her surprised face. “Why not? That was the last train that stops here to-night. You weren’t expecting to sleep in the depot, were you?”

“I—I might have to,” Joan stammered. “No one met me, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Say, now, I bet you are the little girl for Scared Acres?”

“Oh, I am!” Joan cried hastily. “How do I get there, please? I expected Miss King to meet me.”

“Judd is going to drive you out,” he stated, idly scratching his chin. “Miss King called him about an hour ago and said that she couldn’t get her car started, and told him to bring you.”

“That’s too bad—I mean about Miss King’s car,” Joan ventured, after waiting for the man to continue. “Where do I find Judd?”

“Haven’t you seen him?” he asked. “Well, now, that’s funny. He was around here a while ago.”

“What does he look like?” Joan finally asked, when the man seemed inclined to lean against the

baggage-room door without moving. “ I’ll go and hunt him.”

“ Haven’t you seen him? ” The man seemed suddenly to understand the situation. “ Oh, you haven’t seen him! Well now, I bet I know exactly where he is—asleep on my cot. It takes more than a train to wake Judd when he gets settled for a nap.” He got out his long key and opened the doors. “ I’ll get him for you. He might as well take your trunk, too; it’ll go in the back seat of the Ford easy enough.”

Several minutes later the baggage-master returned with a man who, since he was yawning, Joan decided was Judd. After an altercation over the advisability of taking the trunk,—Judd protesting that Miss King had told him to bring a girl, and not a girl and a trunk, and the baggage-man insisting that he might as well take the trunk,—Judd settled the argument by walking away towards a decrepit car without the trunk.

Joan followed him, sensing that he expected her to, and Judd motioned her into the front seat. Then he cranked the car, crawled over the door on his side, settled down with a sigh, and they were off, bumping over rough roads and leaving a trail of noise behind. Judd yawned slowly and luxu-

riously now and then, but never said a word after inquiring perfunctorily, "Train on time?" as if he really suspected it of coming in an hour early.

Twenty miles of dirt roads in a rattly car should have kept Joan awake, but she was so tired that she half dozed all the time. Finally she realized that Judd had stopped the car, and woke up to see him opening the gate of a lane.

"That's it—Scared Acres," Judd confided, crawling back into the car, but leaving one leg dangling outside in anticipation of stopping again in a few minutes.

They drove slowly down the lane, and Joan eagerly watched the house loom up at the end of the road. She could discern the outlines of a square box-like structure, with a lighted window on the second floor, and a faint glow shining through the open front door. In the twilight it looked gray and mournful and unfriendly. Even Judd's presence seemed cheerful by contrast, and Joan spoke to him.

"Ugh-h, it looks as gloomy as the House of Usher." She shivered as they drove up the lane between overhanging trees.

"Huh?"

Judd, Joan guessed, had never heard of Edgar

Allen Poe or his short stories. Poe was, right then, Joan's favorite author, and she felt lonelier than ever as she wondered if any one out here had ever heard of him. Then she lectured herself mentally for feeling superior, and reminded herself that a New York taxi-driver would probably have asked what street the House of Usher was on; so she explained.

"The House of Usher was gloomy and ghost-haunted. This place looks gloomy. Has it any ghosts?"

Judd chuckled slowly and appreciatively. "Ghosts in Kansas? Well, hardly." He surveyed the house thoughtfully, and then added, "That is, not exactly."

With a groan the car stopped in front of the door.

"Not exactly! What do you mean?" Joan cried in amazement.

Judd was out of the car by that time and was getting her bag out of the back seat, so she had to squirm around to hear his answer.

"Well, ghosts are things that come after deaths and disappearances, aren't they?"

"Why, I guess so," Joan began bewildered.

"Of course they just come after deaths and dis-

appearances,” Judd reiterated with a chuckle. “You never heard of a ghost of a living person, did you?”

“Why, no,” Joan laughed. “But of course we know that ghosts don’t exist, anyway.”

“Maybe not,” Judd admitted reluctantly, evidently clinging to the idea of the supernatural.

“Still, I don’t understand what you meant when you said ‘Not exactly,’” Joan persisted.

“Well, I said ‘Not exactly,’ because this here place has only the *makin’s of a ghost*.”

“What *do* you mean by that?” Joan began again, when she was interrupted by a quiet voice at her side.

“Joan Kellogg, my dear, I welcome you to Scared Acres.”

CHAPTER III

MAY KING

HASTILY Joan turned around, not waiting for Judd's answer. In the light that now streamed from the open door, she saw a tall figure standing by the side of the car. Joan's first impression of May King came from her thin proud face, and she almost shivered in the warmth of the evening. Without realizing it, she had formed a mental picture of Miss King from her mother's story of her, and unconsciously she had been expecting a big, hearty woman with a deep masculine voice and a bluff good nature; a woman with a face tanned by the outdoor life, with twinkling sympathetic eyes and a jovial smile. But Miss King, as she stood erect by the car, was pale and her eyes were haughty. Her gray hair was drawn severely back from her forehead, and the slender gold chain from her glasses was fastened in the smooth waves. Her dress, of a dark-gray cotton material, was plain and straight, with stiff white collars and cuffs.

She was smiling kindly at Joan, though, as she

stood beside the car, but Joan could find no words to answer her greeting, for she was lonesome and blue, and, oh, so tired of taking care of herself. She wanted some one to slip a motherly arm around her and let her cry a little on a comfortable shoulder.

Finally, after what seemed to Joan a long silence, she realized that Miss King was waiting for her to answer her greeting, and she managed to begin: "I'm glad to meet you, Miss King. Mother has told me so much about you that I feel as if I am already half acquainted. I—I ——" She stopped abruptly, realizing that her voice was beginning to tremble and her eyes were filling with tears of disappointment.

"Ah, ha! A real *genus homo*; species, New Yorker! And we have captured it, haven't we, Miss King? Does it look any different from us ordinary mortals?"

A welcome interruption to Joan—this voice from the doorway of the house, and she blinked the tears from her eyes and glanced up. A girl about her own age was standing on the porch. She was plump and sturdy, and looked attractive and comfortable in a tan-linen dress and trim brown oxfords. Her black bobbed hair curled

saucily on the ends and framed a face that was smiling broadly.

“With the aid of Judd we have captured the specimen,” agreed Miss King, the girl’s infectious laugh bringing a smile to her face. “But it is a tired, worn specimen, I’m afraid.”

“Unpack it carefully!” The girl spoke again in her cheerful voice and ran down the steps and opened the door of the Ford. Then all at once Joan found herself out of the car, her bag beside her, and Judd rattling out of sight.

“This is Mary Alice Donahue, Joan,” Miss King was saying as the two girls faced each other. “She will take you to your room up-stairs and you can brush up a little while I tell Mrs. Oldham to serve supper.”

Mary Alice grabbed Joan’s bag and Joan’s arm and led the way into the house. Joan had only a glimpse of an old-fashioned hall with a grandfather clock and a high-boy before they started up the stairway.

“O dear!” Mary Alice sighed an enormous sigh. “To think that you have ridden in a subway!”

“O dear!” Joan mimicked, knowing that she was going to like this gay girl. “To think that

you have ridden a horse, or maybe even a tame cow! ”

“ But you have seen the Woolworth Tower, and maybe have even climbed the Statue of Liberty,” Mary Alice insisted, as they reached the top of the stairs and she led the way down a high, narrow hall.

“ And you have climbed a haystack, and slid down, to the grief of your dress,” Joan rejoined.

Mary Alice chuckled, gave Joan’s hand a friendly little squeeze, threw open the door of a room, and said with a low bow, “ This is your Kansas room! ”

With a little gasp of wonder Joan stepped into a quaint room that seemed to belong to another generation and another time. The furniture was a dull, pleasant brown from years of use, and very old-fashioned. The bed was so high that Joan almost wondered how she could clamber into it, and as she laid her purse on the dresser she saw that it had a marble top. Everywhere were soft chintz pillows, and the wall-paper had tiny pink rosebuds bunched awkwardly in an “ all-over ” pattern. Pink-and-white rag rugs lay on the floor by the bed and in front of the dresser. Joan’s shiny traveling-bag seemed almost an in-

truding note in the midst of this quaint room, and in place of Mary Alice and her tailored dress there should have been a girl in full skirts and pantalettes.

“Isn’t it a dear old room?” Mary Alice queried. “It’s so prim and yet friendly. Wouldn’t it be fun if it could talk to us, and tell us about all the young girls it has known? But do take off your hat and wash your hands and comb your hair—all in about five minutes. I think Mrs. Oldham—she’s the housekeeper—is apt to be peevish if every one isn’t ready when she is.”

“Are you a stranger here, too?” Joan asked, as she searched her traveling-bag for a comb.

“I just came out from Fame this afternoon,” Mary Alice replied.

“Do you live in Fame?”

“Oh, no, not really. My home is in southern Kansas, but I’m spending the summer in Fame, cramming for the entrance exams to Fame College, while Dad and Mother are vacationing in Colorado.”

“I looked around a little as I came out here,” she continued, perching on the edge of the bed. “I saw an old horse in a pasture, and I’m sure he’s big enough and tame enough to carry double.

And then there's a flat, green place on the south side of the house that will make a tennis-court, only we'll have to knock easy balls, because we sha'n't have any back-stops."

"But I haven't any racket with me," Joan announced regretfully, struggling to get her light hair to look soft and fluffy, despite the fact that it was full of train-grit and cinders.

"I brought two rackets and an old net with me, because Miss King asked me to stay several weeks so that you wouldn't be lonesome at first," Mary Alice answered, and then continued, "How I love your blonde hair and blue eyes and slenderness."

"And don't forget," Joan laughed, "that if I lose a single pound, I'll be skinny, and that my nose is pug, and I am too short to play basketball!"

"Are you ready, girls?" interrupted Miss King from the doorway, and the girls followed her down the long stairs to the dining-room.

The dining-room was dark and gloomy, with heavy furniture. But Miss King suggested that they light the candles in the silver candelabra and turn out the electric lights. In the yellow candle-light the white linen gleamed softly, and the corners of the room were lost in pleasant shadows.

As the three sat down at the table Mary Alice sniffed the good odors that were floating around the room.

“O dear!” she groaned; “I’m dieting.”

“Well,” Miss King suggested, “here is a lettuce salad and some fruit, and you might have a muffin with a small, very small, piece of butter. Then if you go without dessert, you will not have too many calories.”

“Oh, Miss King,” said Mary Alice reproachfully, “you can’t expect me to do that when I can smell country sausages, see pale-gold honey, and have a distant view of a huge lemon cake on the sideboard?”

Just then Mrs. Oldham came in with a plate of muffins and sat down at the table. After saying, “I’m glad to meet you” to Joan, she was quiet during the rest of the meal. She was a dumpy little woman, with masses of brown-gray hair which kept sliding from one side of her head to the other, and every time a strand came loose she would take a long hairpin from a pocket in her apron and stab it into the knot. Finally, when the sixth hairpin had been fixed in the wobbly mass of hair, Joan heard Mary Alice choke and reach hastily for a glass of water, and she began

to feel like giggling, so she avoided looking at Mrs. Oldham any more.

Supper was a rather quiet affair, and by the time it was over the clock had struck nine. The fatigue of her trip and the warm food made Joan very drowsy, and her eyelids kept creeping down and down until she would have to jerk them open. Miss King noticed her and said, "Mary Alice, Joan is so tired that she is nearly asleep. And you must be tired yourself, considering all the steps you have made up and down and around and about this afternoon. I will get up early in the morning and go to town after Joan's trunk, but you girls can sleep as late as you wish, and then Mrs. Oldham will give you your breakfast."

Joan heard an indignant clatter of dishes behind her as Miss King finished, and judged that Mrs. Oldham did not particularly approve of the idea, but Miss King continued: "Here's a basket of fruit for you to have in your room. And, Joan, I hope you sleep well and feel that you are going to like being here."

"Thank you, Miss King. It is so very kind of you to let me come. I feel sure that I am going to like it, and—and you, too," Joan added rather hesitantly. She wanted Miss King to like her,

and she felt the need of the older woman's sympathy and help, now that her own mother was so far away.

"Yes, yes," Miss King answered, but her voice was chilly, and Joan felt that her offer of friendship had been rejected.

Hurt and bewildered, she took the basket of fruit from Miss King, and, after the good nights were said, followed Mary Alice into the kitchen.

"Let's go up the back stairway," Mary Alice suggested. "I hate deserted front halls at night, don't you?"

"Yes," Joan answered, but she was hardly conscious of what she said, for she was still hearing Miss King's cold words.

They said good night to Mrs. Oldham, but she was disappearing into the pantry and did not answer. Then Mary Alice opened the stair-door and they climbed the steep steps to their rooms. Joan noticed that hers was directly over the kitchen, and Mary Alice's, opening out of it, was probably over part of the dining-room.

Mary Alice disappeared into her own room for a minute, and returned with her hair-brush and perched cross-legged on Joan's bed.

"My wall-paper has blue bow-knots instead of

pink rosebuds," she confided, while she brushed her hair vigorously. "But I don't have a cunning little table with knobby legs, as you have."

Joan unpacked her bag, hanging up her extra frock and putting her handkerchiefs and toilet-articles in the dresser. Then she slipped on the dark-blue negligée her mother had bought for her to wear on the Pullman. Mary Alice was chatting on steadily, but Joan was so sleepy that she hardly heard her, and only said "Yes" and "No" occasionally.

When Joan was ready for bed Mary Alice tucked her in, in spite of protests, and turned out the lights. Then she went into her own room, leaving the door ajar between.

Joan curled down luxuriously between the cool sheets and expected to go to sleep immediately. But she didn't. She was nervous and excited from the happenings of the day, and kept getting more wide-awake all the time. She heard Mary Alice punch out her light, make a flying leap for the bed, and turn over two or three times; then everything was fearfully quiet. Joan longed for the cheerful, friendly noises of New York. In her tiny room there she always went to sleep listening drowsily to the roar of the busses and motors on

Riverside Drive. Or sometimes the metallic voice of the radio in the next apartment would be the last thing she would hear. And less frequently, when the river was foggy, the constant moan of the fog-horns on the boats passing up or down the Hudson would penetrate her sleep.

But here there was nothing; the very lack of any noise kept her awake. And Joan distinctly did not want to be awake, for while she was awake she would think, and she particularly did not want to think. But awake she stayed, and think she did. And her thoughts were mostly of May King.

“If she doesn’t want me to like her, and if she doesn’t want to like me, what did she let me come for?” Joan whispered in a trembly little voice to herself. “She makes me feel like a duty, and that is the most miserable way to feel in the whole world.” She lay quiet a few minutes and then went on: “I remember now that Mother said May King had always wanted to pay back the kindness of my grandfather in providing her tuition. And I guess that is just what I am—a chance to pay back what she thinks she owes.”

But no one can lie awake and think forever, particularly weary little travelers, and before long Joan dozed off.

It was very much later when she found herself sitting up in bed and shivering. From somewhere beneath her had come a prolonged "scre-e-eak."

For one scared instant Joan thought it came from under her bed, and she sat tense and cold, afraid to breathe. Then after a few minutes of silence she heard again a muffled and drawn-out scre-e-eak, an eery and gruesome sound in the stillness. She realized now that it was not in her room, but much farther away, perhaps in the kitchen below.

It was scary, just the same, and Joan still was afraid to move. Then suddenly some one bounded into bed beside her. It was Mary Alice, and she scurried under the covers, head and all. After a minute of rigid listening she began to feel around cautiously with her hand and discovered that Joan was sitting up. So she stuck her head out of the covers and whispered, "Have you been hearing it?"

"I just woke up," Joan whispered back. "But I've heard two awful screams."

"What can it be? I have never heard such a noise."

"It sounds to me as if some one were drawing nails out of something," Joan decided.

A final and louder scream emphasized her remark.

“Of course,” Mary Alice replied. “How logical of you! Everybody always pulls nails out of things in the dead of night.”

“Just the same,” Joan argued stubbornly, “nails sound just like that. I know, because last week we discovered that we had forgotten to pack a set of Dickens with the rest of our books, and Dad had to pry the packing-box open.”

They were whispering to keep up their courage, for the silence was getting oppressive. They listened carefully, and now that the noise had ceased, Joan began to doubt if it had sounded like nails being drawn after all.

“Perhaps that’s the way a rat sounds in the middle of the night,” she suggested softly as she snuggled down close to Mary Alice.

But Mary Alice shook her head. Then they listened again, and everything was quiet. Finally they could barely distinguish some scraping and scratching noises that gradually grew louder and then ceased altogether. Joan could not identify these sounds, but she suggested desperately to Mary Alice, “Maybe it’s a dog or a coyote, or something prowling around back of the house.”

“Dogs don’t scratch themselves that loud,”
Mary Alice answered, with a shiver and a giggle.
“Let’s get out together and lock your door. I’ll
never dare to go to sleep otherwise.”

CHAPTER IV,

THE CLOSED DOOR

SUDDENLY the sun was shining and the pink-and-white room was very light. Joan, opening her eyes a little, realized that it was morning. For a dazed minute she looked at the quaint room and did not know where she was. Then it all came back in a rush—Judd, Miss King, Mary Alice, and, last, the strange noises of the night before.

With that memory she sat up in bed and shook Mary Alice, who yawned, blinked, and closed her eyes again.

“Wake up,” Joan insisted. “I want to know if anything exciting happened after I went to sleep.”

“Hm-m-m,” Mary Alice meditated, opening one eye a little. “I can’t remember staying awake to watch you fall asleep.” Then she shut the eye again and lay very still.

“It’s no use pretending that you are asleep, Mary Alice,” Joan stated. “Because I want to talk!”

“I knew it,” Mary Alice muttered regretfully. “I knew by the look in your eye when I first saw

you that you were the kind of girl who would want to talk when I wanted to sleep!"

"Well, if you knew it," Joan laughed, "you ought to be more resigned to it. I want to know if anything happened after I went to sleep."

"You were still awake when we decided to lock the door, weren't you?" Mary Alice asked.

"Silly, of course I was."

"And also when we were both so scared that neither of us would put a foot out of bed until the other did? And you recall how we poised on the edge of the bed and each of us put a foot on the floor at the same time?"

"Yes," Joan answered with a reminiscent little shiver. "And how we went hand in hand to lock the door, and how we tiptoed and tiptoed, and I thought we never should reach it!"

"And of course," Mary Alice took up the story, "you remember when we were scurrying back to bed, how you suddenly gave a yelp and leaped in, and lay there shivering so that you shook the whole bedstead, and scared me to death?"

"Well, if you had stepped on the bristly side of a hair-brush, you would have yelped, too. Besides, we had been talking about coyotes and rats and things, and, ugh-h-h, when I put my foot on

those bristles I thought that the brush was something alive lying there."

"I suppose that I left my hair-brush on your bed last night after I got through brushing my hair, and it got knocked off on the floor. It must have felt as an angry porcupine looks! I don't blame you for yelping; what I can't understand is why you didn't give a full-grown scream."

"I was so scared that I couldn't," Joan laughed. "But I must have gone to sleep after that; I can't remember anything else."

"I listened for a while, but I couldn't hear a sound."

"Mary Alice, what do you suppose we heard last night?"

"Well, it sounded like a lot of things, but mostly like an ill-bred ghost," Mary Alice finally decided.

"Ill-bred?" Joan exclaimed, bewildered.

"Yes. All well-bred ghosts make a few preliminary noises and then glide through your room so that you can see them. It's just like a well-bred person coming to your house and knocking and coming in, and an ill-bred person coming and knocking and skipping around the corner before you get to the door."

“ I’ll take my ghosts ill-bred, then,” laughed Joan. “ I don’t want any wraith gliding through my room. But, seriously, Mary Alice, the man who drove me out from the station last night told me that this place had all the ‘ makin’s of a ghost.’ ”

“ How funny! ” Mary Alice cried, sitting up in bed. “ What are the ‘ makin’s of a ghost ’—a white sheet? ”

“ I’m not sure what he meant,” Joan admitted. “ But he said, or at least he implied, that there has to be a disappearance or a death before there can be a ghost.”

“ Which is it here? ”

“ I don’t know. I had just asked him when Miss King came out of the door.”

“ This house has probably had plenty of deaths,” Mary Alice mused, “ because Miss King said yesterday that part of it is over seventy-five years old. In fact, if that were the only requirement, there would probably be a whole flock of ghosts here! ”

“ The ‘ makin’s ’ might have been a peculiar death or perhaps a disappearance,” Joan went on. “ At least, that noise last night was creepy, although I imagine that we shall find out this

morning that a particularly huge rat has been caught in a trap."

"Of course we shall. It always happens that way. I remember last summer, when I went on a camping trip with a bunch of girls, a big rain came up and blew our tents down and we slept in a deserted hay-loft all night. The rain and lightning were scary, and we heard the most deliciously spooky noises all night long. But the next morning we found that it was an old cow that had taken refuge down below. It always happens that way," Mary Alice finished pessimistically.

"Maybe this was Mrs. Oldham, taking the hairpins out of her hair," Joan suggested with a laugh.

"Mrs. Oldham—food—let's get up," cried Mary Alice.

"And investigate the noises," Joan added, hopping out of bed.

In a few minutes a tantalizing odor of toast drifted up to the bedroom and made the girls scurry into their dresses.

"'Mary, our cook, smells exactly like hot buttered toast,'" Mary Alice caroled, bounding down the back stairs after Joan's flying feet.

Mrs. Oldham had breakfast on a small table by

the sunny south window of the kitchen, and the girls ate hungrily.

Finally Mary Alice took a last slice of toast, contemplated it, and slowly spread it with marmalade. She took a bite, sighed, took another, and Joan knew that she was not hungry any more. Both girls began to look around the kitchen. It was a long, narrow room, reaching across the back of the house. It was scrupulously clean and light and cheerful, and Joan could not see a thing out of place. The walls were plastered and painted a clear gray, and their surface was unbroken except for the doors and windows. There was no built-in furniture, and the miscellaneous collection of cabinets and tables and chairs had been painted to match the walls. The stove was an ordinary kitchen range, but in one end of the room, between the back stairs and the pantry, was a huge fireplace. It was built of uneven rocks mortared together, and was very old, Joan decided, because it was so large, and because there were iron hooks projecting from the masonry to hang kettles on. It was swept out carefully, and evidently not used.

Mary Alice had been watching Joan study the fireplace, and she volunteered, "The fireplace belonged to the original house, the part that I said

was seventy-five years old. I guess this kitchen is about all of the original home left; the front rooms are newer. Isn't that right, Mrs. Oldham?" she asked as the housekeeper came from the pantry.

"Yes," Mrs. Oldham replied briefly, energetically stirring some preserves on the stove. "The original house burned nearly to the ground, and when old Mr. King rebuilt, he tore down all of it except this kitchen."

"The furniture must have been saved from the fire, though, for Miss King told me yesterday that some of it is very old," Mary Alice added, getting up from the table. "My, I feel good. I slept well, didn't you, Joan?" winking elaborately at Joan.

"I missed the New York noises," Joan answered, nearly convulsed by Mary Alice's assumed sleuth expression behind Mrs. Oldham's back. That lady was cautiously sliding a cream pie into the oven and paid no attention to the girls.

"Did you have to stay up late, washing all the supper dishes, Mrs. Oldham?" Mary Alice continued, pretending to take notes on the white-linen cuff of her dress.

"No. When supper is late I always leave the

dishes until the next morning. Of course, it is too bad when I have late breakfast dishes, too." And with that remark she bustled into the pantry, her hand mechanically replacing a hairpin in her mass of brown-gray hair.

Her words left Joan gasping and Mary Alice looking blank.

"She's mad because she had to get our breakfast," Joan whispered in dismay. "But Miss King said we could be late."

"She's just grouchy, I guess," Mary Alice decided. "Let's help her with the dishes and maybe she will relent."

So Joan cleared the breakfast-table, and both girls wiped the dishes and placed them carefully on the pantry shelves.

"Now what can we do to help you?" Mary Alice asked.

"I want to scrub the kitchen now," Mrs. Oldham said. "Thank you for helping me with the dishes, but I would rather have you go into some of the other rooms until the floor is dry. I hate to have my scrubbing tracked up."

Thus dismissed, the girls wandered into the dining-room.

"A most ordinary kitchen," Mary Alice sighed.

“I didn’t see a sign of a ghostly visitor. Let’s look around the other rooms.”

“All right,” Joan assented. “But I know the noises were in the kitchen.”

“It won’t do any harm to look, though.” And Mary Alice put her words into action. “The dining-room looks just as it did last night. Let’s go into the library.”

The library did not reveal anything interesting, and the girls again paused for conference.

“The kitchen goes across the back of the house, and the dining-room and library across this side,” Joan said, looking out of the library window. “Then the hall divides these rooms from another,” she went on as she stood in the library door and surveyed the front hall, with its long staircase. “I suppose that door opens into a living-room, doesn’t it, Mary Alice?”

“I suppose so,” Mary Alice agreed, looking over her shoulder. “But I didn’t get here until late yesterday, and while we were waiting for you, Miss King and I sat in the library. Let’s see.”

“I don’t know of any reason why we shouldn’t,” Joan said thoughtfully, looking at the closed door across the hall. “Yet that door seems shut so tightly.”

“ Oh, well, it’s just because you are accustomed to big doors and open spaces between your rooms,” Mary Alice said easily, “ that these little dark doors seem different. Besides, Miss King keeps all the doors shut everywhere.”

As she spoke she stepped across the hall and laid her hand on the door-knob. She turned it, stood for a minute with an amazed expression on her face, and then looked back at Joan.

“ It’s locked! ” she gasped.

Joan went slowly across the hall, reached out a cautious hand, and tried the door. It would not open.

Quietly, almost guiltily, the girls returned to the library.

“ How queer! ” Joan whispered. “ How unusual to lock up your living-room! ”

“ Do you think we did wrong to try the door? ” Mary Alice asked, puzzled.

“ I can’t see why,” Joan answered. “ Of course, we wouldn’t think of opening the other bedroom doors up-stairs, but surely—the living-room door ——”

“ Maybe it isn’t a living-room,” Mary Alice said. “ Maybe it is the ghost’s bedroom.”

“ Perhaps,” Joan admitted. “ But I’m sure that

he wasn't in his bedroom when we heard him last night. Those noises sounded right under me; they could not have come from rooms on the other side of the house."

"I think you are right about that," Mary Alice admitted. "Let's go back to the kitchen and look again. I feel sure now that those noises were not ordinary ones, don't you?"

"Yes."

Both girls retraced their steps to the kitchen and waited in the doorway until Mrs. Oldham gave them permission to enter.

"How soon will Miss King be back?" Mary Alice asked, when they were beginning to feel rather foolish, standing in the middle of the floor and looking stealthily about them.

"This afternoon, sometime," Mrs. Oldham replied, and disappeared in the pantry.

As soon as she was out of sight Mary Alice walked the length of the kitchen and back.

"What is that for?" Joan whispered.

"To find out if there are any loose boards in the floor," she confided in a sepulchral tone. "If one had been loose, I should have tripped over it, because I always trip over loose boards. It's no use; the ghost evidently brought his nails and

boards with him, and when he got through with his séance, he cleaned up the mess."

"You are not thorough," Joan asserted, entering into the fun. "Lo! You haven't looked at the ceiling." And she backed around, scanning a very innocent gray plastering, until she stumbled over the waste-basket and upset it. She got down to pick up the scattered papers, while Mary Alice poked around the fireplace. Suddenly they heard a slight ejaculation from the pantry, and Mrs. Oldham came scurrying out.

"Girls, would you mind going after a dozen eggs for me? I am out of them, and Miss King is expecting me to do enough baking to-day to last all the week."

"Of course," said Mary Alice.

"Where can we find a store?" Joan asked in perplexity.

"Not a store," Mrs. Oldham corrected, "but a neighbor's house. I guess you had better go to Mrs. Parrott's. Here is a basket and some change, although she probably won't take any money."

"And where is Mrs. Parrott's?" Mary Alice questioned, as she took the basket.

"I'm telling you," Mrs. Oldham said im-

patiently. "Go down the lane in front of the house until you come to the main road. Turn to the right and go down that road until you come to a road leading west. Go along it for about a mile—or until you come to a house, for the first one is Mrs. Parrott's."

"We'll be back in a jiffy," Mary Alice cried.

"There's no hurry," the housekeeper said hastily. "Just get back in time for luncheon. I won't need them until after luncheon."

"Luncheon's at twelve-thirty, sharp," she called after the girls as they raced out the back door and around the house.

CHAPTER V,

A RUSTY NAIL AND A DOZEN EGGS

THE morning air was crisp and fresh, and the girls were glad to be out-of-doors. They ran about half-way down the lane, and then stopped under a huge walnut-tree, whose dense foliage made an inviting shade on the green grass beneath it.

“We have until twelve-thirty,” Mary Alice cried. “Let’s stop in this cute green spot and rest.”

“Rest already?” laughed Joan, but she sank down on the grass very willingly.

Mary Alice sat down beside her and put the basket over her head, using the handle for a strap under her chin.

“I’m disappointed,” she sighed. “No ghost!”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” Joan teased her.

“What do you mean? We didn’t find a trace of him, unless he was behind that locked door, and you don’t know any more about that than I do.”

“Don’t be too sure that we didn’t find a trace of him,” Joan reiterated.

“Explain yourself immediately,” Mary Alice demanded, taking the basket off her head so that she could look properly autocratic.

“We-ell,” drawled Joan, lying back on the grass and keeping Mary Alice in suspense as long as possible, “we-ell, what do you think I found in the waste-basket?”

“A footprint!” Mary Alice ejaculated; “a ghostly footprint, with the left hind toe missing!”

It was Joan’s turn to be nettled. “If you can’t be serious, I’m not going to tell you.”

“Oh, Joan,” Mary Alice begged, “I thought you were joking, yourself. Do tell me; I am dying to know.”

Joan was so anxious to hear what Mary Alice would say that she did not wait any longer. She sat up quickly.

“Look!” she triumphed, drawing a long bent nail out of the pocket of her dress, and waving it before Mary Alice’s astonished eyes.

“It’s rusty on the head,” Mary Alice whispered, capturing it and looking at it. “And it is all crooked, as if it has been drawn out of something. It fits those noises exactly!”

“Yes,” Joan gloated, enjoying her find.

“Very well, Sherlock Holmes, I’ll be Watson.

Where did you get it? And why didn't you let me know?"

"I didn't have any chance to let you know," Joan answered the questions backwards, "for Mrs. Oldham was standing right there."

"But *where* did you find it?"

"In the waste-basket, the simplest place to look for trash! You remember how I knocked it over? Well, when I was putting the papers back into it, I saw this sticking in one side. It was caught between the reed fibers."

"But we surely heard more than one nail."

"That's what I thought; so I noticed the waste-paper. There was a wrapper off the bread we had this morning ——"

"How do you know?"

"Well, of course, I'm just guessing. But there was a new loaf lying on the bread-board, with about enough missing for our breakfast. Don't you think it is safe to assume that the wrapper came from that loaf of bread and was put in the basket just before our breakfast, Miss Doubter?"

"I wasn't doubting," Mary Alice objected. "I just wanted to understand."

"And then there was an old newspaper, last Tuesday's, in fact; so it might just as easily have

been put in this morning, and that was all, besides the nail. Now I can't imagine that basket sitting in the kitchen all day yesterday and collecting nothing but one newspaper. I think the basket was emptied in the night or the first thing this morning, and the nails and whatever else was in the ghostly party last night were thrown out. But this one nail got caught in the fibers."

"I certainly can't dispute that logic," Mary Alice conceded.

For a few minutes the girls sat silently thinking over the strange noises of the night before. Then they got up soberly and continued their walk down the road.

"With all that ability to reason," Mary Alice said finally, "can't you figure out the rest of the mystery?"

"No, I can't," Joan admitted regretfully. "I can't think of a genuinely logical and sensible reason why anybody should be up at that time of the night opening a box, which in my mind is the most ordinary thing to draw nails from that I can imagine."

"That is a rather involved sentence," said Mary Alice critically, "but I understand it."

"Do you suppose," Joan went on, "that Judd's

remark and those noises have anything to do with the name 'Scared Acres'?"

"Scared Acres? *Scared* Acres? Oh, what a funny name," Mary Alice chuckled. "And what is it, anyway?"

"Why, that's the name of Miss King's ranch," Joan explained in amazement. "Haven't you ever heard it before?"

"You mustn't forget that I've only been in Fame a little while, and of course the young folks at the college aren't interested in Miss King and her Scared Acres; so I haven't had any chance to hear of it."

"That's right," Joan admitted. "But now that you know, what do you think?"

"I'll tell you, Joan," Mary Alice said solemnly, "I've thought and thought, and all that I have thought of is—nothing!"

"Think again," Joan demanded. "What do you suppose any one would name a ranch Scared Acres for?"

"I have it!" Mary Alice cried.

"You have?"

"I have. Maybe once upon a time the acres got scared, and ever since they have been called Scared Acres!"

“Oh, Mary Alice, I thought you had really thought of something.”

“Well, that’s more than you have thought of.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Joan triumphantly, “because I believe you came pretty close to it, after all. It must be called Scared Acres because the *owners* got scared!”

“And that fits in with the fact that there still seems to be plenty of things for people to get scared about there now.”

By this time the girls had come to the end of a corn-field, and suddenly saw Mrs. Parrott’s little house tucked back among the trees. They found Mrs. Parrott on the back porch, shelling peas, while a chubby baby leaned out of a high-chair and reached longing arms towards her mother.

The girls introduced themselves and told their errand. Mrs. Parrott insisted on going to the hen-house for fresh eggs; so Joan went with her, and Mary Alice amused the baby by crawling about on her hands and knees and barking like a dog.

Mrs. Parrott was so jolly and her baby so chubby and good-natured that they stayed for some time, eating hot gingerbread and talking.

Finally they started home, and Mrs. Parrott walked as far as the road with them.

“You’ll have a long, hot walk back to Scared Acres,” Mrs. Parrott said as she gave each of them a big scarlet zinnia from her flower-bed.

“Yes,” answered Mary Alice, and then continued hastily, “We were just wondering, as we came over, why Miss King’s ranch is called Scared Acres.”

“I’ve often wondered, too,” Mrs. Parrott said. “When I first came here, three years ago, I asked Miss King. She said that Scared Acres had been the name for years, and changed the subject. So I didn’t ask any more questions.”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t, either,” said Mary Alice thoughtfully, and the girls started home.

The sun was higher now, and getting warm with all the intensity of a Kansas summer sun, and the roads seemed dustier and the way longer.

“Doesn’t a diagonal equal the square root of the sum of the squares of the other two sides?” Mary Alice asked.

“It does in New York,” Joan laughed. “Are you cramming for your entrance exams?”

“Don’t remind me of those exams! No, I was going to suggest that we climb this fence and cut

across the pasture. It will be shorter and much better walking than the dusty road."

Joan hesitated and looked at the proposed route. "But see all those trees over there. They wind around as if they were on a river-bank, and we sha'n't be able to get across." What really made her hesitate was the sight of two cows idly switching their tails and grazing in the middle of the pasture.

"All the more fun," cried Mary Alice. "We'll go adventuring. This land is part of Scared Acres, so we shall not be trespassing."

Joan could not think of another excuse, so she reluctantly squirmed under the barbed wire fence after Mary Alice, and started across the pasture. Not until they were safely past the cows did Joan begin to enjoy the walk.

Before long they came to the river, a busy little stream that meandered here and there with much gurgling and rippling. It was cooler under the trees, and the girls loafed along, while Mary Alice taught Joan to skip pebbles. They passed several ripples that were shallow enough to wade across, but they went on, expecting to find a foot-bridge or a log, since Miss King must have some way to get to her pasture besides the long road.

Soon they heard the musical splash of falling water, and hurried around a bend in the river, to find the water eddying toward the opposite bank and plunging down about ten feet to make a lovely falls.

“What a beautiful place,” cried Joan. “Let’s bring our lunch out here for a picnic sometime; that is, if Mrs. Oldham will let us,” she added with a smile. “We can explain to her that it will mean fewer dishes for her to wash.”

“Let’s,” agreed Mary Alice. “See how the water sparkles and glistens. Let’s name it Sapphire Falls immediately, before we learn that some one has already named it Terrified Waters, or Frightened-to-Death Torrents, or something equally unpleasant.”

“I christen thee Sapphire Falls,” Joan exclaimed as she knelt by the water and flicked a handful of bright drops into the air. “Why, Mary Alice,” she went on, “I do believe that the rocks that make this falls are cemented together. What a nice idea some one had to make a lovely waterfall.”

“I guess it wasn’t nice, but practical,” Mary Alice answered. “We have been so engrossed in the waterfall that we forgot to look across the

bank. There's an old mill over there, all covered with vines."

Joan followed her pointing finger and saw a weather-beaten building. It was partly overgrown with green, and young bushes crept up to the very door. In the weeds of the river's bank she could discern the outline of a great water-wheel.

"Let's go over and explore it," Joan suggested. "It looks entirely too tempting to pass by."

"We must," said Mary Alice. "I said we were going adventuring when we cut across the fields, and for adventurers not to investigate everything in their path is a great crime."

"We'll have to go back and find some shallow ripples and wade across," Joan added. "The water is too deep and swift here."

Wading the ripples was a little adventure in itself, and took some time, for the girls had to sit on the opposite bank and wriggle their toes in the sunshine until they were dry enough for their stockings.

Then they scampered back to the mill and peered in at the door, or at least where the door had been—it was leaning against the wall now, in a warped, worn-out pose.

Both girls lost their eagerness to explore as they looked through the door. Mary Alice drew a sigh of disappointment, and Joan echoed it. The inside of the mill did not reproduce the fascination of the outside. True, the same gray, worn logs showed in the walls, but, instead of straying green tendrils of wild grape-vines hanging from them, there were stringy, fly-filled cobwebs. A huge, rusty mass of machinery filled one end, and great corn-bins were all around the walls. At one corner a narrow stairway led to an upper floor. Everything was dusty, and the whole place looked rat-haunted.

“Let’s not go in,” Joan suggested. “It’s just dirty and tumble-down.”

“And full of spiders, probably,” Mary Alice finished, but she continued to stand in the doorway.

Joan turned away and sat down on the flat rocks beside the falls, dabbling her fingers in the clear water and enjoying the quiet beauty of the woods.

Mary Alice had disappeared from sight, and Joan knew that she had gone inside the mill after all.

“Come here, quick!” her voice came after a

few minutes, and Joan jumped up so hastily that she slipped on the moss-covered rocks and nearly tumbled into the river.

“What is it?” she called as she ran to the mill door and peered in.

Mary Alice was standing by the staircase, one tightly-clenched hand held out before her.

“Guess what I found on the second step of the stairs,” she demanded with a glow of triumph on her face.

“Well, if it is a spider or a thousand-legged worm, you surely have it squeezed to death,” Joan cried as she came over to Mary Alice’s side.

“Now, guess,” Mary Alice insisted.

“You found it on the stairway,” Joan pondered, and turned to inspect the stairs. “Why—why, Mary Alice, look!” she pointed dramatically to a shiny new board which had been nailed over one of the rotting steps of the stairs. “Have you seen that new step?”

“Yes, yes,” Mary Alice said impatiently. “That’s what tempted me into the mill. But that isn’t half so important as what I have in my hand.”

“Oh, show me!” Joan begged. “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“ You have to guess once.”

“ Well, then, I guess a ghostly footprint, with all the toes missing,” mimicked Joan.

“ You mean thing,” giggled Mary Alice. “ But I’ll have to show you after that. Look!” she opened her hand and disclosed a long, black hairpin. “ Maybe you will guess whose hairpin this is.”

“ Mrs. Oldham’s,” Joan exclaimed immediately.

“ It surely looks like it,” Mary Alice responded thoughtfully, “ and I found it right here.” She carefully replaced the pin on the second step.

Together the girls raised their eyes from the pin to the new board, and on up the stairway.

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN IN THE MILL

FOR several minutes the girls stared up the mill-stairway before either of them spoke.

“What do you suppose Mrs. Oldham was doing in this deserted place?” Joan finally questioned. “Somehow I can’t think that she just ventured in as we did.”

“Neither can I,” agreed Mary Alice. “But I’m sure that whatever she wanted concerned itself with the loft, and not with the first floor, because the hairpin was on the step, and then there is that new board. Shall we see what is on the next floor?”

Joan looked hesitatingly up the stairway. It was steep and narrow, and turned abruptly at the top for the last few steps. She did not fancy going up into that black cavern, but curiosity urged her, and she nodded agreement to Mary Alice’s question.

Having decided to go, neither of them was eager to start. Finally, hand in hand, they set foot on the first step. That one safely conquered, they

stole on until they came to the step that would put their heads above the landing. There they paused again to gather courage for the venture. They were afraid to speak for fear some one might be lying in wait for them; so, after a few silent gestures which neither could understand, they drew a long breath and ran up the last steps.

“Whew!” said Mary Alice. “What should we have done if there had been somebody here?”

“I think we should have gone down a great deal faster than we came up,” Joan vowed. “But no one has been here for ages.”

The loft was dark and small, and covered with dust and cobwebs. There was some extension of the mill-machinery here, and across one end of the narrow room was a crude partition.

“Let’s go down,” Joan continued, watching a big spider scurry out of sight.

“Before we go, we ought to look behind that partition,” Mary Alice suggested indecisively.

“We’ll just see more cobwebs and dirt,” Joan demurred.

“Probably, but until I’m sure I shall not be satisfied. Let’s open the door of that partition for just a tiny peek.”

Mary Alice did not wait for Joan’s answer, but

walked across the loft and opened the door. Joan was treading closely on her heels and peered over her shoulder. The room was small and lighted only by a narrow window at one side. It was filled with rickety, worn furniture—but here Joan stopped her inventory in surprise.

“Mary Alice, some one is living in this room!”

For on the tumble-down bed in one corner were clean sheets and blankets. The wobbly table in the center of the room was covered with rotted oilcloth, but a tray of unwashed dishes and several well-kept books were lying on it. By sniffing, the girls could detect the stale smell of tobacco-smoke.

“Those dishes,” said Mary Alice, taking a few cautious steps inside the room, “are just like the ones we ate off this morning.”

“Maybe there is a name in one of the books,” Joan suggested. “Let’s look and see.”

But as each girl reached a hand for a book, they heard a rustling noise from the direction of the window. Both of them stood paralyzed for a minute, and then, without moving their bodies, turned their heads quickly towards the window. At first they saw nothing at all, and then the bough of the tree just outside the mill rustled

against the window under the weight of a black cat they could see crouching on the limb.

The noise was innocent enough, but the girls did not get over their fright.

“Suppose,” Joan whispered, “that the owner of this room should come up the stairs!”

Simultaneously both girls tiptoed out of the door, closed it quietly behind them, sneaked down the stairs, and out of the stuffy old mill, pausing only long enough for Mary Alice to snatch up the basket of eggs. Once outside, they abandoned caution and fled noisily through the trees until they came suddenly out of the woods and found themselves among the shacks around Miss King’s stables.

“Why,” Joan gasped, stopping in amazement and staring blankly at the back of the house, “the mill isn’t any distance from the house! All these trees just concealed it from us.”

“Come on,” Mary Alice urged. “Let’s get to the house. We don’t want to be seen coming from here.”

They tried to walk casually, but quickly, up to the back porch and stroll calmly into the kitchen. Their relief when Mrs. Oldham wasn’t in sight was immense.

“Whew!” sighed Mary Alice explosively, as she dropped into a kitchen-chair, “it’s a good thing there isn’t any one here to wonder where you got that cobweb in your hair!”

“Or where you got that streak of dirt on your face,” Joan retaliated, wiping her hair with her handkerchief. “Put the eggs in the pantry and let’s go up-stairs and get cleaned up.”

“All right,” Mary Alice agreed, going into the pantry while Joan ran up the back stairs.

In a few minutes Mary Alice followed. She was eating a cookie, but her eyes fairly danced with excitement. She did not say a word, though, until both she and Joan had changed to fresh frocks and made themselves clean and dainty again.

“Well,” she began as she sat on the edge of the bed, “what do you think I found in the pantry when I went to put the eggs away?”

“Don’t tell me that Mrs. Oldham was in there all the time and heard what we said?” gasped Joan.

“No.”

“Well,” Joan speculated, relieved to know that no one had overheard their words, “another hair-pin?”

“No, silly,” laughed Mary Alice. “But you’ll never guess; so I will tell you. It has to do with Mrs. Oldham, and I hate to be suspicious, but there were at least two dozen eggs on the shelf in the pantry!”

“And she sent us all those miles after eggs,” Joan exclaimed indignantly. “But, of course,” she added less violently, “if we hadn’t gone after the eggs, we shouldn’t have found the mill.”

“But you are missing the real point,” Mary Alice cried. “Why did she send us for eggs when she had eggs?”

“Oh,” exclaimed Joan, staring at Mary Alice round-eyed, “she must have wanted to get us out of the way!”

“Of course,” said Mary Alice solemnly, “and we probably would be very much interested in knowing what she did while we were gone.”

The girls sat silent for a few minutes, puzzling over the problem.

“Oh, Joan, I know,” cried Mary Alice. “Remember that tray of food in the mill? It was somebody’s breakfast probably, and Mrs. Oldham wanted to take it there and didn’t want us to see her.”

“Yes,” agreed Joan, “that is a good guess.

However, if it were not for the tray of food and the hairpin, I should be inclined to think that some tramp was living in the mill."

"A tramp with clean sheets?" said Mary Alice reproachfully.

"That's right," admitted Joan with a laugh. "Still, couldn't it be a hired hand?"

"Of course," Mary Alice said instantly. "Of course. The man in the mill is Uncle Ben, beyond a doubt."

"Who?"

"Uncle Ben. He probably lives in the loft, and of course Mrs. Oldham might take his meals to him on a tray. At least, he doesn't eat in the house, and I suppose we may presume that he eats somewhere."

"Mary Alice, I don't know what you are talking about," Joan cried. "Stop a minute and tell me who Uncle Ben is."

"Oh, I forgot that you didn't know. Uncle Ben is Miss King's old negro coachman. He takes care of the two cows and the comfortable old horse. He is very old, and not of much assistance any more, but I think Miss King keeps him because he has always been with the family."

"I haven't seen Uncle Ben yet, but of course I

haven't had much chance to," Joan interrupted. "Is he the only farm-hand?"

"Miss King doesn't farm any more, so Uncle Ben doesn't do much at all. He doesn't even take care of the car, I know. That is why, by the way, we didn't meet you in Fame last night. The old car wouldn't start, and Miss King didn't know what was the matter with it, and of course I didn't, and Uncle Ben just walked around and around it, saying that he wouldn't touch the plaguy thing, and that in the old days he had never been late to meet a train, although it took him nearly half a day to drive a team to Fame. Finally, when Miss King telephoned in for a mechanic to come out, and for Judd to meet you, Uncle Ben just snorted in disgust and stalked away towards the stables. So I know he is the only man around the place."

Joan smiled at the picture of the indignant old darky's contempt of the automobile. "I want to meet Uncle Ben soon," she said, "but, Mary Alice, I'm sure that he doesn't live in the mill-room. I know that Miss King wouldn't have any of her servants living in such a dirty place. More likely he lives in some one of the numerous shacks around the stables."

“You’re right,” Mary Alice agreed. “I suppose that it wasn’t Uncle Ben in the mill. Besides, I think that there is something mysterious about the man who is living there,—something to do with the rusty nail and the dozen eggs.”

“It does look like it,” Joan agreed.

“Do you think that we should tell Miss King?” Mary Alice questioned reluctantly.

“I’ve been thinking of that, too,” Joan answered. “But if we do, she will probably give us some simple explanation of the affair, and then all the mystery will be spoiled.”

“I know it. And I’ve always wanted to be mixed up in a mystery.”

“Let’s try to find out for ourselves,” Joan went on; “and then, if we discover that it is something Miss King doesn’t know, we will tell her.”

“All right. And now let’s go down-stairs. It must be nearly luncheon time.”

The girls entered the kitchen just as Mrs. Oldham came in the back door with the mail. There was a letter from Joan’s mother, and she ran back to her room to read it. She curled up on the bed and kissed the precious message. The sight of her mother’s handwriting made her suddenly homesick, although at the same time she realized

that, with the exception of the night before, she hadn't had time to be homesick since she had been in Kansas.

There were only a few lines on her mother's heavy white stationery, but Joan knew that the boat had sailed at midnight of the day she had left New York, and she knew that her mother had had to snatch the time to write from a myriad of last-minute arrangements.

The letter was a cheerful one, in which Mrs. Kellogg said that she had always wanted to visit Kansas, and that Joan must remember every little thing to tell her, and that she would bring back a long diary from Europe, and it would be like two trips for each of them.

The letter made Joan feel that they would be together soon, telling of interesting adventures, but when she realized that she had been in Kansas only one day, and that, although an adventure seemed to loom close, she would not be able to confide it to her mother for six months, she felt very blue.

Then she got out her own stationery and began to answer the letter, telling about Mary Alice, and how jolly she was, and how quaint and attractive the pink-and-white room was.

Then Mary Alice called her to luncheon, and Joan was glad to break off with, "It's time for luncheon, Mother, dear, but I'll write again soon," for her mother had said that she hoped Joan and May King were going to like each other very much, and Joan didn't want to answer that particular question.

As Mary Alice called a second time, Joan hastily sealed the envelope, and, wiping the traces of tears from her face, went down-stairs. She found Mary Alice sitting on the floor by the south window, with an enormous black cat in her arms.

"This is the cat," Mary Alice said significantly, and Joan remembered the creature outside the mill-window. "Miss King has only this one big cat, and she stays down at the stables most of the time, Mrs. Oldham says," Mary Alice went on, tickling the cat's ears.

"Isn't she a beauty? Let me hold her a while," Joan cried, as she bent over pussy's sleek back. But the cat clung to Mary Alice, and the other girl desisted.

"It's no use," Mary Alice triumphed. "I have fed her a huge saucer of milk and she is mine."

"All right, I can't compete with a saucer of milk, I know," Joan laughed, "but just wait until

I find a mouse. Then I bet I win her away from you. What is her name?"

"What is her name, anyway, Mrs. Oldham?" Mary Alice queried, as the housekeeper set a plate of olives and a dish of marmalade on the table.

"Puss, I guess," Mrs. Oldham answered as she hurried back to the stove.

"Puss!" Mary Alice exclaimed indignantly. "Why, you poor old kitty, you! Just think, Joan, how ashamed she must be when she goes to afternoon tea with Cicero Maltese and Constance Tiger Cat, and has to admit that she hasn't any name but Puss!"

Puss's contented purring did not seem to indicate much embarrassment on her part, but Mary Alice continued, "We are going to name you. M-m-m, what shall we call her, Joan?"

"I can't think of anything. She's your cat; you name her."

"That's fair enough. I'll name her," Mary Alice said solemnly. "I'll call her Pickles."

"Why Pickles?" cried Joan amazed.

"Do you remember, in 'Alice in Wonderland,' how the Mad Hatter or the March Hare, I've forgotten which, said he drew a picture of everything that began with an M. 'Why with an M?'

asked Alice. 'Why not?' answered the Mad Hatter. So when you ask 'Why Pickles?' I can only answer, 'Why not?'"

"Pickles it is, then," Joan laughed. "But if you will lay Pickles down, Mrs. Oldham is waiting for us to eat olives for luncheon."

After luncheon the girls decided to spend the afternoon laying out their tennis-court, and, after a long altercation over ways and means, they wheedled an old sheet from Mrs. Oldham to tear into narrow tapes to mark the lines, and hurried out-of-doors laden with net and rackets.

CHAPTER VII

“ WE ALL WEAR WHITE ”

THE afternoon passed quickly in the making of the tennis-court, and in playing a few games, for without back-stops, as Mary Alice said, the games turned into a running-match.

It was nearly supper time when they heard Miss King's car coming up the lane. As she drove around to the garage Joan noticed that the car was old, as well as noisy, and she wondered why Miss King did not get a new car, since this one must need a lot of attention and Mary Alice had said that she took care of it herself.

When Miss King put the car in the garage, the girls stopped their tennis game and helped her carry her purchases into the house. Then they went up-stairs to change their dresses before supper.

As Joan dressed very carefully, and put on a pretty blue-crêpe frock, she would not admit even to herself why she chose her most attractive dress, although she knew deep down in her heart that it was for Miss King.

“ Still, if all the days in Kansas are like this one,” she continued her thought aloud, “ it will be lots of fun, and the six months will go fast.”

“ What did you say? ” Mary Alice called from her room. But Joan was saved from answering by Mary Alice’s appearance in the doorway. “ Oh, what a lovely, lovely frock! We’ll have to use the front stairs to-night to live up to our appearance! ”

Supper was a lively affair, starting with Mary Alice’s mock confession of browbeating Mrs. Oldham into giving them a sheet to tear into shreds for their tennis-court. Even Mrs. Oldham smiled as Mary Alice pictured her meekly rifling the linen closet at their command.

“ But that,” went on Mary Alice, “ isn’t the worst thing we have done to-day. After we got the court made and the net tied between a maple-tree and the shutter of the library window, we started to play. We got on beautifully for a time, winning a game apiece, and were starting on the third, when Joan caught her toe under the tape and fell down. She skinned her elbow, got a grass stain on her middy, and insisted that the tape idea was a complete failure! ” Mary Alice paused for breath and a bite of baked ham.

Miss King was not even trying to eat, but just sitting back in her chair and laughing. "It is like old times to have these girls here, isn't it, Mrs. Oldham?" She spoke spontaneously, and seemed to realize afterward what she had said, for she grew sober and quiet all at once. Mrs. Oldham, instead of answering, got up hastily and went into the kitchen. Joan watched them in amazement, but Mary Alice went on with her story.

"When Joan refused to play with the tape, we had to sit down and think of a way out of the difficulty. Finally we decided flour would do, but we peeked through the kitchen window and saw Mrs. Oldham furiously stirring up a cake, with a butcher-knife and two rolling-pins lying beside her; so we decided that that was a poor idea after all."

The white, hard expression was leaving Miss King's face, and as Mary Alice finished she was laughing again, but with a little more restraint. Then Mrs. Oldham came in from the kitchen with a plate of biscuits, and Joan wondered if she had been mistaken in thinking that the housekeeper left the room to avoid Miss King's question.

"After we decided not to use flour," the irre-

pressible Mary Alice went on, “ we thought we would forage around and find something else. Sure enough, in the very first shed we entered we discovered a tub of thick, white liquid in a perfect state of existence for our purpose. And in the same shed we found a funnel and a tin can, and now you should see our tennis-court! ”

“ I hope,” Mrs. Oldham said abruptly, “ that it wasn’t the funnel that I use to fill the coal-oil stove.”

“ I only hope,” laughed Miss King, “ that it wasn’t the funnel that I use to pour water in the car-engine.”

“ It wasn’t either of those, I’m sure,” Joan hastened to say, “ for it was all rusty, and we found it in a pile of junk.”

“ Well, I’m sure that I don’t keep my funnel in a pile of junk,” Miss King said; “ and knowing Mrs. Oldham’s cleanly habits, I am sure that she doesn’t either. But I can’t imagine what you found to mark the court with.”

“ It was in a tub,” Joan answered, “ and it was white, and there was a lot of it, and we didn’t use very much.”

“ And it made the nicest white line you can imagine,” added Mary Alice.

“It was probably the whitewash Uncle Ben had mixed to paint the chicken-coops,” Mrs. Oldham suggested with a ring of disapproval in her voice and a particularly energetic stab with a hairpin.

“Of course,” said Miss King, smiling.

“Oh, I do hope it wasn’t anything valuable,” Joan ventured.

“Not in the least. It is just lime and water, I think,” Miss King reassured her. “Only in the morning you must go down and make your peace with Uncle Ben. I’m just glad that you found something to do to amuse yourselves, while I had to be in town.”

“Oh, it was lots of fun,” Joan answered eagerly. “And we also had a lovely walk this morning.”

“Yes? Where did you go?”

“We went to Mrs. Parrott’s after eggs,” Joan replied, just as she felt an energetic push from Mary Alice’s foot.

“Eggs?” Miss King asked blankly.

“I sent the girls for eggs,” Mrs. Oldham interrupted hastily. “I tripped on that board on the back porch this morning—I’ve been trying for two weeks to get Uncle Ben to fix it—and spilled all of ours. I needed some for the cake, and I sent the girls to Mrs. Parrott’s.”

"I hope you didn't hurt yourself?" Miss King asked kindly, but Mrs. Oldham was already half-way to the kitchen and did not reply.

Joan watched with interest as she returned with a dish of marmalade, when there were two jellies already on the table. "I'm sure now," she thought to herself, "that Mrs. Oldham goes to the kitchen to avoid embarrassing answers."

Miss King interrupted Joan's thoughts by saying abruptly: "I have found something to-day that you may want to do, and it will be an interesting experience for you. I called to take Mrs. Theobald, the minister's wife, some fresh vegetables, and she said that they were needing more singers in the church choir, since three of their girls have gone away on summer vacations. I told her about you, Joan, and said that you might like to sing with them."

"Oh, do," Mary Alice cried. "I sing in the choir, and it is lovely. Mr. Theobald himself coaches us, and he is such a kind, helpful director."

"I should like to sing in a church choir," Joan answered. "It must make you feel a real part of the service, and not so much a spectator, like I have often felt in New York. I'm afraid, though,

that I can't sing well enough. I never have had any training; I just sing."

"That doesn't matter in a small town. If you are interested and willing, I know that they will be glad to have you."

"I'm very interested and very willing," smiled Joan. "I'll go to the first choir practice, if Mary Alice will take me, and see if Mr. Theobald thinks that I sing well enough."

"I am sure that you sing well enough," Miss King assured her. "But Mrs. Theobald said that they were not going to have choir practice this week, because they are singing some well-known hymns next Sunday. She gave me a hymn-book, though, and you and Mary Alice can go over the numbers." Miss King hesitated and then continued: "There is a piano in the music-room, although I am afraid that it is sadly out of tune; it hasn't been played since—for—for a long time." For a fleeting moment Joan caught the hard expression in Miss King's eyes, and her thoughts seemed to be far away.

"I didn't know that you had a music-room," Joan exclaimed timidly, to attract Miss King's attention.

"Why, yes," Miss King replied rather vaguely,

her mind evidently still on other things. “It’s really just a big living-room, but I have had it locked up for a long, long time. The library serves me for a living-room; I don’t have much company any more.”

As she paused Joan could find nothing to say. Finally Miss King went on dreamily: “No, I don’t have much company any more, but three generations of Kings have lived in this house, and it has been the scene of a great deal of entertaining during its time. But the library is very gloomy,” she said with more of her old abruptness, “and the music-room is sunnier and brighter, and I am sure that you girls will like it better. As soon as we can, Mrs. Oldham and I will open and air it, although, as I said, the piano is not in tune.”

“Oh, we’ll manage, Miss King,” cried Mary Alice. “I am so glad to have Joan in the choir, and I know that she will like it. And she will meet a very nice group of young people from the college summer-school, too.”

“I’ll be glad of that,” Miss King replied, “for I am so afraid that Joan is going to be lonesome in Kansas.”

“Oh, Joan,” Mary Alice continued, “did you

bring a white dress with you? We all wear white."

"Why, no," Joan answered blankly. "I haven't had a white dress for years."

"You haven't?" Mary Alice cried in amazement.

"No," Joan repeated, and then felt that she must go on and explain. "You see, we don't have a car, and when we don't take a taxi we ride on the subway. And wearing a white dress on a subway is about the same as walking in one on a dusty road, and the results would be similar, I am sure."

"I never thought of that side of it," replied Mary Alice. "That's too bad, because if you sing in the choir, you will have to have a white dress. We have been wearing white all summer. You see, before we settled on a definite color, everybody wore what she wanted to, and there was always a conglomeration of green and red and rose-pink and yellow, and the general ensemble took away from the effect of the new stained-glass window!"

"Oh, Mary Alice," remonstrated Miss King, although she was smiling at the girl's fun.

"Well, you must admit, Miss King, that the

colors were always a mixture, particularly since there are so many young people in the choir.”

All this time Joan had been sitting very quietly and very miserably at her place. “ I shall not be able to sing, then, I guess,” she said in a low voice.

“ Oh, Joan,” Mary Alice cried, turning to her, “ I noticed the other day that Boone’s Dry Goods Store had some dresses for sale. There were several plain, white-silk crêpes among them. You are so nice and slender that I am sure you can find one that will fit you.”

“ And the sale is still going on,” Miss King contributed. “ I purchased some things there to-day. We can go to town some time before Sunday and you can look at the dresses.”

Every one waited for Joan to speak, and she grew more uncomfortable and more miserable as the silence continued. Suddenly she knew that there were tears of wounded pride and unhappiness coming to her eyes, and she pushed back her chair, stood up, and blurted out, “ I—I can’t afford a dress.” Then she ran from the room.

She hardly drew a breath until she was upstairs and in her own cozy pink-and-white room. Once there, she flung herself on the bed and cried.

She knew that she had no reason to be quite so upset, but sitting at the supper-table with three complacent faces waiting for her to say that she would buy an expensive white frock when she had only a little pocket-money, had been a severe trial to Joan's pride. Then, too, the incident had made her feel so alone, without her father and mother to lean on, that she could not restrain the tears.

"Six months is a long, long time," she was sobbing to herself, and did not hear a gentle tap at her door.

Then Miss King opened the door quietly and sat down beside Joan. After a few minutes she spoke softly: "Joan, dear, Mary Alice and I are very sorry. We didn't realize that we were being thoughtless, and we didn't mean to hurt you ——"

Joan was so tired of being brave all by herself, and it was so nice to have some one patting her hair and sympathizing with her, that she blurted out a lot of things that she had meant never to tell any one.

"Daddy didn't have much money to give me, and he didn't want to borrow any money because he might not—not get well," she sobbed.

“Mother and I cleaned all of my things, and decided that I could get along until Christmas ——”

“And you can, Joan. Your frocks are lovely, and you have plenty of them. This little blue dress you have on is very becoming to you.”

“Do you like it?” Joan whispered, raising her head. “I—I didn’t know whether you did or not.”

“It’s very hard for me to say things like that, Joan; you will have to learn to read my thoughts. But I have liked all your neat little frocks, and it was very thoughtless of me to suggest that you buy a white dress, but I didn’t understand the situation. You see, your mother and I haven’t been corresponding very much, and I had forgotten—though I certainly should know”—Miss King’s voice became a little bitter—“that situations change with the years.”

Then she began to ask about the places Mrs. Kellogg was going to see in Europe, and soon Joan was telling her of her mother’s friends whom Miss King had known when she was in Mrs. Haddon’s School, and they were very chummy and comfy on the big bed.

“And to think that little red-headed Alice

Moore has twin boys entering Dartmouth this year!" Miss King exclaimed finally. "It doesn't seem possible. And Mary Erwin's daughter is going to Paris to study art. I remember how Mary used to entertain us with sketches of all our teachers!"

Miss King's voice faded away, and when she spoke again it was dreamy and low. "It all makes me seem dreadfully alone, Joan. It would be so nice if you would call me Auntie May. I know I'm rather grim and old to be the right sort of auntie, but I should love it, for it would make me feel that I belong to somebody. Once I thought I might be called Auntie May sometime, but I—was mistaken."

"Oh, Miss King, I should love to call you Auntie May," Joan whispered back, squeezing Miss King's hand happily. "I've been wrong to think that Miss King was cold and haughty," she lectured herself. "Why, she was just lonely with only a housekeeper for company."

But Miss King, after her last words, had suddenly changed. "We will see about it," she answered Joan brusquely, and stood up. "Mary Alice is waiting for you in the library." And she abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHIPPENDALE DESK

As the door closed behind Miss King, Joan gasped with surprise. The sudden change in the older woman was so great that the girl knew she had not imagined it, but she was at a loss to explain it.

“What did I do?” she moaned. “Or rather I didn’t do anything. I just said that I should love to call her Auntie May. She had asked me to, and she didn’t expect me to refuse, did she?”

For a long time Joan sat on the bed, puzzling over Miss King’s attitude. Having decided, to her own satisfaction, that it could not have been anything she said or did, she began to look further for motives. She remembered Miss King’s words, “Once I thought I might be called Auntie May sometime, but I—was mistaken.” She wondered if those words had any connection with Miss King’s remark at the supper-table about the gayety of Mary Alice reminding her of old times.

“It is something that happened long ago,” Joan decided, “but I’m sure that it doesn’t concern



me, and cannot be the reason that she doesn't like me."

Joan felt very miserable to think that Miss King did not like her. She was conscious of the fact that she was in Kansas because she had no other place to go, and if her mother's old friend didn't like her and didn't want her, her position was unpleasant indeed.

"I mustn't let Mother know," she finally concluded. "But what am I going to write to her to-morrow? She wants to hear all about her old chum, and—and how I like her. Well, I'll try to like her, although it is hard to like any one who doesn't like you or want you."

Then Joan got up to wash her face and brush her hair. She straightened the blue dress and went slowly down-stairs to the library. She hadn't seen Mary Alice since she had run from the table, and she dreaded the meeting, but Mary Alice, also a little embarrassed, ignored the affair altogether.

The two girls were alone in the library, and Mary Alice began immediately, "Joan, do you remember the books in the mill-room?"

Joan nodded, a little afraid to trust her voice just yet.

“Do you suppose they came from this library?”

“Why—I don’t know,” she answered vaguely, looking around the room.

The library was a gloomy room, because it had only one high south window, half hidden in the recesses of a deep window-seat, and further concealed by dark-red draperies. The only light came from a floor-lamp with a red-brown shade. The room felt crowded, too, because book-shelves and bookcases covered almost every inch of wall-space in a haphazard way, as if it had started out to be an ordinary room and the owner had added shelves and cases as he had accumulated books.

“Of course,” Joan said, “there could be an arm-load of books missing here and we should never know it.”

“That’s true enough,” Mary Alice admitted. “I guess that my idea wasn’t worth anything.”

Joan had wandered towards the window-seat and was now curled up on its comfortable pillows. Mary Alice joined her, and they pulled the draperies so that they were almost concealed in their little nook. There they sat, whispering softly, until, in a pause, they noticed the light of the room grow brighter as the door into the din-

ing-room opened cautiously. Startled, both girls shrank back farther into the shadow and peered towards the door.

It was opening slowly, but they could not see who was back of it until Mrs. Oldham stuck her head in, and, overlooking the girls in their dark corner, stepped quickly into the room. She stood there for a moment, listening intently, with her eyes raised towards the ceiling, as if she thought Miss King and the girls were up-stairs. Then she went to a desk against the side wall, entirely out of Joan's range of vision and nearly out of Mary Alice's.

Joan did not dare move, and she could only watch Mary Alice's face in an agony of suspense. Surprise was written there, and amazement. Then a baffled expression came, and Mary Alice leaned forward hastily, evidently unable to see something that interested her very much. But her haste was injudicious and she lost her balance, tumbling out of the window-seat with a dull thud.

Joan sprang out and looked towards Mrs. Oldham. The housekeeper was standing with her back to the desk, and her face was pale. She started to speak once or twice, and finally said, "What were you girls doing there?"



MARY ALICE LEANED FORWARD HASTILY.—Page 102.

Joan could think of nothing to say in reply, without admitting that they had been watching, and she was reluctant to do that.

“My, how you startled me,” Mary Alice cried, getting up from the floor and rubbing her elbow. “Joan and I didn’t hear any one come in.”

“No, we didn’t *hear* any one,” Joan admitted to herself; “but we *saw* some one.”

“You mean that you just looked up and saw me?” Mrs. Oldham asked eagerly, evidently anxious to know if the girls had seen her sneaking through the door.

But Mary Alice was saved answering by the appearance of Miss King at the hall entrance.

“Why, what’s the matter?” she exclaimed as she came into the room. “Are you—quarreling?”

“Oh, no,” Mary Alice answered. “I fell out of the window-seat and scared Mrs. Oldham and myself, too.”

“But you quite obviously are not hurt. Why should Mrs. Oldham be scared?”

“That wasn’t it,” interrupted the housekeeper. “I came in to look at the marketing-list I gave you after dinner, to be sure that I had put on—soap; and as I was looking in the desk for it, I

heard an awful crash behind me. I didn't know any one was in the room, and the girls had not heard me come in, so when Mary Alice saw me it startled her. That was the way it was."

"I should think you both had a right to be frightened," Miss King said genially, and went over to the desk and took a slip of paper from one of the big drawers. "No, there is no soap on this list," she said to Mrs. Oldham. "But I thought we got soap last Saturday?"

"Oh, that was *soap*," said the housekeeper, pausing in the dining-room door. "I really meant to say that I needed a package of soap-chips to wash out some colored pieces." And she departed hastily.

As Miss King stood by the desk, Mary Alice moved over to her side.

"What a fascinating old desk!" she said. "It must be very old, isn't it, Miss King?"

Joan drew close, too, and looked at the desk with interest. It was a huge affair of dark old mahogany, like so much of the furniture in the house. To Joan it seemed to be a combination desk and bookcase, for there were a number of drawers in the lower part, below a writing-desk that let down, while above were glassed-in book-shelves.

“It is very old,” Miss King agreed with Mary Alice. “My grandfather brought it from Charleston with him, and we think it came originally from England. In fact, my father was sure that it was a Chippendale bookcase-secretary, and he used to plan to bring a furniture expert here to see it, but he never did. He was very much attached to the old desk, though,” Miss King finished softly, “and even if it isn’t a Chippendale, it is very valuable.”

“I studied a little about furniture in home-decoration in high school,” Mary Alice said. “I was very much interested in it, but I never had a chance to see anything really antique.”

“Then you may want to see the inside of this desk,” Miss King answered, and let down the writing-desk. “Since I have my own desk upstairs, I never use this one, and it is quite empty. Besides, it was my father’s and—and it has never been used since his death.”

Joan peered over Mary Alice’s shoulder. She saw an intricate arrangement of little and big pigeonholes, and in the center a large one with a door. This door had a tiny gold lock on it, in which was a fat gold key.

“I use the drawer below for my household ac-

counts, but, as I said, I never use the desk itself," Miss King repeated and turned away.

"I am going to read a while," she said as she selected a book from a shelf. "If you girls care to read, you will find a great variety in these cases."

"Do you have a book on home-decoration?" asked Mary Alice as she still stood by the desk.

"Home-decoration? Why, no," laughed Miss King. "You must remember that this is not my library, but my father's. Only one or two shelves here contain books of mine. I'm sorry, but won't a volume of Dickens or Scott do instead?"

"It doesn't matter," Mary Alice replied. "Only I thought I would read about Chippendale desks."

"You are interested in furniture, aren't you? Well, if you will look in that farthest case, you will find a big book on furniture. Father used to read it and try to figure out what period his furniture belonged to. I remember now that he said that there was only one thing that made him doubt that this desk was a Chippendale, but that was when I was young and didn't care whether it was or not. Perhaps you can discover what that thing is."

“Maybe we can,” cried Mary Alice enthusiastically. “Come on, Joan.”

Soon they were again established in the window-seat, with the bulky old book lying on their knees.

Joan, however, was not interested in the book. “Do you think that Mrs. Oldham was telling the truth about the soap-*chips*?” she whispered to Mary Alice.

Mary Alice was engrossed in the book’s index and didn’t answer.

“Miss King believed it,” Joan went on. “But Miss King didn’t see her sneak through the door. Mary Alice, do answer me; I want to know if you think Mrs. Oldham was looking for the shopping-list.”

“I know she wasn’t,” Mary Alice whispered back.

“How do you know it?” cried Joan, almost speaking aloud in her amazement.

“Because she wasn’t opening the drawer that Miss King said she used for keeping her household accounts. She was letting down the desk.”

“Oh-h,” breathed Joan, and then added in disappointment, “But, Mary Alice, the desk was empty.”

Mary Alice had found the page that she wanted, and was reading rapidly.

“How dumb of me,” Joan went on. “She was looking for something that was in that pigeonhole with the locked door, wasn’t she, Mary Alice?”

“I don’t think so,” said Mary Alice, “because the lock on that door is evidently broken. When Miss King let the desk down the door jarred out and swung open a little, and I saw that it was empty, too.”

“Well, then, we are all wrong,” Joan concluded in disappointment. “No one would be secretive about opening an empty desk.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Mary Alice said triumphantly. “Read this!”

Joan bent over and followed Mary Alice’s finger, as she read:

“In the picture on page 153 you may see the two carved panels which conceal the customary secret receptacles of the Chippendale desks.”

“Secret receptacles,” whispered Joan, and she leaned out of the window-seat to look at the desk which was still open. “Oh, Mary Alice, there

they are: a little panel on each side of the locked pigeonhole! ”

“ I am going up-stairs, girls,” Miss King interrupted. “ I will see you before you go to bed.” And she left the room.

“ Mrs. Oldham was going to look in them for something,” cried Joan, and ran over to the desk. “ Or maybe she was going to put something in them. Did she have anything in her hand? ”

“ I didn’t see anything,” Mary Alice answered, studying the little carved panels that merely seemed a decorative touch in the intricate arrangement of drawers and compartments. “ Let’s look in these secret receptacles, shall we? We know that Miss King doesn’t have anything in them, and since Mrs. Oldham lied to Miss King, it may be something that Miss King should know.”

“ I think we ought to find out,” Joan said thoughtfully. She put out a tentative finger and poked one of the panels. “ But, Mary Alice, how do these things work? ”

“ Why,” said Mary Alice vaguely, “ there is a spring somewhere.”

“ Well, it’s well concealed,” said Joan, investigating the compartments around the panel,

“though of course it would be, since these are *secret* drawers.”

For several minutes the girls investigated the desk, but the empty pigeonholes baffled their efforts. They worked longest on the one with the door and lock, but it, too, was bare, and they were not able to manipulate the key or lock in any way that stirred the panels.

“How exasperating,” Joan finally exclaimed. “To know that the secret places are there, but not to know what is in them. Or, Mary Alice,” she cried suddenly, “I’ll bet that there aren’t any secret receptacles back of these little panels. Do you remember what Miss King said about her father having one reason to think that this desk was not a real Chippendale? Well, I’ll bet this is the very reason; the panels are not secret panels at all!”

“Oh, Joan,” Mary Alice wailed, “I’ll be so disappointed. But I won’t give up the idea yet,” she concluded stubbornly, “because if there isn’t a secret place, what was Mrs. Oldham looking for?”

“I don’t know,” said Joan abstractedly, bending close to inspect the carving on one of the panels. “Look, Mary Alice, there is a tiny crack

running right along by the edge of this design. If we could stick something through it, we might be able to tell if there was a space behind the panel.”

“Of course we could,” cried Mary Alice. “What shall we use, a knife?”

“But we can’t get a knife unless we go to the kitchen where Mrs. Oldham is. Let’s try a piece of paper.”

Before she had finished Mary Alice had torn a page of advertising from a magazine on the table. She tore a long narrow strip from this, and began to urge one end into the crack. For a minute it refused to go, and then slid easily through the crack until Mary Alice was holding to the very end of it.

She looked at Joan triumphantly. “There’s a secret place back of that panel. But how are we going to get to it?”

“I don’t know,” Joan began in perplexity, and then finished hastily: “Oh, Mary Alice, we are so foolish. Let’s read the book and find out how to open the panels.”

“The book?”

“Yes, the furniture book.” Joan closed the desk.

“Well, we are silly,” Mary Alice conceded, as she ran back to the window-seat and the bulky book.

Several minutes of searching, though, did not reveal any information, so the girls read the entire chapter on Chippendale furniture, word for word. At the end they looked up in exasperation.

“Outside of that one remark about ‘customary secret receptacles,’ there isn’t another word about them!” Joan cried.

“That spring is there, and we’ve got to find it,” Mary Alice said with determination. “Let’s look again.” Then she paused, as she heard steps in the dining-room.

Mrs. Oldham came in, and, Joan thought, looked at them very closely, but she only said, “If you girls will take your books to your rooms to read, I can lock up and go to bed.”

“Of course,” Mary Alice cried, jumping to her feet. “We are through reading for to-night anyway.” And she slipped the book into its shelf hastily.

“And we’ll help you lock up,” added Joan, resolved that Mrs. Oldham wasn’t to have another chance at the desk.

The housekeeper did not thank them for their services, but bustled around the room, doing several rather aimless things.

“We’ll wait and go up-stairs with you,” Mary Alice suggested with a significant look at Joan. “This old house is lonesome at night.”

Joan was sure that she saw a look of anger and annoyance in the housekeeper’s eyes, but she did not reply and only stalked out to the kitchen.

The girls followed, close on her heels, and stood silently watching her lock the kitchen door. Then the trio proceeded gravely and quietly up the back stairs.

CHAPTER IX

THE WHITE-SATIN GIRL

“ Good night, Mrs. Oldham.”

The housekeeper went into her room on the opposite side of the hall from Joan's with an indistinguishable murmur.

“ Don't close your door,” Mary Alice warned. “ Leave it partially open. After spending a good half-hour standing around in Mrs. Oldham's way, so that she could not get to the desk, I don't want her to have a chance to go back down-stairs now.”

“ You are so thoughtful,” said Joan, smiling, as she left the door slightly ajar.

Then the girls found their favorite places, Mary Alice on the bed and Joan on the rug, and looked at each other.

“ Well? ” Mary Alice finally said.

“ There isn't any doubt in my mind any more,” Joan stated. “ We have found a full-fledged mystery.”

“ It is a mystery, all right,” Mary Alice conceded,—“ every inch of one as far as I am concerned.”

Joan got up and took a sheet of stationery from her box. "There must be some connection between all these things," she said decisively. "Let's make a list, and then maybe we shall see something logical about it."

"Your idea is logical to start with."

Joan bent over the sheet of paper with her pencil poised. "We ought to have a name for our list," she decided. "Shall I head it 'The Deep, Dark Mystery'?"

"Too trite," Mary Alice instantly objected. "Let's call it the 'Mystery of the Mill.' No, that won't do, because we don't know how much of a part the mill is going to play."

"I have it," Joan cried. "Let's call it the 'Mystery of Scared Acres,' or, better yet, 'The Secret of Scared Acres.'"

"Write it down," Mary Alice commanded in a tone of satisfaction. "And now for the list. Put the things down just as they happened."

"Let's start out with the name of the ranch itself," Joan suggested.

For a half-hour the girls worked, adding, correcting, reorganizing, until Joan's last copy of the list lay before her.

THE SECRET OF SCARED ACRES

1. Scared Acres.
2. "Makin's of a Ghost."
3. Noises in the kitchen.
4. Locked door. Miss King says that it has been locked for a long time.
5. Rusty nail.
6. Dozen-eggs errand.
7. Hairpin on mill-stairs.
8. New board on mill-stairs.
9. Mill room.
 - a. Clean sheets.
 - b. Books.
 - c. Tray of dishes.
10. Miss King says that our gayety reminds her of old times.
11. Mrs. Oldham seems fussed about egg-errand.
12. Mrs. Oldham sneaks into library to desk.
 - a. Presents soap-chips as an excuse.
13. Secret panels of desk.

"Look!" Joan exclaimed as she read the list again. "See how many of these items are concerned with Mrs. Oldham! Six, seven, *c* of nine, eleven, twelve, and thirteen; and three and five happened in the kitchen."

“And the two items about Miss King both say something about a long time ago!” Mary Alice added, kneeling by Joan’s side.

Joan remembered another item that might have been included for Miss King,—the words “Once I thought I might be called Auntie May sometime.” That, too, seemed to point to the past, but she did not add it to the list, for she did not feel that she could talk to Mary Alice about her relation to Miss King.

“Also,” Mary Alice said, “Mrs. Oldham does not want Miss King to know what she is doing, but she evidently knows about Miss King’s ‘long ago,’ for Miss King talks in front of her.”

“But I believe that there is some connection,” Joan cried excitedly, “because when Miss King spoke to Mrs. Oldham about us girls reminding her of old times, Mrs. Oldham did not answer, but went to the kitchen. I was watching her, and I don’t believe that Mrs. Oldham wanted to talk to Miss King about those past days!”

“The whole thing baffles me,” Mary Alice concluded. “Do you suppose if we knew why the door to the music-room is locked, and who is living in the mill, and what is concealed in the desk, we should understand?”

“Surely we should understand most of it,” Joan said thoughtfully. “Let’s find out about those three things first.”

“That’s easy to say,” Mary Alice demurred. “But it will be a long time before I will venture up those mill-stairs again ——”

“Never,” interrupted Joan with a shudder.

“And Miss King is ever so nice, but she is so—so sort of reserved, that I don’t feel that I could ask her why she locked the door so long ago, could you, Joan?”

“No,” Joan answered soberly. “And we don’t want to ask Mrs. Oldham, because we don’t want her to think we suspect anything.”

“Well, that leaves the desk. And the desk, being an inanimate thing, I am neither afraid of it nor awed by it. I think we may try to find out what is in those secret panels with some hope of success.”

“That, then, is our first aim,” Joan granted. “When shall we start?”

“The first chance we get in the morning.”

At that moment there was a knock at the door. The girls looked at each other in surprise, and then Joan called, “Come in.”

Miss King entered quietly, and the girls

scrambled hastily to their feet. Her appearance was so unexpected that neither of them could think of a thing to say, and Miss King herself did not speak. She was carrying a long box under her arm, and she walked over to the table and put it down carefully. The box was yellow with the color of years, and the black ribbon that tied it fell apart when Miss King attempted to undo the knots.

Joan grew more embarrassed as the minutes passed. She was in her own room, and she felt that courtesy demanded that she should greet Miss King in some way, but she could only remember their last meeting in this room, and she did not know whether to call her guest Miss King or Auntie May. Miss King did not look so cold and stern now, for there was a dreamy expression in her eyes and her lips were softer, but still Joan could not forget her abrupt, brusque exit from the same room several hours earlier.

“How I like to be around when packages are opened,” she finally managed to say, and then instantly regretted the remark because it sounded so foolish.

“This one hasn’t been opened for a long time,” Miss King answered. “But it contains a white

dress—a white dress that perhaps we can fix for you to wear to church.”

“Oh, how lovely, Miss—Auntie—Miss King,” Joan stammered.

Miss King took off the lid and stood looking silently into the box until the girls began to think that she had forgotten them. Finally, with a long breath, she drew forth a heavy brocaded-satin dress. It was a dress that just fitted into the pink-and-white room, and seemed to say, as it poised gracefully and gayly when Miss King held it up, “This is my room; this is where I belong.”

“What a lovely dress,” Joan sighed in ecstasy as she looked at the puffy “leg-of-mutton” sleeves, the tiny waist, and the full gored skirt. She reached out her hand to touch the cobwebby lace that outlined the neck. Then suddenly she drew back as she remembered what Miss King had said about the dress. Under her miserable gaze it lost its fairly-like quality and became just a piece of heavy rich satin, slightly yellowed, that was not at all suitable for a young girl. The pert flounces of the skirt were just so many narrow gores that could not possibly be made into a straight one-piece dress for the modern Joan.

Her thoughts must have been mirrored in her face, for suddenly she became conscious that Miss King and Mary Alice were watching her.

“No, it won’t do,” Miss King said. “I can see that now, but I thought at first that we could make it over into a little dress to wear just for the church services.” She spoke wistfully, and then added decisively, “I had forgotten just what this dress was like, but I realize now that it belongs to another generation and is not at all suitable for Joan.”

She put the dress back into its box and turned to leave the room, pausing only long enough to say abruptly, “By the way, Joan, you will find a flash-light in the table-drawer. The electricity from Fame is not very dependable, and if there is a storm it is sure to go out.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss King,” Joan whispered, as Miss King went out, closing the door softly behind her.

Joan continued to stand in the middle of the floor, looking at the closed door. She was miserably uncomfortable. The dress had not been at all suitable for her, but she had been very thoughtless to let Miss King read her mind. And she had been very ungrateful, too. Why, she re-

membered with a gasp, she had not even thanked Miss King for offering her the dress!

Joan took a few steps toward the door, wanting to run after Miss King and whisper how much she appreciated the fact that she had been willing to part with a cherished dress, but the lack of understanding between them, and the fear of cold words from Miss King, held her back. She wavered, paused, and then stood still.

Finally Mary Alice interrupted her thoughts by saying dreamily, "The dress had been a wedding-dress, hadn't it?"

"Had it?" Joan was glad of any diversion that would take her thoughts away from herself. "It was white and satin, but I suppose all white-satin dresses aren't wedding-dresses."

"Of course not," Mary Alice agreed. "But there was a white-lace veil and two tiny white-satin slippers in the box. Can't you imagine a slender, dark-haired girl wearing that lovely dress?"

"But I don't believe that Miss King's hair was ever black, and we know that she was never married," Joan objected.

Mary Alice sighed. "Oh, well, if you will be literal! Still, that was a wedding-dress. What

do you suppose happened that she never got married after all? ”

“ In my opinion,” Joan answered crossly, because she still felt uncomfortable over the dress, “ in my opinion, that dress was never intended for Miss King. Girls wore their dresses quite long twenty-five years ago, when Miss King was young, and that dress would be about the right length on some one my height, not some one as tall as Miss King.”

“ I never thought of that,” Mary Alice pondered.

“ I know,” Joan cried, as she drew the list from her pocket where she had placed it at Miss King’s entrance. “ The girl who wore this dress belongs to the ‘ long-ago ’ items on this list. She it was who made this house gay and—and, Mary Alice, there is something else that I haven’t told you. But when Miss King came up to my room after—after supper, she said once she had expected to be called ‘ Auntie May.’ See how that fits in! The girl was going to get married in the white-satin frock, and Miss King had hoped that the girl’s children would call her aunt; but she didn’t get married, and Miss King was never ‘ Auntie May.’ ”

“The white-satin girl must have been Miss King’s sister, then,” Mary Alice decided. “Did you know that Miss King had a sister?”

“Why, no, I’m sure she didn’t,” Joan gasped. “Mother never mentioned one, at least.”

“Moreover, where is the girl now? I don’t believe that your theory is right.”

“Perhaps she died, unexpectedly, on the eve of her marriage,” Joan defended her idea. “That would fit in with Judd’s remarks about this place having the ‘makin’s of a ghost.’”

“Yes, it would,” admitted Mary Alice. “Maybe you are right after all.”

“No, I don’t believe I am,” Joan suddenly disagreed with her own theory. “I don’t believe that she died. You remember Miss King speaking about being reminded of other times by us girls, and also that the piano hadn’t been touched for many years?”

“But that seems to point directly to the white-satin girl being dead.”

“No, you didn’t see her face. It got hard and dreadfully cold and proud. Surely, if the white-satin girl is dead, she wouldn’t act that way.”

“Of course she wouldn’t,” Mary Alice acquiesced. “And we are probably all wrong, anyway.”

Moreover, it doesn't help explain the person in the mill."

"Or the rusty nail."

"Or Mrs. Oldham."

"And let's go to bed," Joan ended the colloquy.

"To-morrow we will investigate further."

CHAPTER X

CONSUELO MAY OF SANTIAGO, CHILE

“MARY ALICE, wake up!”

“No, no.”

“Mary Alice, you must wake up.” Joan was determined, and she accompanied her words by a vigorous shake.

“Oh, all right.” Sleepily Mary Alice sat up and rubbed her eyes. She looked around vaguely and blinked at the pale light outside the window. “Why, Joan,” she cried indignantly, “it’s hardly daylight yet. What do you mean by waking me up?” She flounced back on the bed and shut her eyes tightly.

“But listen to me, Mary Alice,” Joan begged. “I’ve been thinking about the secret drawers of the desk. Mrs. Oldham can open them when she goes down to get breakfast.”

Mary Alice opened one eye, but she did not condescend to answer.

“And then if we ever find out how to get into them, there won’t be anything there.”

“You aren’t suggesting that we get up and go

down-stairs and help get breakfast, are you?" Mary Alice moaned. "Because if you are, you might as well go back to bed. After the way we haunted her last night, Mrs. Oldham would suspect us the very first thing."

"No," laughed Joan. "I am suggesting that we get up and play an early-morning game of tennis."

"Tennis! How is that going to keep Mrs. Oldham out of the desk? I really think, Joan, that the early-morning air affects your mind."

"Don't you know, Mary Alice, that one end of the net is fastened to the library window-shutter? No one can come into the library without our knowing it."

"And no one will suspect a thing if we want to play tennis early," Mary Alice agreed, as she scrambled out of bed. "Joan, I withdraw all the cruel, heartless things I have said to you. You are a master mind! I'll beat you dressing."

In a few minutes the girls had gone silently down the back stairs and let themselves out the back door. The morning air was fresh and soft, and the birds kept up a twittering, happy accompaniment.

"This idea of a tennis game isn't so bad all by

itself," Mary Alice admitted as she returned one of Joan's "cut" balls.

Very soon they heard Mrs. Oldham in the kitchen, and saw her glance at them from the window. After that Mary Alice played close to the library.

Once when she and Joan were together at the net she whispered, "No one has been in the library since we have been out here. Mrs. Oldham either noticed that we could see into the library, or she is in no hurry to get to the desk."

Sometime later Miss King came to the door and called them to breakfast. The crisp bacon and slightly-browned omelet tasted so good to the girls after their morning exercise that Joan said she thought Kansas eggs and bacon were better than the eggs and bacon of New York.

"That isn't it," Mary Alice said. "It's because you had a hand in getting these eggs, I imagine. Aren't these some we got from Mrs. Parrott's yesterday, Mrs. Oldham?"

"Why, I suppose so."

"Oh, no, they couldn't be, though. I forgot that you wanted those to bake a cake," Mary Alice went on in an innocent voice.

Mrs. Oldham hurriedly picked up the meat-

platter and went to the stove for more bacon. Mary Alice grinned slyly at Joan.

Then breakfast was over, and Miss King was saying: "Oh, Joan, I have some mail for you. I had forgotten all about it. When I was in town yesterday I went by the post-office, thinking perhaps you might have a letter, and then I forgot to give them to you."

She took six identical little white envelopes from the kitchen-cabinet and handed them to Joan.

"Oh, they're from the girls," Joan cried excitedly. "Isn't it darling of them?" She looked at each one, recognizing the handwriting. "It's Anne's stationery; I just know they were all at her home for a slumber-party."

She looked up to find Miss King and Mary Alice smiling at her enthusiasm.

"Why don't you use the Chippendale desk you girls like so well, to answer your letters, Joan," Miss King suggested. "I am sorry that I do not have a desk to put in your room."

"I'd love to answer my letters from your desk," Joan said. "I'll put at the top of each one:

AT THE CHIPPENDALE DESK,
SCARED ACRES, KANSAS.

Doesn't that sound impressive and ——” Joan caught her words. She had started to say “mysterious,” but she substituted “ —— and interesting? ”

“ She won't want to use the desk until I get it cleaned up,” Mrs. Oldham interrupted harshly.

“ Cleaned up? ” Miss King questioned.

“ It's dusty. I haven't had time to clean the library this week.”

“ Joan can dust it herself,” Miss King said, “ if she wants to use it.”

“ Of course I can,” Joan cried, and took a dust-cloth from the holder.

She and Mary Alice fled to the library and looked at each other radiantly.

“ What luck,” Mary Alice whispered. “ We have the desk to ourselves for an hour anyway. If we can't find the combination to the secret drawers in that time, we are poor searchers.”

“ Will you run up to my room and bring my stationery and fountain-pen? ” Joan asked. “ I don't want to leave the desk alone for an instant, for fear Mrs. Oldham will dart in.”

Mary Alice came flying back in a few minutes, and Joan arranged her writing-materials and letters about the desk.

“The girls’ letters are numbered on the back, so I’m only going to read one of them a day,” Joan decided, as she opened the first one.

“And I’ll be hunting while you read it,” Mary Alice agreed, as she began a study of the desk.

The letter was full of the doings of Joan’s friends, but it did not cause her the unhappiness she had expected to feel when she left New York. In fact, the story of the slumber-party at Anne’s concerned itself mostly with the people in the apartment above rapping on the heat-pipes for the girls to be quiet, and sounded decidedly ordinary in comparison with the events that had taken place at Scared Acres in her two days there. Joan found herself glancing up repeatedly, to watch the progress of Mary Alice’s search.

“Joan, I simply can’t find the spring to open these drawers,” Mary Alice finally said, and Joan shoved her letters aside.

“We’ll have to find it now,” she declared. “We’ll never have another chance like this.”

“It’s easy enough to say ‘have to,’” Mary Alice sighed.

Joan leaned back in her chair and stared determinedly at the desk. “You’ve poked and pulled everything,” she said. “Now I’m going to

sit and look at it, and maybe I shall see what you have missed."

There was quiet in the library for a few minutes, and then Joan leaned forward suddenly.

"Look, Mary Alice," she pointed to the inch-thick board which formed the bottom of the row of pigeonholes that included the locked one and the two panels. "None of the other boards is so thick. There must be a reason for this one being so much wider, and the reason is ——"

"—— that it conceals the springs," finished Mary Alice, as she leaned close to the desk. "And see, Joan, the board is not solid under this pigeonhole!"

Joan excitedly traced with her finger the tiny groove that showed that the bottom of the pigeonhole was composed of two boards. She laid her hand flat on the bottom, and gently urged the top board forward. For a minute it resisted, and then slid slowly forward while the girls watched breathlessly. When the false bottom was nearly out, it would move no farther, and they transferred their attention to the two springs that lay in the hollowed-out space of the thicker board.

"You found them," Mary Alice cried. "You've got to press them."

Joan put her hand in cautiously and pressed the left spring. Slowly, grumblingly, the left-hand panel fell forward. It was warped from years of disuse, but finally it stood open, and the girls peered breathlessly into the narrow drawer that was revealed. It was empty! Mary Alice blew into it, and a cloud of dust came out and nearly choked her.

“Maybe,” she giggled in spite of her disappointment, “maybe this was what Mrs. Oldham meant when she said that the desk needed dusting.”

“It’s just too exasperating,” Joan cried, wrinkling her nose at the empty drawer. “After all, though, what did we expect to find?” she sighed resignedly.

“Why, I expected nothing less than the jewelry of a princess,” Mary Alice stated. “But why don’t you open the other drawer before you despair?”

In spite of her first disappointment Joan was breathless as the second drawer came open. And then she found herself staring in awe at a paper covered with dust, and looking almost parchment-like from age that had yellowed it.

“What can it be?” she gasped.

“ I don’t know,” Mary Alice answered solemnly. “ I just hope, though, that it doesn’t turn out to be a bill from the iceman that has got tucked away here.”

“ I don’t believe it has been touched for years,” Joan said as she reached in and drew out the folded paper. “ Surely it has taken years for all this dust to get into these secret drawers.”

Her fingers were trembling a little with excitement, and as she handed the paper to Mary Alice a small photograph dropped out. Mary Alice picked it up and saw a picture of a pretty little girl with black hair and laughing eyes. She must have been about two years old, and was dressed in quaint clothes that looked both old-fashioned and foreign.

The words “ Consuelo May ” were written across it in a sprawling handwriting, and when the girls bent to read the photographer’s mark, they found a strange foreign name, and the address, Santiago.

“ Santiago! Why, that’s in Chile! ” breathed Mary Alice. “ What does it mean? ”

“ Maybe the paper will tell,” Joan answered, and spread it out carefully. It was a piece of plain paper, and there wasn’t a mark on it.

As they turned the picture and paper over and over in an effort to find some additional information they heard some one come into the dining-room from the kitchen. Mary Alice stuck the things into the secret drawer and hastily closed it, and shoved in the false bottom. Joan caught up her fountain pen and sat down at the desk in a writing pose, just as Mrs. Oldham came in the door.

Joan was sure that the housekeeper looked at them very closely, and she furtively scanned the desk, to see if they had left any telltale signs of their discovery, but the old desk looked placid and undisturbed, and she was reassured.

“Miss King said when you had finished with your letters that she wants both of you to come to her room,” Mrs. Oldham stated.

“Oh, thank you,” Joan answered. She sat at the desk while Mrs. Oldham bustled around, straightening up the library-table and rearranging the chairs.

In a few minutes it became apparent that the housekeeper did not intend to leave the room until they did; so Joan reluctantly shut up her stationery-box and closed the desk, and arm in arm with Mary Alice went out of the door.

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE BEN IS EMPHATIC

THE girls ran hastily up the stairs and knocked at Miss King's door. She called to them to come in, and they found her dusting a very plain, severe room.

"I just happened to think of the whitewash you used to make your tennis-court," she said as she motioned to the girls to sit down.

"Oh," murmured Joan in dismay.

"It doesn't matter about the whitewash," Miss King hastened to reassure her. "But I think you should make your peace with Uncle Ben before he misses it."

This time it was Mary Alice who looked alarmed, and Joan remembered her vivid description of Uncle Ben's contempt of the automobile. "Maybe he will resent our use of his whitewash," she whispered to Mary Alice, "just as he resented the automobile supplanting his team."

"He won't care," Miss King was speaking. "But Uncle Ben is getting old, and he is a little childish and finicky about his jobs around the

place. You will find him living in a shack out by the stables."

"Has he always been with you?" Joan asked, interested in a servant who stayed a lifetime; her friends in New York were always getting a new one.

"Yes, Uncle Ben has always been with us. His father and mother came from Charleston with Grandfather King when Ben was a baby."

"Were his parents slaves?"

"Not exactly." Miss King smiled at Joan's interest. "Grandfather King came from a slaveholding family, but he did not fully believe in slavery. He paid small wages to the negroes that worked for him, and they were free to leave. But in those days the free negro had an unpleasant life in most cases, and the ones that left my grandfather generally returned."

"And they came to Kansas with him?"

"A few of those that had been in his employ for a long time came."

"Did your grandfather come here to this ranch the first thing?" Mary Alice wanted to know.

"As soon as he had looked around a little, he located here. Of course the original house was not as large as this one, and many of the stables and

implement-sheds and negro-quarters that clutter up the place were added later."

"That must have been about Civil War times?" Mary Alice went on, her face screwed up as she made a mental calculation with some remembered history dates.

"Yes. And it was very hard for the people here to understand my grandfather's attitude towards the negroes he had with him, and there was a lot of misunderstanding and trouble over them. But I must get on with my work," Miss King broke off. "There is a basket of cookies on the kitchen-table. Will you take them to Uncle Ben?"

The girls skipped down the stairs, found the cookies, and started out the back door. They walked slowly towards a cluster of little buildings grouped around the rambling old barn.

"Well," said Mary Alice after a pause, "we have found the secret of the secret panels. Do you feel that we know any more than we did before?"

"I hardly know," Joan replied. "Do you think Consuelo May is the white-satin girl?"

"I think she may be," Mary Alice granted. "But why does Mrs. Oldham want to get the

picture out of the desk, when it has obviously been there for years?"

"Maybe she had just discovered the panels herself."

"No, I don't think so. I believe she knew what was in those secret drawers, and for some reason wanted it out, and didn't want Miss King to know about it."

"I do wish the picture of Consuelo May had been a grown-up picture," sighed Joan. "I want to see her at the time she wore the wedding-dress."

By this time the girls had reached the group of buildings. Many of the sheds had fallen into disuse, and there were some decaying foundations where a few had been moved away. Only one showed any semblance of life, and since it had smoke drifting from the chimney, the girls decided that Uncle Ben lived there. They opened the gate in the little whitewashed fence that surrounded the shack and walked up the path. Mary Alice rapped on the door loudly, explaining that Uncle Ben was a little deaf.

There was a shuffling inside and a fumbling with the latch; then Uncle Ben opened the door. He was a stooped and wizened little old man,

with thin gray kinks over his head, a black wrinkled face, and eyes that still rolled white and clear. He was wearing a clean pair of blue overalls and a red calico shirt with a huge patch on each elbow, and held a broom in his hand.

He blinked at the sunshine, peered at his visitors for a minute, and then cackled in a shrill voice, "Why, it's Mis' Mary."

"I'm glad you remember me," Mary Alice spoke loudly and distinctly. "And this is Joan Kellogg from New York. She is visiting Miss King, and will be here for several months, so she wants to get acquainted. But perhaps Miss King told you that she was coming?"

"Jone Kellogg," the old man said, beaming at Joan. "I sho' has heerd your last name a lot, honey. A long time ago, when Mister Phil King was alive, and Mis' May was in New York goin' to that school, Mr. King he useter talk to me sometimes. When he was eatin' a lonely Thanksgiving dinner—I was his butler then—he'd jes' pick at his food and say to me 'She's eatin' turkey with the Kelloggs now.' Or on Christmas Eve he'd look at his big gold watch and say, 'She's probably all dressed for the Kelloggs' Christmas dance, Ben.'"

Phil King, Joan knew, was the morose, silent man her mother had said once visited Miss King in New York. He didn't sound morose now, but just lonely and sad, and Joan wondered if it had always been the lot of the Kings to be alone in the world.

"Here I be, leavin' you-all standin' on my doorstep," Uncle Ben exclaimed. "I'll jes' bring you two chairs and set them here by my climbin' rose-bush."

"That will be lovely," Mary Alice answered; "and take these cookies that Miss King sent you."

Uncle Ben pattered around, bringing out the chairs and getting them in just the right place under the roses. Then he dusted them carefully, even the rungs, and at last motioned for the girls to sit down.

"Would you missies mind waitin' jes' a minute while I finish my sweepin'?" he asked, his eyes twinkling. "I am 'fraid I'll forget jes' how far I got my dust."

"And you'd hate to sweep some that you had already swept," Mary Alice finished for him. "Uncle Ben, you are a sweeper after my own style!"

Uncle Ben went away chuckling, and the girls exchanged merry smiles.

As Joan sat up stiffly in the erect little chair, she glanced around Uncle Ben's domain. When he had opened the door to them, she had had a glimpse of a clean, neat cabin, and now the outside of his house confirmed the impression. The low picket fence surrounding the house was in good condition, and the few flowers and vegetables were in orderly beds. Not a dandelion stuck its impudent yellow face through the blue grass; not a weed crowded the bright-colored hollyhocks or elbowed the onions. Joan easily concluded that the house and yard were the pride of the old negro's life.

In a few minutes Uncle Ben came out of the house, carefully closing the door behind him, and sweeping off the flat rock that served as a porch or step before the door. He did not stop with the rock, though, but, to Joan's surprise, swept the hard-dirt path that led down to the gate, making the twigs and dust fly to both sides with his energetic broom.

"Uncle Ben," began Mary Alice as he came back after setting the broom carefully against a tree, "we came down to tell you that we used

some of your whitewash to make ourselves a tennis-court. I hope you don't mind. We—we have been afraid that you might be a little mad at us for using it without asking you."

"Now, don't you worry a minute, missies," replied Uncle Ben, smiling at them both.

"If you will tell us how," Joan added quickly, "we will mix some to take the place of what we used."

"You don't want to get your nice white hands all messy," the old negro chuckled. "I don't have much to do, and I can soon mix up some more. The hens can jes' wait a day or two to get their houses painted."

"That's awfully nice of you," Mary Alice went on engagingly. "Do you do all the work around here yourself?"

"There ain't much work any more; not like it was in the old days, when Mister Phil King and his daddy was runnin' the place. Not that I'm complainin'," he added hastily. "But Scared Acres was a big farm once, and there was a lot goin' on all the time."

"Bigger than it is now?" cried Joan. "Why, what happened to it?"

"It jes' got sold, little by little. Now there

ain't nothin' left but the house and the orchard and a little grazin' for our cows and horse. The big pastures over there," Uncle Ben waved his hand to the west, "Miss King rents to a cattleman down in Fame. But there was big doin's here when Mister Phil and Miss King was raisin' cattle for market."

Uncle Ben paused, and his wrinkled old face seemed to light up with the memory of the "big doin's" of other days.

Finally Mary Alice recalled him by asking, "Did you say that you were Mr. King's butler in those days?"

"Yes'm. I was always small, and never had to do much heavy farm work, but I worked in the house, takin' care of Mister Phil's clothes when he was a young man, and later I waited on him, too. But when Mister Phil got sick Miss King got a housekeeper and—and now I don't do nothin' but take care of the cows and chickens." The old man's voice quavered a little; evidently he felt chagrined at his fall from prestige, but he went on honestly: "You see, I'm not much good any more, but I've always worked for the Kings, and they jes' think of me as one of the fam'ly. Jes' one of the fam'ly," Uncle Ben finished, visibly

expanding with pride over his long régime with the Kings.

“And there isn’t any hired man but you?” Mary Alice persisted; and Joan realized that she was thinking of the room in the old mill, and searching for some explanation of its occupant.

“I’m the only man ’round the place, but I’m not a hired man,” Uncle Ben answered, obviously hurt.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Uncle Ben,” Mary Alice exclaimed contritely. “I wasn’t really thinking of you as a hired man, but I didn’t know what else to call you.”

“Of course, Mis’ King takes care of me, and pays me a sal’ry, but I’m not a hired man; I’m one of the fam’ly,” the old man insisted, mumbling a little.

To divert his attention Joan quickly asked a question she had been pondering for some minutes, “You’ve been with the Kings so long that you must have known Consuelo—Consuelo May?”

“What dat you say?” he muttered quickly, peering at her from under his crinkly gray brows. “What you know ’bout her?” he went on, almost threateningly.

“Why—why nothing,” Joan stammered, surprised at the instant response her chance remark had brought. “That is, I just saw her picture.”

“Mis’ King didn’t show it to you?” he asked in amazement.

“No,” Mary Alice interrupted. “We found it in an old desk.”

“Well, let me tell you, missies,” the old man whispered, mopping his face with a blue-ban-danna handkerchief, “don’t you eber say anything to Mis’ King ’bout her. It’s always been my idea that there wouldn’t never have been any trouble at Scared Acres if it hadn’t been for that black-haired witch, but of course I never told nobody what I thought.”

“But—what about her?” Joan cried, trying not to seem too eager.

“You’re better off without knowin’ nothing ’bout her.” Uncle Ben shook his head decisively; and the girls knew that he was not going to tell them about Consuelo.

“And you think we had better not say anything to Miss King about her?” Mary Alice asked.

“No, no, no,” he stammered excitedly. “Don’t mention that black-haired witch’s name! If it hadn’t been for her, I would still be drivin’ Mis’

King to town when she wants to go, 'stead of her foolin' with that new-fangled automobile. You see, Mis' King she give us all orders never to mention her name again, or to tell any one 'bout her, and one day when I was drivin' Mis' King home from town I forgot. Mis' King got whiter and madder all the way home, and when she got out of the carriage she says, 'Ben, you are not to drive for me any more.' And then for a while she drove her own horse, and for a long time she never spoke to me like one of the fam'ly, but ordered me around like she did the servants. She's proud, Mis' King is, awful proud, and it was two or three years 'fore she forgot that I disobeyed her."

"But ——" Mary Alice began, when Uncle Ben interrupted:

"I've been talkin' too much. I better go mend the barn fence," he muttered, turning away.

"But please," Joan cried, dismayed that he wasn't going to tell them about Consuelo, "but please, Uncle Ben, we would love to hear more about Consuelo and what she did."

"You forget that I eber said anything 'bout her," the old man insisted, looking at her angrily. "You ought to be ashamed to come 'round here

quizzin' and makin' an old man forget his promise."

Joan was frightened by his vehemence. "I'm sorry, Uncle Ben, we—we didn't mean ——"

"All right, all right," he broke in testily. "But mind what I'm tellin' you, missies, you better not mention her in front of Mis' King."

He bustled away towards the barn, leaving the girls overwhelmed with amazement and curiosity.

"There was a Consuelo and her hair was black," breathed Mary Alice. "She must have been lovely in that gorgeous wedding-dress and soft veil."

"Uncle Ben called her a black-haired witch," Joan said. "Maybe she wasn't pretty."

"Oh, she must have been," Mary Alice cried. "I'm going to think of her as pretty, anyway," she finished defiantly.

"So am I," agreed Joan. "But what do you suppose she did that turned every one against her?"

"I can't imagine," Mary Alice answered, as they walked slowly to the house. "But we evidently will have to find out for ourselves. Uncle Ben won't tell us, and he says Miss King will be angry if we so much as mention Consuelo's name.

And we don't want to ask Mrs. Oldham, because we don't want her ever to know that we have heard of Consuelo."

"How are we going to find out?" Joan cried. "I do so want to know all about her. Somehow I can't feel about her as every one else here does."

"Neither can I," agreed Mary Alice. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could learn her story, and find that she was innocent of whatever people think she had done?"

"Oh, wonderful," breathed Joan. "And yet, after all these years," she added regretfully, "I doubt if there is anything new to be learned about Consuelo and her troubles."

"Well, at least there is plenty to be learned about this place," Mary Alice decided. "There is the person in the mill; we haven't found out a thing about him. I don't see, though, how he can be connected with Consuelo."

"I don't, either, but let's add our newest information to our list, and aim next to discover something about the person in the mill."

CHAPTER XII

THE LIBRARY VISITOR

THE girls hurried back to the house, intent on adding to their list headed "The Secret of Scared Acres." They dashed into the kitchen, through the dining-room, and up the front stairs without seeing any one. Once in Joan's room, they selected the facts about the picture of Consuelo and the information gained from Uncle Ben, and decided that the morning had been devoted to the "long-time-ago" group of events.

"Now it's time to give some attention to the present situation," Mary Alice exclaimed.

"As if what we decide will make any difference in what happens," Joan laughed.

"Still, Joan, we went down-stairs this morning with the intention of discovering the secret panels, and we did, and found out a lot more about what they revealed."

"All right. Our aim now is Mrs. Oldham and the mill-person. Have you noticed, Mary Alice, that Mrs. Oldham seems to be the connecting link between the 'long-time-ago' part of our list

and the present part? At least she is concerned with both."

"So she is," Mary Alice commented. "I think that is a good observation, Joan; it may help us a lot sometime."

"Why don't you add," Joan rejoined, "that it doesn't help much now?"

"I really wouldn't say such a thing about one of your thoughts," Mary Alice grinned, "but I'm glad that you noticed it yourself."

After a little more banter the girls went down the front stairs. Once at the foot, they decided they should go first to the kitchen, since they were now in pursuit of Mrs. Oldham. The kitchen was empty, though, and they drifted through the dining-room towards the library.

Joan was in advance of Mary Alice, and just as she started to open the door she distinctly heard some one say, "To-night at twelve." She drew back her hand in surprise, and looked at her friend. The latter was standing in the middle of the dining-room with amazement written on her face. It was several minutes before Joan could decide whether to knock, or merely to walk in, as they always did, and finally Mary Alice opened the door.

Miss King was standing by the table in the middle of the room, and she looked up quickly as they came in. She seemed startled by their entrance, and cleared her throat a little before she asked, "You must have had a long visit with Uncle Ben?"

"We did stay quite a while," Mary Alice answered. "He was telling us about his life spent working for the Kings."

"You were gone a long time, if you just got back," Miss King said again.

"We have been back for some time," Joan answered. "We have been up-stairs." Joan felt very uncomfortable, because she knew that Miss King wanted to know how much of her conversation they had overheard, but did not want to ask them. She tried to find words to tell her, and stammered, "We just came down-stairs ——"

She saw the relief that came into Miss King's face, and saw that she thought the girls had heard nothing. Then Joan felt more uncomfortable, because she did not want to deceive Miss King. She tried to think of a casual way to add, "And we heard you say, 'To-night at twelve' as we came in," but the words sounded harsh and abrupt and suspicious.

While she was still debating, Miss King spoke abruptly: "I am going to drive Mrs. Oldham to her sister's. The sister is ill, and Mrs. Oldham wants to do some baking for her and clean up the house. I told her last night to limit her bundles and bags, because I should like to take you girls along. But now that I think it over, I believe, if you don't mind, that I will leave you here."

"That is all right, Miss King," Mary Alice answered.

"I hate to be gone so much when Joan has just arrived," Miss King went on, "but this will be a hot, dusty trip and you probably wouldn't enjoy it, anyway. Moreover, as I seldom go into that neighborhood, I should like to take the opportunity to call on an old friend of mine who is an invalid. I don't want to leave you sitting in the car, and I prefer not to take you into the sick-room. Are you sure that you can occupy yourselves here?"

"Oh, yes," answered Mary Alice. "Don't worry about us, Miss King. We will read for a while, and then perhaps we will play tennis."

"And you are sure that you won't be bored if you are left alone here so much?" Miss King asked Joan.

"I'm sure we'll not," Joan answered, just as Mrs. Oldham opened the door and said briefly: "I'm ready, Miss King." Her quick eyes glanced at Joan and Mary Alice. "Aren't you girls ready yet?" she asked, and her voice was censorious.

"The girls aren't going," Miss King replied.

"They aren't going?" Mrs. Oldham cried in dismay. Then she bit her lips in an effort to regain her self-control. She could not, however, keep from adding accusingly, "But you said last night that they were."

Miss King looked surprised and displeased at Mrs. Oldham's words.

"I have changed my mind," she said coldly, and dismissed the subject by concluding, "If you want to take your sister some canned peaches, there will be room in the back of the car now."

Before she had finished speaking Mrs. Oldham was half-way towards the kitchen, and Miss King, saying good-by to the girls, followed.

"Bored?" ejaculated Mary Alice, sinking into a comfortable chair. "We are anything but bored."

"Whom do you suppose Miss King was talking to when we came in?" Joan whispered. "And where did they go?"

“You goose,” Mary Alice laughed, after a moment of surprise, “she was talking over the telephone, of course.”

“Oh,” Joan said blankly, following Mary Alice’s gesture until she saw a telephone hung on one end of a bookcase. “I never thought of the ’phone.”

“I’m going to see if it is a party line,” Mary Alice continued, going over to the telephone and giving the bell a long, vigorous ring, followed by two short ones. After a minute she asked sweetly: “Operator, can you tell me the time, please? Oh, thank you.”

“It’s a private line,” she added, coming back and perching on a chair. “At least somebody on a party line always has a long and two shorts for a ring, but here the operator answered me.”

“I don’t see what you mean.” Joan was mystified by phrases she had never heard before.

“In Kansas,” Mary Alice explained laughingly, “eight or nine country ’phones will be on one line. Each has a different ring, so that you can talk to any one else on the same line by ringing their signal, without going through the central office. And of course on that sort of line the operator is one ring.”

“ Oh, yes,” Joan replied vaguely. “ But what difference does it make whether this 'phone is a party line or not? ”

“ Just this—out here in the country you do not talk secrets over a party line, because some one is sure to be listening in.”

“ And you think Miss King was talking secrets? ”

“ Don't you? ”

“ I'm afraid so. 'To-night at twelve' doesn't sound like customary conversation. And—and I think she was disturbed for fear that we had heard her when we came in.” Joan was reluctant to think that Miss King was trying to conceal something from them; it made any chance of friendship between them seem very, very remote.

“ Do you think,” she went on earnestly, “ that we should not try to find out the mystery about this place, now? ”

“ You mean ——? ”

“ Well, if Miss King is mixed up with it, I suppose we should not try to find out anything that she doesn't want us to know,” Joan explained regretfully, since she hated the idea of not investigating the mystery so far as they could.

“ I suppose we shouldn't,” Mary Alice agreed

mournfully. "Of course," she added hopefully, "we are not sure that she is connected with everything that has happened."

Puzzling over the situation, each girl chose a book and settled down to read.

For a long time Joan was half-unconscious of what she read, thinking instead of the fascinating hints they had had of the story of Consuelo, and of the presence of a strange man in the mill, and of the meaning of the phrase "to-night at twelve." Finally, though, she grew interested in the book she had, and read on and on. Once when she finished a chapter she raised her eyes as she turned the page, and, since she happened to be facing that way, looked directly at the dining-room door.

The door was slightly open, and a man was peering through the crack straight at her!

He was as surprised as Joan, and seemed transfixed until her book slid from her frightened fingers and crashed on the floor. Then with a bang he pulled the door shut, just as Mary Alice screamed and made a bound for the door. Joan was only a step behind her, the fact that the man ran giving them courage to pursue him. As the girls dashed into the dining-room they saw the

swinging door into the kitchen still swaying back and forth. They rushed madly across the room and then suddenly grew frightened and hesitated. After a second they took hands with mutual consent and pushed open the door, knowing that if they hesitated longer their courage would fail.

Their fears, though, were unnecessary. There was no one in the kitchen! Mary Alice ran to the pantry, and Joan to the back door. But the wire screen was latched, and, as she turned back, she readily saw in Mary Alice's face that there wasn't any one in the pantry.

Of one accord they turned to the back stairs door, but that was fastened from the kitchen side and the key was still in the lock. Joan guessed that Mrs. Oldham had locked the door, for she had been locking it since the first day when the girls had started using the back stairs. She had said at the time that it blew open and made a draft in the kitchen, but the girls suspected that she didn't want them bobbing unexpectedly into her domain. However that might be, Joan knew that they had exhausted the last way of exit from the room.

"He came into the kitchen," Joan spoke for the first time since they had started the pursuit,

“because the door was still swinging, but if he didn’t leave by the back door or up the stairs, and if he isn’t in the pantry ——”

“I know,” cried Mary Alice, tears of excitement in her eyes, “there must be a secret room here!”

“There can’t be,” Joan disputed. “The kitchen goes across the entire end of the house, and we know every inch of it.”

“Just the same, the man disappeared in a few minutes. Both doors are locked, the pantry is empty, and the window-screens are all fastened! Moreover, I know that there isn’t any trap-door into a basement, for I heard Mrs. Oldham grumbling because there wasn’t any basement to keep her milk cool.”

“But there can’t be a secret place,” Joan reiterated, stubbornly. “The only possible chance would be some sort of connection with the locked room, and I don’t see how there could be any, with the stove and the cabinet and the pantry against the wall that joins it.”

“But you admit there’s a place big enough to hide a man,” Mary Alice argued, “because we saw one come in here.”

“Yes,” Joan admitted, looking around fear-

fully, "and maybe he's listening to us this very minute."

"The thing to do," Mary Alice continued, calmly ignoring her remark, "is to measure the outside of the house and the length of the kitchen, and see how they compare." She got a ball of twine from the cabinet and measured the length of the kitchen, marking the place with her finger.

Then she started out the kitchen door, and Joan followed mechanically.

"There can't be a secret room," she protested for the third time. "There is only the kitchen here."

"Take this other end of the string to the edge of the house," Mary Alice commanded, stationing herself at one side and holding her finger and the twine to the corner of the house.

Joan obeyed her, and started confidently to the opposite side, but soon stopped short. The twine would not reach by several feet! The girls stared at each other in amazement for a few minutes, and then Joan burst out laughing.

"We forgot to measure the space in one end of the kitchen where the stairway and the fireplace and the pantry cut off part of it."

“So we did,” muttered Mary Alice chagrined, and they went back into the house.

“I suppose, with the fireplace and the pantry and the staircase all grouped together, there might be a few inches of space unaccounted for,” Joan admitted. “But I’m sure that what we are looking for is a secret exit, and not a secret room,—an exit that leads into the locked room, or maybe just out of doors.”

Then they prowled around rather aimlessly for a while, sounding the walls and floor, although Joan was sure that she could not tell when anything was wrong with them, despite the fact that Mary Alice kept telling her to listen for a hollow sound. They accounted, by aid of the string, for every inch of space in the pantry and the stairway, and pushed and pulled on all the rough stones of the fireplace. They even laboriously moved the kitchen-cabinet and scanned the innocent gray plastering behind it.

Suddenly they did discover something strange. While they were taking a last survey of the pantry Joan inadvertently lifted the lid of a huge roaster, and there, inside it, was a plate filled with food. A thick slice of boiled ham, some pieces of bread wrapped in a napkin, and a num-

ber of cookies were arranged tidily inside the roaster.

“It’s for the man’s luncheon,” Joan exclaimed. “Mrs. Oldham knows about him and feeds him!”

“I’m sure now that it was the man from the mill-room, because we saw books and a tray from this kitchen in his room, and to-day he came to the library, and here is the food waiting for him. Mrs. Oldham is most certainly connected with him, but she doesn’t have to let him in and out of the house. I’m determined to know how he gets in,” Mary Alice said decidedly. “I don’t believe, since we scared him away, that he will come back before night, now. The thing to do is to watch for him to-night and find out how he gets in.”

Joan looked at her in amazement. “Watch—in the dark?”

“It’ll be worth it. Imagine seeing a man suddenly drift through a keyhole or waft down the chimney in a cloud of smoke——”

“We might sit on the back stairs, ready to run up them if we get frightened,” Joan suggested nervously.

“That’s a good idea,” Mary Alice conceded. “He probably won’t come back until the lights

are out in the house; so we can wait until every one is in bed, and then sneak down here. He ought to be pretty hungry by then, and come as soon as possible. And, speaking about being hungry,—it's nearly one o'clock and we haven't had anything to eat ourselves."

"Wouldn't it be a good joke to eat his food?" Joan exclaimed.

"A good joke, but a complete admission to Mrs. Oldham that we know about her friend at the mill. I have a better idea. Let's fix up a lunch and go out on the lawn to eat it. Then we can play tennis."

"Let's do," Joan agreed with alacrity, for she did not like the idea of spending any more time alone in the house.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE BACK STAIRS

THE girls were sitting in the shade of the big maple-trees on the lawn when Miss King returned late in the afternoon.

“I’m sorry to be so late getting back,” she said as Joan and Mary Alice went to meet her, their rackets under their arms. “Could you find anything for luncheon? I forgot to tell you about it.”

“We found plenty,” Mary Alice assured her, “and we ate it under the trees.”

“Still, after your tennis game, you must be very anxious for supper. I will have it prepared in a little while.”

“Can’t we help you?” Joan asked shyly. She was afraid to make any advances towards Miss King for fear that she would be coldly rebuffed.

By this time the three were in the kitchen.

“That is very nice of you,” Miss King replied. “If you will peel the peaches in that crock on the cabinet, while I clean up after my journey, it will help a lot.”

Miss King returned after a few minutes, bring-

ing three of her aprons with her. She was so tall that the ones Mary Alice and Joan put on reached the floor and made them feel very grown-up and a little awkward.

Cooking supper was a jolly affair, for Miss King was in a most pleasant humor, and Joan was so happy to have her smiling at her that she fairly bubbled with fun.

And once, when a bit of grease popped from the frying-pan on Joan's finger, and Miss King caught her hand quickly and applied a cooling salve, the girl watched the gray head bent over her finger and wanted to say, "You have helped it so much, Auntie May," but somehow she was afraid to, and her very emotion made her reply rather stiffly, "Thank you very much, Miss King."

As they sat at the supper-table Miss King told them of some of the parties that had been given in the big house. Among them was the story of a hay-rack ride, starting in Fame and ending in the big King kitchen with a gay taffy-pull. The girls were so interested that Miss King said, "We can't manage the hay-rack ride, but I will show you how to make the taffy, and we will have a triangular taffy-pull of our own."

So they washed the dishes and then boiled a huge mass of fragrant syrup. It was great fun pouring it into shallow pans and setting it on the back porch to cool. Once Joan heard a noise and rushed out just in time to save Pickles' black nose from being scorched and their taffy from being ruined.

Then they pulled it into long, glistening strands, and broke it up into pieces to harden. The palms of their hands were pink from the hot taffy, and the floor and tables were sticky with stray bits that had dropped in spite of their precautions.

Miss King laughed once when she stepped into a particularly large splotch. "We shall surely catch a thief to-night if one ventures in," she said gayly, "for we are merely applying the fly-paper principle on a large scale."

Joan caught her breath at the words. She and Mary Alice were expecting an intruder that very night, and she felt that, since Miss King mentioned the matter of night visitors so casually, surely she did not know of the one who was coming. Joan felt that she should tell her, but just as she started to speak she remembered the older woman's words, "to-night at twelve," and the

realization that perhaps she was prying into some of Miss King's affairs made her stammer awkwardly and indecisively.

"Miss King, we have discovered something about a Consuelo and a man in the mill, and we thought perhaps that you should know—should know ——" She broke off vaguely, not quite sure of what they thought Miss King should know, and remembering too late Uncle Ben's warning that they should not speak of Consuelo.

At Joan's first words Miss King, a plate of candy in one hand and a knife in the other, had turned to look at her. Her face had grown white and hard and she spoke sternly: "Don't mention Consuelo or the mill to me. I don't know where you have been, or what you have run across, but, please, I don't want to hear anything about it."

"I'm—I'm sorry," Joan whispered, completely upset by Miss King's words. "We didn't know we were doing anything wrong."

"Not wrong, not wrong," Miss King said crisply. "I just do not want to be questioned about the affair, that is all."

She set the plate of candy down decisively and dismissed the girls by saying: "We have eaten

enough candy for one evening. I'll clean up the kitchen in the morning. Good-night."

Slowly they went up the back stairs to their rooms.

"What shall we do?" Joan questioned miserably as she closed the door of her pink-and-white room.

"I don't know," Mary Alice answered glumly. "In spite of what she said, I don't believe that Miss King knows about this man."

"But how could I tell her after she told me to keep still?"

"You couldn't," Mary Alice admitted. "But I think it is up to us to find out about this man."

"At least we can watch and see how he gets in, and if he is the person with whom Miss King has her twelve-o'clock appointment, we will come back and not listen."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Mary Alice. "I must know how he gets in and out of the kitchen."

They took off their light dresses, and put on dark jersey frocks, in their zeal even removing the white collars and cuffs for fear the white would show in the darkness. Mary Alice even suggested that they use a little ink on their faces, but Joan absolutely refused.

Finally, after about an hour of nervous waiting, they peered down the hall and saw that Miss King's light was out; so they turned out theirs and crept down the stairs with the aid of a flash-light. The flash-light had been a last-minute thought of Joan's, or hardly a thought, for she had opened the table-drawer where they kept their list headed "The Secret of Scared Acres," and noticed the flash-light that Miss King had spoken of the night before.

The cheery circle of light playing on the stairs gave them courage as they crept down. Mary Alice had brought several pillows, and they made themselves comfortable on the bottom steps.

After they had listened cautiously for a few minutes Joan carefully opened the door and surveyed the kitchen.

"It looks just as we left it," she whispered to Mary Alice. "But do you suppose he has been here already?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Mary Alice gasped. "We can't sit here all night waiting for a man who has come and gone."

"There is only one way to find out," Joan breathed, "and that is to see if the food in the roaster is gone."

“ Br-r-r, and suppose he should appear about the minute I had the lid off? He would never believe me if I said that I didn’t intend to eat the food, but was just seeing that it was all ready for him! ” Mary Alice giggled.

“ One of us will have to go and see, ” Joan argued.

“ Let’s both go, ” Mary Alice compromised. “ Then if the man appears, you can hold him while I run to safety! ”

Cautiously the girls crept across the kitchen floor and into the pantry. Joan had the flashlight in her hand, and she raised the lid of the roaster a little and peeked in. The food was undisturbed.

“ It’s still here, ” she whispered. “ Let’s go. ”

“ Wait a minute, ” Mary Alice returned. “ I don’t intend to let this man sit here and gorge himself while I starve to death. ” She fished a long pickle out of a jar and slipped a cookie into her pocket.

Then they crept back, looking behind them at every step, and breathing a sigh of relief when they were once more on the stairs. They propped the stairway door open with Joan’s slipper, and Joan sat with her back against the wall of the

house so that she could look through the crack and command the space around the pantry door. There was a faint light shining through the windows from the moonlit sky, and she could vaguely distinguish objects in the room.

“If he comes into the kitchen,” she whispered, “our positions will be reversed from those of this morning. Then he peered through a door at us, and now we shall be peering through a door at him.”

“Would you recognize him?” Mary Alice queried thoughtfully. “I only got a glimpse, because I didn’t know that he was there until you dropped your book.”

“Of course I can’t recognize him in this dark place,” Joan answered. “But if it were light I might, though I only saw a part of his face through the library-door. I can’t describe him at all, and yet if I see him again I’ll recognize him, I’m sure. What concerns me more is which of us is going to run away this time.”

“Well, if he sees us, and doesn’t run,” Mary Alice exclaimed, “we undoubtedly will.”

“What do you suppose Miss King’s twelve-o’clock appointment means?” Joan questioned after a few minutes. “Do you suppose she is

going to meet some one, or was it just the time set for something to be done? ”

“ I can't even guess,” Mary Alice puzzled. “ But I don't believe it is connected with the man that we think is going to come to this kitchen to eat his supper, since he is only coming to-night because we interrupted his trip this morning.”

“ I never thought of that,” Joan conceded. “ Besides, Mary Alice, if this is the man in the mill, she couldn't be telephoning to him.”

“ That sounds logical, too. Still, if, after all our arguments, Miss King's appointment is with this man, we should go back up-stairs. We mustn't listen to any of her secrets.”

All this conversation had been whispered, but the girls decided that they might be heard even then, so they stopped. Mary Alice nibbled the cookie and the time began to drag heavily. Joan looked at her watch and discovered that it was only ten-thirty. Soon after, in spite of their determination, they both dozed off, aided by the fact that it was still and close in the stairway.

Suddenly Joan was wakened by a noise. She reached into the darkness for Mary Alice's hand, but instead grasped the pickle which the girl had gone to sleep holding in her fingers. The cold,

slimy thing startled Joan so that she gave a scared exclamation and Mary Alice woke up.

“Listen, Mary Alice!” Joan barely breathed the words, but they sounded in her ears like a loud shout.

“What is it?” Mary Alice whispered.

“I don’t know, but something woke me up.”

“Can you see anything?”

“No.” Joan was peering through the crack into the kitchen, but there was no one in that part of the room that she could dimly see.

Then abruptly the noise came again, and they both whispered, “The front stairs!” Some one, they could now tell definitely, was carefully and slowly coming down the front stairs.

The girls huddled together and listened. With a pause between each step, regularly, relentlessly, the sounds came. Down, down, down—they seemed interminable; Joan hadn’t realized that the stairway was so long. She grew more and more nervous until she thought that she should scream if some break did not interrupt those unseen footsteps.

Even in her fear, though, she remembered that the stairway was old and undoubtedly would creak alarmingly, but it seemed strange that this

person could not take a single step without that complaining and protesting "cre-eak." And, too, she wondered why, since he was not moving quietly, he should move so slowly.

Then, abruptly, the sounds ceased and Joan immediately wanted to hear them again. At least, while the person had been creeping down the stairs she was certain that he was not sneaking towards the kitchen. She held her breath the better to hear the least sound from the swinging door between that room and the dining-room.

Just as Joan thought that he surely must have reached the kitchen door, a crash resounded through the house and died away in oppressive silence.

For a moment afterward she was paralyzed, and then, could she have found the flash-light, she would have dashed up the stairs, jumped into bed, and buried herself under the covers. But it had slipped from her fingers while she dozed, and the fear of taking one step up the black cavern of the stairway held her shuddering in her corner.

"He must have ——" Mary Alice was giggling hysterically, "he couldn't have knocked over anything less than the grandfather-clock in the hall!"

“Sh-h-h,” Joan cautioned in an agony of fear. “He surely will sneak into the kitchen now and hide. Miss King, I know, will hear the noise and get up to investigate it.”

“I’m going to bed,” Mary Alice asserted.

“Sh-h-h, Mary Alice, he may be coming any minute.”

“That is the reason I am going. Besides, he sounded as if he were tearing down the house as he came.”

“Do you suppose he got in while we were asleep?” Joan whispered, reassured that Mary Alice would stay, now that she could joke, even though it was in a trembling voice.

“Well, he was in the last time we saw him. It surely makes it seem that there is an exit from the kitchen to the locked room, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does,” Joan agreed soberly. “And he has been prowling around up-stairs and is just coming down from there.”

“I don’t like the idea of his prowling around up-stairs,” Mary Alice shivered. “Just imagine, he may have been hidden in the dark hallway, watching us creep down the back stairs!”

Just then Joan thought she heard a slight sound from the front of the house, but it was not

repeated and she could not be sure. Finally, after what seemed a long time, Mary Alice whispered, "He will starve if he doesn't get around to eat before long."

"And we can't stay here all night. We are both getting sleepy, and I don't propose to have him find us asleep."

"Besides, he might go up-stairs again and come down the back stairs," Mary Alice said with a shudder. "Wouldn't that be terrible? Let's go to bed right now."

"But we are no nearer discovering how he got out of the kitchen than we were," Joan objected. "All we know is his method of coming down the front stairs."

"I have lost all my interest. I prefer to go to bed."

"I know what we can do, Mary Alice. Let's tie up the doors, and then we will know which one he comes through. That will help us figure out how he gets in and out."

"If he comes through any door at all. Besides, if he does come through a door, he will know that something is wrong if it is tied shut."

"No, I don't mean that. Use thread, just one strand. In the dark it will break so easily when

the door is opened that it will not be noticed, but in the morning we can see which threads are broken."

"Of course," Mary Alice answered sarcastically. "Shall you or I go ask Miss King where she keeps her sewing-box? And do you prefer lavender or green thread?"

"Neither," Joan stated proudly. "I'll bet your jersey dress has the hem whipped in, hasn't it? Well, pull out the thread, and I'll do the same with mine."

"Never," insisted Mary Alice. "There is nothing I hate to do like whip in hems. Moreover, it seems to me that one of us will have to get up early in the morning and scurry down here and check up on the doors before Miss King comes down. It's a good thing Mrs. Oldham is away; she gets up so early."

By Mary Alice's last words Joan knew that she approved of the idea, and started pulling the threads out of her own dress.

When they had several lengths, they cautiously crept out to tie the doors. The old-fashioned locks stuck out about an inch from each door, and it was an easy matter to wrap a thread around them and tie it securely. The outside kitchen

door and the pantry door were soon fastened, but the swinging door into the dining-room presented a different problem. Finally they tied a thread to a chair placed on each side of the door and scurried back to the stairs. Here they paused only long enough to put their last piece of thread on this door and then went up-stairs cautiously, their sagging skirts dragging around their ankles.

CHAPTER XIV

“ TO-NIGHT AT TWELVE ”

ONCE safely in Joan's room, with the door closed, Joan pulled the window-blind and ventured to turn on the electric light.

“ Whew! ” Mary Alice sighed explosively as the girls looked at each other. “ I wonder what Judd would have said, had he been on the back stairs with us to-night? ”

“ He would have said that the ghost was made! ”

“ I think he would. And it is a noisy ghost. Remember the sounds in the kitchen the first night, and this awful crash to-night. ”

“ I wonder if the crash woke Miss King up? ”

“ If it did, she did not get up to investigate it, but maybe she is like me, and doesn't investigate strange noises in the middle of the night. Still, Joan, that noise probably sounded a lot louder to us than it was, because we were sitting there in the dark, waiting breathlessly for something to happen. ”

“ I suspect that it did, ” said Joan hopefully.

She much preferred to think that Miss King had not heard the noise.

“Well,” said Mary Alice, “I’m going to bed. But first we have to settle which one of us is to get up in the morning and go down and remove those threads before Miss King gets up. I ought to make you do it, for you cooked up the idea of tying them on the doors, but I’ll be generous. Wait a minute.”

She disappeared in her own room and returned after a minute with her hands behind her back.

“In one hand I have an alarm-clock,” she announced, “and in the other a hand-mirror. If you choose the clock, you’ll have to get up; and if you choose the mirror, you sleep.”

“I’ll take the left hand,” Joan laughed, and was presented with the alarm-clock.

“How am I going to wake up?” she groaned, as she looked at the clock. “It is after eleven now, and I am too sleepy to trust myself to wake up at six!”

“That’s an *alarm-clock*,” Mary Alice said significantly.

“But if I set it, I shall wake every one up.”

“That’s true,” cried Mary Alice, with mock terror. “Don’t set it; I should be sure to be

roused out of a nice dream. The problem is yours, though. I'm going to bed, as I said before."

After Joan got ready for bed she decided to move her pillow to the foot of her bed, so that she would sleep facing the window and the morning sun would shine in her eyes. She was sure that the bright light would arouse her in time to get the threads. She raised the window-shade and pinned back the curtains.

The moon was just disappearing behind some tall trees, and Joan leaned out to watch it. She had often heard that the moon was loveliest on the prairie or on the ocean.

"The prairie or the ocean," Joan mused. "I'm on the prairie, and Mother is on the ocean, but we are both looking at the same moon."

Joan imagined that she could see beyond the placid prairie moon and catch a glimpse of her mother leaning on the boat-rail watching a silver ocean moon weave a path of fairy light across the Atlantic.

Longing for her mother stirred in her heart, and she realized that she had only written her one letter since she had been at Scared Acres. "But she will be expecting me to write about

Miss King," Joan thought unhappily, "and I can't tell her that Miss King doesn't want me here. Mother has to take care of Daddy; she hasn't time to worry about me. But I can't put off the letter forever. I must write something. I'll try to-morrow, and tell how we made taffy and how much fun we had, and not say a word about the other things."

As Joan leaned her cheek against the window-frame and let her thoughts wander far away to her mother and father on their eastern-bound steamer, the moon slipped behind the trees and she became aware of a myriad of fireflies holding merry carnival on the lawn. Fascinated, she watched a host of them playing in and out among the trees that bordered the lane leading from the front of the house to the main road.

Suddenly, just as she was about to turn away, she found her eyes fastened on two little points of light far down the lane. In all that flickering twinkle it seemed to her that these two little lights were steady. Joan watched them closely, and became convinced that there were two lights advancing towards the house, although she frequently lost sight of them because of the trees that bordered the lane.

She turned and softly called Mary Alice. There was no answer, and she ventured to call a little louder.

“What do you want?” Mary Alice finally moaned in a sleepy voice.

“Come here and see the fireflies.”

“What? I have seen millions of fireflies in my life, but never when I could be sleeping. You can tell me about them to-morrow.”

“But, Mary Alice, they just seem to be fireflies—I mean, they aren’t fireflies.”

“You are talking in your sleep,” Mary Alice said in disgust. “Pinch yourself and turn over and let me go back to my dream.”

“Oh, Mary Alice, come here! There is some one coming up the lane!”

Joan heard Mary Alice jump softly out of bed and in a few seconds stumble noisily into the room.

“Did you fall?” she whispered anxiously as her friend crept up to her side without saying a word.

“I stumbled,” Mary Alice answered crossly. “One ankle is a complete wreck.”

“I’m so sorry,” Joan sympathized. “How did you do it? I didn’t leave a chair in the way, did

I? I have been careful since the hair-brush episode.”

But Mary Alice was leaning out of the window by this time, and only replied, “I don’t see anything but fireflies.”

“There were two steady lights coming up the lane,” Joan answered, looking from the window again. “They were flash-lights, I’m sure, and the persons carrying them stopped about where that big walnut-tree is.”

“What big walnut-tree?” Mary Alice asked.

“Don’t you remember the one we sat under when we started to Mrs. Parrott’s after eggs? Anyway, the lights disappeared about there; so the persons either stopped, or are coming on without any lights.”

“Maybe it was two fireflies having an endurance contest to see which could stay lighted the longer.”

“Maybe,” Joan admitted, not minding the badinage. “Please, Mary Alice, did you trip over something I left on the floor?”

“The dictionary.”

“Dictionary? You are the one who is talking in your sleep.”

“Walking in my sleep, you mean,” Mary Alice

giggled. “No, Joan, I stumbled over the dictionary all right.”

“You mean the big one on your book-shelf? You must have been walking on your hands to have skinned your ankle on it.”

“Wretch,” sighed Mary Alice. “I might as well tell you, for you are going to quiz me until I do. I got so accustomed to tying up doors down in the kitchen that I decided to fasten mine, too.”

“But ——”

“Yes, I know that strings are better, but I didn’t want to spend all the morning sewing the hems back in my dresses; so instead of thread I used the dictionary by this door, and my suit-case in front of the one that leads into the hall. That was my big error—the suit-case would have been softer than the dictionary.”

“If you try to get out my door,” Joan chuckled, “you will find a chair tied to it with my leather belt.” And they squeezed each other’s hands understandingly.

“Look!” Joan exclaimed, again glancing from the window. “See those two lights coming up the lane?”

“Where?” breathed Mary Alice, trying to follow Joan’s guiding finger.

But almost as she spoke two figures came out from the dark shadows of the lane onto the lighter lawn in front of the house. Here they stopped again, and seemed to hold a conference; then they advanced hesitatingly until they finally disappeared by the side of a big lilac-bush near the front porch.

The girls had to lean far out to be able to see, for their window opened on the side yard. Fortunately the lilac-bush was not directly in front of the house, but on one side,—their side,—and they could detect the dark splotch where the people stood close to the tree.

“I wish they would make up their minds what they are going to do,” Mary Alice shivered. “This window-sill is about to cut me in halves.”

“Do you suppose they can see us?” Joan worried, since the persons seemed to be permanently stationed by the bush.

“I don’t think so,” Mary Alice decided critically. “We are just a part of the vague outline of the house. We shouldn’t notice them if we hadn’t seen them with their flash-lights.”

The girls waited for some minutes longer, growing more and more uncomfortable all the time. They had just about decided to take turns

watching, when a vague shadow emerged from the direction of the front porch, and they heard a high, querulous half-whisper which they both recognized.

“Right dis way, gentlemen.”

The dark splotch by the lilac-bush that was evidently the “gentlemen” moved with alacrity towards the house and out of their line of vision. The girls drew back from the window and stared at each other in blank amazement.

“It was Uncle Ben,” Joan whispered.

“We can’t be mistaken in his voice,” Mary Alice agreed. “But who are the ‘gentlemen,’ and what can they want? A most unusual time for ‘gentlemen’ to call, I think.”

“Still, I can’t believe that they are on an underhand mission,” Joan pondered. “Uncle Ben seemed so loyal to the Kings.”

“I’m sure that they are not thieves,” Mary Alice stated. “But let’s tiptoe down to the stairway and see what they are doing.”

The girls got their kimonos and cautiously crept down the carpeted hall until they reached the stairs. Here they paused and leaned far over the banisters. They could not hear a thing, but they could see a square of moonlight on the hall floor

that meant that the front door was open. Then they caught an indistinguishable murmur of voices and saw a flash of light across the hall floor.

“That was one of the flash-lights,” whispered Mary Alice, “and it came from the room with the locked door!”

“I do wish we could see what they are doing,” Joan sighed.

“I won’t go a step down that stairway in my nightie,” Mary Alice muttered decisively.

“Sh-h-h,” cautioned Joan suddenly. “I thought I heard a sound from Miss King’s room.”

“You did? Let’s go back to our room. We can’t see anything down-stairs anyway, and I should hate to have her find us here.”

Joan nodded her head in quick agreement, and the girls tiptoed back even more cautiously than they had advanced.

They carefully shut the door, and Joan re-wrapped the leather belt around the knob.

“So this is what ‘to-night at twelve’ meant,” said Mary Alice soberly as she went back to her old station across the window-sill.

“I’m afraid so,” admitted Joan.

The girls leaned out of the window for some

time, but their patience was finally rewarded. In the dim, shifting moonlight they could see the two figures reappear from the front of the house and go in the direction of the lane. They were not using their flash-lights, and it seemed to Joan that they were carrying something between them, but she could not be sure.

The girls continued to lean far out to watch the strange pair disappear among the shadows of the lane, until Uncle Ben shuffled along under their very window and faded out of sight around the house.

“ I have a feeling that that is all for to-night,” Mary Alice whispered soberly, turning from the window. “ I think I’ll sleep with you; no one knows where that dictionary is by now.”

Neither of them spoke until they were snuggled into bed.

“ Do you suppose it was Uncle Ben who was creeping down the stairs?” Mary Alice asked thoughtfully.

“ It might have been. But, Mary Alice, weren’t those men carrying something when they left, something big?”

“ Yes, they were carrying something between them,—a big box or something. I know! It was

Uncle Ben carrying it down the stairs that we heard, when we were on the back steps. That's why he went so slowly and cautiously; and then at the last step or so he dropped it!" Mary Alice finished.

"But if two men were needed to carry it away, Uncle Ben could not get it down-stairs by himself," Joan objected.

"Those men were moving briskly when they left, so what they carried wasn't very heavy. And you know the person coming down the stairs took a lot of time. Uncle Ben might have been easing down the box, or whatever it was, step by step."

"That would explain the regular creaking that we heard," Joan admitted. "But what did those men have to go in the locked room for, if Uncle Ben brought what they carried away down the stairs?"

"That's a puzzler," agreed Mary Alice. "In fact, that may ruin all our theory, although I am inclined to stick to the belief that Uncle Ben made the stairs creak to-night."

"You are probably right," Joan admitted again, and both girls went to sleep without mentioning one thing, and that was that it might have

been Miss King who helped Uncle Ben down the stairs.

Joan's sleep was troubled, though, for she felt that if Miss King was engaged in secretive transactions at Scared Acres, she might have a very definite reason for not wanting a stranger there, and probably would not change her attitude towards her. Moreover, Joan knew that she herself could not freely like any one who moved in an atmosphere of secrecy, and she began to hate the mystery that had promised her so much when she first came to Scared Acres.

CHAPTER XV,

THE CLOSED DOOR OPENS

“BREAKFAST is nearly ready, lazy things.”

Joan woke up with a start. To her dismay she saw that the sun was high, and she realized that Miss King was calling from the kitchen. Mary Alice was rolled up in a tight little cocoon on her side of the bed, but Joan ruthlessly pulled the covers away from her.

“Oh, Mary Alice,” she groaned, “I didn’t wake up and go down after those strings we tied on the doors!”

“What strings?”

“The ones we took out of our skirts and tied on the doors,” Joan cried. “Please wake up, Mary Alice, and help me think what to do. Miss King is in the kitchen already.”

“You mean to say that you didn’t go get them?” Mary Alice asked indignantly.

“No, I didn’t wake up.” Joan was almost in tears. “And I was sure that the sun shining in my face would wake me.”

“Well, don’t worry,” grinned Mary Alice. “It

woke me up all right. I dreamed that the mill was burning up, but it was only the sun in my eyes."

"Oh, you grand girl! And the strings?" Joan asked hopefully.

"Yes, I went down and got them." Mary Alice closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"And had any of them been disturbed?" Joan exclaimed.

"Um-m-m," said Mary Alice without opening an eye.

"Which one? Mary Alice, tell me, please. I can't wait."

"Guess."

"The dining-room? No, the back stairs? Oh, I can't guess."

"The pantry."

"The pantry," repeated Joan slowly. "And all the others were still fastened?"

"Um-m-m."

"Then he got into the kitchen, but not through the back stairs door, or the dining-room door, or he didn't come in the back door. Then there is a secret entrance of some sort. Had he eaten the food?"

"I didn't have time to look in the pantry, to

see if the food had been touched, because I heard Miss King coming down the front stairs."

"Girls, please, the omelet is nearly done."

"Coming, Miss King," Joan called, as they jumped out of bed. They dressed hurriedly, and in a few minutes were down-stairs, eating breakfast in a sunny corner of the kitchen.

After breakfast the girls helped Miss King do the dishes, but neither of them got a chance to peek into the roaster, though they passed it many times on their trips to the pantry.

When the dishes were finished and Mary Alice was brushing out the kitchen, Miss King called Joan into the library.

"I have to go to Fame this morning on business, and then I am going after Mrs. Oldham," she said abruptly. "It will be a long, hard trip, or I would take you to town. I—I want to get you a white dress, Joan. Do you think it will be satisfactory if I bring out several on approval? Boone's will probably not have over two or three that you can wear, anyway, so if I bring them out here, you will have just as much selection as if you went to try them on."

"Oh, Miss King, that is so sweet of you, but I mustn't let you buy things for me," Joan stam-

mered, confused and embarrassed at the mention of the white dress.

“Nonsense, child. It is a great pleasure to have some one to do things for. It’s very hard to live only for oneself.” Miss King’s voice faded away in a wistful sigh that brought the tears to Joan’s eyes.

“You don’t know how nice it is to have people want to do things for you,” Joan answered softly, feeling that Miss King really liked her after all. “Miss King is just proud and reserved,” she thought to herself, “and not accustomed to having girls around. Underneath she is really sweet and friendly, and I have been too sensitive.” She smiled shyly at the older woman and finished aloud, “I’ll be glad to sing in the choir with Mary Alice’s friends.”

“Then we are making both of us happy,” Miss King laughed. “Now tell me what kind of a dress you want.”

“Any kind of a plain white dress,” Joan decided. “Somewhere, though, I have been having a mental picture of a straight little dress of crêpe, trimmed only with hand-hemstitching,” she added naively.

“That’s the kind of dress you shall have if I

can find it," Miss King said. "Of course I shall be limited by the stock at Boone's."

"But I'll like any dress you select," Joan cried. "I merely described that one to give you some idea of the type I wear best."

"I am sure that I shall need your description and suggestion. It has been a long time since I have chosen dresses for any one." And then Miss King got cold and distant again, in spite of Joan's attempts to convince herself that she only imagined it.

"While I am gone, I thought you and Mary Alice might like to practise the hymns for Sunday; so I opened the music-room this morning," Miss King continued as she stood up. "If you will find Mary Alice, I will show it to you now."

Joan skipped out to the kitchen and found Mary Alice in the back yard, feeding Pickles a huge saucer of milk. Pickles quite evidently was not hungry, for she much preferred Mary Alice's hand rubbing her back to the rich yellow milk.

"Pickles must be dieting," sighed Mary Alice, as she held the saucer close to the cat's nose,—so close, in fact, that pussy was forced, rather indignantly, to wash the milk off her shining black face.

“She’s not dieting,” Joan laughed. “Look at her sides. She has probably eaten half a dozen mice already. But put her down, for Miss King is going to show us the music-room!”

“The music-room?” breathed Mary Alice, as she skipped along by Joan’s side.

Miss King was waiting for them in the library, and they solemnly followed her across the hall and watched her reach out a slim hand and slowly turn the knob of the locked door.

Joan was sure that it wouldn’t open, but it did, and the girls waited breathlessly for their first glimpse of the music-room.

“The room looks dismantled now,” Miss King said as she led the way in. “I took the curtains down, and put away all the pillows and center-pieces and so on, before I locked the room many years ago.”

She stepped to the windows and raised the blinds, and the girls looked around with interest. The music-room was a long room, and, despite the fact that all the accessories that make a place cheerful and friendly were gone, it seemed to have an atmosphere of lightness and gayety. The grand piano which dominated the room had a satiny walnut finish, and the keys gleamed white

in spite of their years of idleness. A music-cabinet matched the piano, and several dainty chairs and a very prim settee were also of walnut, upholstered in a cool green brocade. The paper was a satin stripe, in a soft cream color, and the carpet was a green-gray. And everything was blended together by the fading of years.

“Joan will use this room to entertain her friends this winter, and I am going to let her redecorate it,” Miss King said abruptly. “I want her to choose the curtains and plan some pillows, and perhaps select a dainty floor-lamp.”

“Oh—oh!” Joan cried, her eyes shining. “Miss King, that will be the nicest thing I have ever done in my life. I know right now just what I want,” she went on; “lavender-taffeta ruffled curtains tied back, and a lavender-taffeta pillow on that darling green settee, and a floor-lamp—a floor-lamp——” Joan paused and continued slowly, “cream, maybe, to match the walls or—or——”

“Well, at least you can think a while about the floor-lamp,” Miss King laughed at her exuberance. “I have a very beautiful Spanish shawl that used to be thrown across the piano. I took it up-stairs last—it is up-stairs now,” she inter-

rupted herself hastily. "I will show it to you, and perhaps it may change some of your plans."

Mary Alice had slipped over to the piano and was softly trying the keys.

"Here are the hymn-books the minister's wife sent," Miss King went on. "The hymns the choir will sing Sunday are marked by slips of paper. I must go now; I have an appointment in town at ten-thirty." She was out of the room before either of the girls could speak.

Joan was still standing in the middle of the floor, staring with delight at the room she was to decorate all by herself. "Miss King didn't say what color the Spanish shawl was," she spoke dreamily. "I do hope it is a creamy-white, with flowers embroidered on it in colors."

Then Mary Alice began to play some of the hymns, and Joan went over to her side. Mary Alice touched the keys very lightly, and the piano did not sound out of tune to the girls, as their young voices sang the familiar songs. For an hour they practised, and then they closed the piano and turned around on the bench to survey the room again.

"Why should any one keep such a lovely room locked up?" Mary Alice asked.

Joan shuddered a little at the words. Her mind had been so filled with Miss King's new friendliness that she had forgotten for a minute the secrets of the place that seemed to shut her out. For an instant she thought that she could never be interested in the mystery again, and then her eyes fell on the side of the room that joined the kitchen, and she walked over to look at the wall. The satin-striped paper was just as smooth here as it was all over the room.

"Mary Alice, there is no entrance into the kitchen through this wall," she said thoughtfully. "The man could not have disappeared into this room yesterday morning."

Mary Alice, too, began to look around the room. "There couldn't possibly be an entrance in this wall," she chimed in. "I believe that this room is just what it pretends to be. I can't imagine any ugly mystery in such a dainty place."

"Still, it was the locked room," Joan brooded, glancing about. "And, Mary Alice, look there!" Joan's voice rose a little higher, and she pointed towards one side of the room, the side that adjoined the hall.

"Why, what is it?" cried Mary Alice, startled. She whirled around and followed Joan's pointing

finger. "But—but I don't see anything. Did you see the man peeking in the hall door?"

"No—not that," Joan said, slowly walking over to the wall. "But look, Mary Alice, look on the floor."

"You mean that little rug?" Mary Alice said, puzzled. "Is that what you are so excited about?"

"Yes. I've seen that rug before, haven't you?"

"Why," said Mary Alice, "I don't think so."

"Well, I have. It has been out in the hall in front of the high-boy ever since I came to Scared Acres."

"It has?" said Mary Alice. "I wonder why Miss King brought it in here. It certainly doesn't fit in this room."

The rug the girls were discussing certainly did not blend gracefully with the dainty furnishings of the music-room, for it was heavy, with the picture of a dog woven in the center of it.

"I wonder what kind of a dog it is supposed to be," Mary Alice said irrelevantly. "It is big enough to be a St. Bernard, but it looks more like a haggard old hound."

"It's atrocious in this room." Joan shuddered. "I can't bear to have it in here, Mary Alice."

“Tell Miss King that you don’t like it, and I am sure that she will let you move it,” Mary Alice soothed her.

“But why do you suppose she put it here in the first place? It looked all right in that dark, old-fashioned hall.”

“Can’t you guess?” Mary Alice asked quickly. “Why do you suppose Miss King put that rug here, where it must be as distasteful to her as it is to you?”

“I can’t think of any reason at all,” wailed Joan.

“She put it here to cover up something,” Mary Alice said confidently. “Let’s see if I am right.” She walked up to the rug, took up one end of it, and flipped it off the carpet. “Look!” she cried, almost as amazed at the correctness of her own guess as was Joan.

For underneath the rug was an oblong piece of the gray-green carpet that was bright and fresh. It stood out abruptly against the faded colors of the rest of the rug.

“How new it looks!” Joan gasped. “Something has evidently been sitting on that strip of carpet for a long time, while the rest of it faded a little year after year.”

“And what covered that strip of carpet?” Mary Alice asked calmly.

“Why, Mary Alice, I haven’t the slightest idea,” Joan exclaimed in surprise.

“You remember, don’t you, the men who were in this room last night?”

“Oh,” breathed Joan. “And they carried something away!”

“Yes!” Mary Alice cried triumphantly. “You are standing at that end of the bright strip, and I am standing at this end. Weren’t those men about this far apart when we saw them leave last night?”

“Yes,” but Joan’s tone was more doubtful this time. “Yes, Mary Alice, but I thought they carried away something that Uncle Ben carried down the stairs.”

“Why,” said Mary Alice blankly, “why, I did too. Still—but—I don’t understand it at all,” she finished defiantly.

“Neither do I,” Joan added bitterly, as she replaced the rug.

“But I know one thing we forgot to do,” Mary Alice cried, starting for the door. “We forgot to look in the roaster and see if the man ate his food last night.”

CHAPTER XVI

UNCLE BEN THINKS TWICE

BOTH girls dashed out of the music-room, down the hall, through the dining-room, and into the kitchen. Mary Alice reached the pantry door first, and, snatching the top off the roaster, brandished it and exclaimed, "He did not go to bed supperless!"

"And he didn't leave many crumbs," Joan added, peering over her shoulder.

"Just imagine," Mary Alice suggested sympathetically, "he came to the house to eat that food for luncheon, and he didn't get it until after midnight. I can understand how he felt. In fact, I probably should have licked the plate."

"We know now that he gets out of the kitchen without going through any of the doors," Joan said with satisfaction.

"We knew that much yesterday when we followed him in here," Mary Alice murmured with a grin.

"So we did." Joan was chagrined. "Still, it is nice to have proof of impossible things."

Just then the girls heard some one come in the kitchen door, and they stood paralyzed, convinced that it was the very man they were talking about. They did not dare whisper for fear that the person would hear them, but each knew what the other was thinking. Mary Alice's face was pale, and she clutched the roaster-lid convulsively. Joan could not move, and her eyes were fixed desperately on the pantry door.

"Isn't nobody at home?" came a shrill voice from the kitchen.

"Oh-h-h!" Joan let her breath out in a long, relieved word.

"It's Uncle Ben," cried Mary Alice, dropping the roaster-lid with a clatter and making a dash for the pantry door.

Joan followed close on her heels, and saw Uncle Ben standing in the middle of the floor with a basket of eggs in one hand and a bucket of potatoes in the other.

"Oh, Uncle Ben," Mary Alice exclaimed, while Joan gasped in amazement at her words, "is there such a thing as a secret room or entrance in this house?"

"Well, not 'xactly," answered Uncle Ben, handing Joan the eggs, which she nearly dropped in

her astonishment, and shuffling into the pantry with the bucket of potatoes.

“Did you hear what he said?” she whispered to Mary Alice, who seemed rooted to the floor. “How did you happen to ask him?”

“I don’t know,” Mary Alice said slowly, dazed at her own words. “I just said it all at once without thinking.”

“What did you mean just now, Uncle Ben?” Joan asked, as the old negro came out of the pantry. “Is there really a secret room in this house? Tell us quickly, for we are dying of curiosity.”

Uncle Ben chuckled and eased himself into a chair by the door, pleased at the idea of a talk.

“Poor old man,” Joan thought to herself as she set the eggs on the cabinet. “He probably gets lonesome down in that little shack. Ugh-h, every one around Scared Acres seems to be lonesome.”

“Explain yourself immediately,” cried Mary Alice, sitting down at his feet, “or I shall perish of curiosity right before your very eyes.”

Uncle Ben chuckled again, greatly enjoying their attention. “There ain’t much to explain,” he said, “but I better begin with the very first of the story, hadn’t I?”

"Oh, do," cried Mary Alice. "Don't leave out a single thing."

"Well, it begins back in the days of old Mr. King—'way back when all the people 'round this north part of Kansas was fightin' over slavery. Now, Mr. King had come from Charleston, and had brought his niggers with him, but he didn't call us slaves. And he didn't treat us like slaves, 'cause we each got a little pay; it wasn't much, but it made us know we weren't slaves. There was the days, you know, when Kansas was decidin' to vote whether she was to be free or slave, and Missouri men was comin' over here to make us be slave."

"But, Uncle Ben," Joan interrupted, "you haven't forgotten that you were going to tell us about a secret place? Mary Alice and I can hardly wait."

"I'm s-certain' to that, mississ," he said, barely enjoying his story. "I'm s-certain' to that. Where was I?"

"You were talking about old Mr. King," supplied Mary Alice. "Was that Miss King's grand-father?"

"Yes, Misser Phil's father," answered the old man. "Of course you know at that time I was

only about five years old, I guess, though I never did know jes' how old I am; so what I'm tellin' you was told me afterward. Now, let's see, where was I?"

"You were talking about Mr. King and the slavery question," repeated Mary Alice.

"Well, old Mr. King did not want to take sides with either party. All his fam'ly back 'round Charleston was big slave-owners, and he had us niggers. But, on t'other hand, he didn't believe in slavery, and he didn't bring any niggers out here that didn't want to come with him. Yet he thought if other men wanted to have slaves, he had no right to say that they couldn't."

The old man paused and wiped his forehead with his clean bandanna handkerchief. The girls were quiet, waiting for him to continue.

"By and by things got violent 'round here. Raids, and a few killin's, and several fires—you know—fires some one set for meanness——"

"Incendiary fires," Mary Alice suggested.

"Yes, dat's it. In—in—uh-h, fires some one set for meanness. Nobody took time to understand things, and both sides was against Mr. King. He tried patiently to explain to every one he knew in town, but the people 'gainst slavery

could jes' see that he had niggers and would not come out and fight the slave-men, and the slave-men thought he ought to be on their side, but he wouldn't join them, and they decided that he was playin' them false. And it all got worse and worse as the time drew closer to vote Kansas either free or slave—you know it was squatter sovereignty in Kansas ——”

“Squatter sovereignty?” Joan echoed, puzzled.

“Oh,” said Mary Alice, “I know what that means. You see Kansas was not admitted to the Union until 1861. And before the Civil War the States in the Union were about equally divided on the slavery question, and naturally they were very much interested in whether a new State was going to be free or slave. While Kansas was still a territory Congress passed a bill called the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which said that Kansas could vote whether she wanted to be a free or a slave State—that was squatter sovereignty, letting the men who settled Kansas decide what she should be.”

“I remember now,” cried Joan, “and Missouri was a slave State, and men from there kept coming over into Kansas to vote for slavery.”

“Yes,” answered Mary Alice, “and that isn't

all that happened. There were marauding parties from both States, burning homes and destroying crops and even killing people."

"That's it, that's it," cried Uncle Ben, delighted. "That's just what I was talking about. M'raudin' parties going up and down the road out here by Mr. King's land, until he got afraid his home would be attacked, and that some one might try to run us niggers out of the State. That was the time this place got the name of Scared Acres."

"What?" cried Joan. "Oh, Uncle Ben, tell us about that!"

"There ain't much to tell. Mr. King had always called his ranch King's Acres before this, but now everybody got to callin' it Scared Acres. It was jes' like a nickname,—if you let people know you don't like your nickname, you jes' can't shed it. Well, Mr. King——"

"But what made the people start calling it Scared Acres instead of King's Acres?" Mary Alice queried.

"That's jes' what I'm tellin' you. Mr. King, he got scared 'bout the trouble that was goin' on, so he put up signs all 'round this place, tellin' people to stay out of King's Acres; and he put a big chain across the entrance to the lane from

the main road, and he tried to hire a white man to patrol the ranch at night—he didn't dare have us niggers do it. And I don't know how it started, but one day he found all the signs with the *King's* scratched out and *Scared* written in. Then I guess Mr. King got awful mad, and he went to town and stormed 'round, threatenin' to prosecute anybody who called his place Scared Acres, and of course after that the name jes' stuck; there wasn't no shakin' it."

"But didn't other people get scared, too?" Joan asked.

"Most people was fightin' on one side or t'other. And I've heard that everybody thought Mr. King was kinder—kinder crazy, he got so upset and talked so much, tryin' to explain to people how he felt about it. But he wasn't," the old man interrupted himself loyally. "He was the kindest man I've ever known; he always used to carry candy in his pocket for us little pickaninies."

Uncle Ben paused, and Mary Alice said softly to Joan, "Can't you just picture old Mr. King threatening to prosecute some village wags for nicknaming his place Scared Acres, when the whole country was embroiled over slavery, and

Kansas herself did not have any courts that could maintain law and order? ”

“And I can imagine how bewildered he must have been when people wouldn’t take time to understand how he felt about slavery, or didn’t want to. And how Mother will enjoy the story of the way that Scared Acres got its name! ” Joan finished exultantly. “ Now I shall have something to write to her to-night.” Then she was silent, wishing that she had not said the last, for Mary Alice might misunderstand, since she did not know that Joan felt she must find something to write that would not let her mother guess the truth about Miss King’s strange attitude.

“ We must be getting close to the secret-entrance part of the story, Uncle Ben,” suggested Mary Alice, artfully.

“ Yes, yes, we are right there! ” Uncle Ben agreed. “ Well, as I was sayin’, Mr. King got scared that his home would be attacked, and that an attempt might be made to run us niggers out of the State. Anyway, I can just remember my daddy goin’ with the other niggers night after night to dig a tunnel between the house and the mill, and my mammy and the other women takin’ them great buckets of coffee and piles of food in

the middle of the night, and how scared us little niggers were by all the strange things that we could not understand.”

“A tunnel? Did you say a tunnel?” gasped Mary Alice.

“Yes, a tunnel. Then, when it was finished and the m’raudin’ bands was raidin’ ’round here, I remember all us niggers sittin’ huddled and afraid in this big kitchen. At night all the light we would have would be a little fire in the big fireplace. Mr. King’s women-folks would be sittin’ in the dinin’-room with the windows carefully closed so that no light would shine through, and Mr. King would go back and forth from them to us. We got awful scared sometimes; once or twice we heard a great band of horsemen go along the road, and once some men come up the lane and stopped in front of the house, but the rest of the bunch out in the road kept callin’ to them to come on, and finally they all galloped away.”

“What a thrilling adventure, Uncle Ben,” Joan exclaimed, breathlessly.

“And the tunnel, where was it?” Mary Alice added.

“It was between the house and the mill,” Uncle Ben repeated. “We was supposed to go

through the tunnel to the mill, and then slip out and lose ourselves among the trees on the river-bank."

"Sort of a secret passageway," Mary Alice murmured with a satisfied air. "Where do you get into it, Uncle Ben?"

"Oh," Uncle Ben looked around vaguely. "I never knew. It connected the house with the mill."

"Yes, yes. But you said that you waited in the kitchen, so it must have opened into the kitchen."

"I guess so. We always waited here, and the white folks in the dinin'-room. But we never used it. And you see I was young, and I didn't know much about what was goin' on."

"But haven't you any idea? Mrs. Oldham told us that this kitchen was the only part of the original house left after the fire, so you must have waited in this very room."

"Yes, I must have," Uncle Ben said, "but it seemed a lot bigger and darker to me then. But, you see, we never used the tunnel, and then the Civil War come along, and after it us niggers was freed, and my daddy decided that he was goin' back south. He took me with him, and for a

while it was lots of fun. But I got to pinin' for the Kings, and as soon as I was old enough I sneaked back and have been here ever since."

"And you never heard anything about the tunnel after you returned?"

"No, I don't think so. By the time I got back old Mr. King was dead, and Mister Phil was managin' the place and hirin' white labor, and none of the niggers was left. I never thought any more 'bout the tunnel and I guess it jes' fell in. My, missies, I have been sittin' here talkin' when I got to let the cows out to water, and mend the break in the west fence."

"But, Uncle Ben," wailed Mary Alice, "we do so want to find the tunnel. Won't you think and think about where it might be?"

"I'll think," Uncle Ben chuckled at her woeful face, "but it's been a long time, and I don't think so very well any more. I guess I've told you everything I know," and he shuffled out.

"Isn't that exasperating?" Mary Alice sighed. "I don't believe that we are any nearer to finding the entrance to the tunnel than we were."

"Do you think that when the house was rebuilt the tunnel-entrance was closed?"

"If it had opened into any other room, yes.

But we know that this man comes from the mill to the kitchen whenever he pleases.”

“Oh, missies,” came Uncle Ben’s voice from the back step, “I jes’ remembered that all the grown-up niggers had a heavy pair of gloves given to them out of a drawer in the pantry jes’ as soon as they gathered in the kitchen.”

“That’s grand,” smiled Mary Alice. “You keep on thinking and you’ll remember a lot more.”

“I don’t ’speck I will,” Uncle Ben chuckled, turning to leave again. “Rememberin’ is kinder hard for me any more.”

“Why did you say ‘that’s grand’?” Joan asked as soon as he had gone. “It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It doesn’t to me, either,” laughed Mary Alice. “But I wanted to sound grateful to Uncle Ben, and it may be just the information that we need, for I intend to find that tunnel-entrance, although I admit I haven’t the faintest sign of a new idea.”

“I suppose it is right under our noses,” Joan mused. “Well, let’s get luncheon and then inspect every possible corner.”

“I’m so glad that you suggested luncheon,” exclaimed Mary Alice, jumping to her feet. “I hate to be the one who always says ‘Let’s eat.’”

CHAPTER XVII

PICKLES PLAYS A PART

“THERE,” said Mary Alice, setting the last polished glass in the cabinet, “the dishes from our luncheon are done and everything is in place. Now for the secret tunnel. Where shall we look first?”

“In the pantry,” Joan volunteered, hanging the tea-towel neatly on its rack. “At least we know he was in the pantry.”

“Yes, but the pantry door had been opened because our thread was broken; so he must have got into the kitchen first.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” slowly demurred Joan. “Wouldn’t it be natural for him to stick his head out of the pantry door and listen a little if the tunnel opened into the pantry?”

“Yes, it would,” Mary Alice admitted. “Let’s look in the pantry then.”

Both girls went into the pantry and surveyed its neatly-arranged shelves. One side was entirely given over to fruit and jellies, and, as Mary Alice said, no one could come through that wall without spending an hour or so moving innumer-

able cans of pears and beans and cherries. The other side—the pantry was long and narrow, with one end broken by a small window and the other by the entrance—had a miscellaneous assortment on its shelves. Food supplies, eggs, and milk filled the lower shelves, while the upper ones stored dishes and cooking utensils. Neither girl could imagine any one coming into this room through the side walls, and the window in the end had a screen that did not open and was too high to be reached without a step of some sort.

Having rejected the pantry as a means of entrance, they turned to the kitchen. The back stairs, they decided, were not a possibility now, since the girls had had the door tied shut. The walls of the kitchen, so far as they could tell, were intact, and were so clean and shiny that it seemed impossible for a secret door to fall open in their immaculate surface. The floor, kept spotless by Mrs. Oldham, also seemed to offer no possibility. It was constructed of wide boards, worn from years of use, and covered here and there with squares of linoleum. For one breathless minute the girls hastily moved the linoleum, expecting to find a trap-door, but there was no break in the floor's even surface.

After a consultation they finally decided that the only thing in the room that could conceal an entrance was the fireplace. It, they were sure, had not been changed since the days of old Mr. King. It was an enormous affair, built of gray rocks put together by mortar which was blackened with age. The stones, the girls guessed, had been gathered there on the farm, since they were of various sizes and shapes. And naturally the number of projections and rough surfaces was innumerable, but they nearly tore it apart, stone by stone, pushing and pulling everything, including the iron bars that were firmly imbedded in the mortar. The fireplace was so large that, by bending, Joan could step inside, straighten up, and peer up the chimney. The heavy rock walls extended up and up until they were lost in darkness. Then, far above, she could see a patch of light that was the sky.

At last they sat down on the floor and looked blankly at each other.

“I don’t believe that it could be the fireplace,” Mary Alice decided regretfully, “because didn’t Uncle Ben say that while they waited in the kitchen for the raids the only light was a glow from a little fire in the fireplace?”

“But that was long ago, and Uncle Ben says that his ‘rememberin’ is poor,” Joan protested, reluctant to give up the fireplace as the tunnel-entrance.

“Don’t you see, though,” Mary Alice explained, “that we can trust this impression, because while Uncle Ben may have forgotten some of the things he saw, he is not likely to *remember* something he did not see?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Joan agreed. “And that reminds me of the gloves he re-membered. What about them?”

“My mind is simply paralyzed when those gloves are suggested. I have no ideas at all.”

“Do you suppose it was only to keep their hands warm?”

“If there was a fire, it must have been cool, at least, but it seems strange that old Mr. King should keep gloves for them. He didn’t keep ear-muffs, or overcoats, or rubbers!”

“To keep out cold,” said Joan, “to prevent blisters, to keep the hands white——”

“What are you talking about?” Mary Alice exclaimed.

“I’m thinking of the reasons one wears gloves. To keep the hands white—I don’t think that ap-

plies here. But, Mary Alice, people wear gloves to prevent finger-prints. Maybe ——”

“Never,” Mary Alice vetoed the idea emphatically. “It’s just recently that finger-prints have been studied. Remember, too, that these marauders were rough frontiersmen who were accustomed to ride through things, and not to search for minute clues.”

“I forgot for a minute,” said Joan meekly.

“You certainly did. But go on with your inventory.”

“To prevent blisters. Um-m-m, I wonder—blisters and a little fire in the fireplace. Do you suppose there is any connection?”

“It sounds as if there might be, but I don’t see any,” Mary Alice said impatiently, getting to her feet.

“Mary Alice, I think there is. I’m sure that it means that the fireplace is the entrance, and, since it was hot because of the fire, they had to have gloves to touch it.”

“Maybe,” Mary Alice admitted grudgingly. “But we can’t find it, and I am tired of sitting around and talking about possibilities. Joan, there is one thing that we can do. We can search the mill!”

"With that man there?" Joan exclaimed, aghast at the idea. "Never!"

"Well," Mary Alice temporized, as she perched herself on the edge of the kitchen-table, "I didn't exactly mean that he was to be there. You know it is after luncheon time, and he hasn't eaten today. I thought we might go over and peek in a window, and perhaps see him operate the tunnel-entrance."

"He'll see us coming." Joan's tone was emphatic, for she was firm in her determination not to go near the old mill.

"I think we can keep him from seeing us," Mary Alice argued. "In his room there was only one window, and that faced away from the house and towards the river. Also, if I remember correctly, there were no windows in the side of the mill that had the machinery, and that is the side that faced towards the house. Now, if we creep up on that side, and then edge around through the brush and vines to one of those high, dirty windows, we can watch the ground floor without his knowing that we are there. And since it is a tunnel, the entrance must be from the ground floor."

"That sounds perfect," Joan admitted. "But

how do we know that he stays in the mill and doesn't prowl up and down the river-bank?"

"I don't believe that he ventures outside the mill, and if we run, he won't chase us farther than the edge of the woods."

"That's far enough to give me cold shivers just thinking about it."

"Oh, come on," urged Mary Alice. "Let's try it, anyway. I don't think he is interested in us, except to keep out of our sight. Anyway, he ran from us the other time we saw him."

"You're taking for granted that it is the same man."

"Well, I resist the idea of a whole flock of villains."

"All right, I'll start."

"Fine. You run up-stairs and get the flashlight while I put some cookies in my pocket. We may have to wait some time for him to appear."

Their preparations completed, the girls started casually down the lane, as if they were going for a walk. As soon as they reached the main road, though, they crawled under the fence into the orchard which stretched along one side of the house from the road to the woods that surrounded the stream. They drifted idly through here, pick-

ing a few flowers now and then, but drawing ever closer to the woods. Just before they slipped into the woods, Mary Alice found Pickles gayly chasing a nimble bird, and she insisted on taking her along.

Once in the woods, the girls scurried quietly along and crept up to the mill on the side that had no windows. Then, close to its friendly wall, they slipped around to the other side and, finding a scrubby little elm by one of the dusty windows, stopped. There they had a silent, gestured debate as to which of them should look in the window. Finally Joan ventured a cautious peek, and saw, through the dusty pane of glass, the old mill as she had seen it two days before.

At least that was her first impression. Then, suddenly, as her eyes became accustomed to the dim interior, she realized that a man was standing on the far side of one of the corn-bins and leaning so far into it that all she could see was the curve of his body as he bent over the bin. Joan clutched Mary Alice and felt her squirm with eagerness. Neither dared whisper nor move for fear that some change in the light might cause the man to look up. They were so still that Joan could hear the tinkle of the water of the falls and

the contented purr of Pickles as she lay along the curve of Mary Alice's arm. She did not, however, take her eyes from their close watch of the man.

Then, without looking up, the man stepped over the side of the bin and disappeared, and with a little gasp Joan realized that they had found the secret passage!

She whispered to Mary Alice, and, after waiting for several minutes to be sure that the man had gone, they tiptoed into the mill. Even then it was scary to walk over to the bin and peer into it. At the last minute Joan had visions of the man crouching in the bottom, but he was not. Instead, she saw a lever sticking through a long slot in the floor of the bin. The whole floor was a trap-door that let down, they could tell, because it was held slightly open by a corn-cob stuck between it and the wall of the bin.

"In Mr. King's day they probably had some corn or old sacks or something to conceal the lever, don't you imagine?" Joan whispered.

"Probably," Mary Alice conceded, "but I'm more interested in it to-day. Let's take a look inside."

Joan grasped the lever and tugged at it, but

she could not budge the trap-door. Mary Alice dumped Pickles unceremoniously into the bin and helped. Finally, after much creaking and protesting, the bottom of the bin swiftly dropped down, and puss, vainly clutching at the worn floor with her claws, slid into the aperture thus opened.

“There goes Pickles,” wailed Mary Alice, grabbing at her disappearing tail. “Kitty, kitty!”

The girls peered breathlessly into the bin. The tunnel seemed to be directly underneath, and a rock wall on one side with ladder rungs fastened on it gave easy access. All they could see of the bottom was a dirt floor, and puss crouching there. For a moment they thought she was going to climb back up the ladder at Mary Alice’s entreaties, but a mouse ran out of some débris and, with a whisk of her long tail, the cat disappeared in pursuit. After that Mary Alice softly called in vain.

“That idiotic cat! But we can’t leave her in there. If the other entrance is anything like this one, she can’t get out and she will starve to death,” Mary Alice moaned. “One of us will have to go after her, and, since it is my fault, I’ll go.”

“It’s not your fault any more than it is mine,” Joan maintained. “We’ll both go. The man is probably safe in the house, eating a cache of food Mrs. Oldham has left for him. It doesn’t look very scary, anyway.” And indeed it didn’t, with the bright sunshine streaming in the mill door; so she scrambled over the side of the bin without giving herself time to get frightened.

Slowly she descended the slippery rungs of the ladder and stood on the dirt floor of the tunnel, blinking at the darkness. Mary Alice scrambled in next, but her foot slipped on one of the rungs, and, grabbing at the trap-door for support, she released its spring and it banged shut above her, with a reverberating sound.

The girls were horror-stricken, for the dark and the smell of the damp earth and close musty air were terrifying.

“The flash-light,” whispered Mary Alice in a shaky little voice.

Joan drew it quickly from her pocket and turned it on the closed door. Mary Alice stood on the ladder-rungs and pushed as hard as she could, but the door would not open. Then she pulled all of the machinery she could reach on this side of the door, but it stayed solid above them.

At last, playing the flash-light about, Joan discovered the remains of a lever on this side, but the wood had rotted away, and there was only an inch or so of iron socket left sticking out. Neither of the girls, although each in turn held to the ladder with one hand and leaned far out, could come within three or four inches of it. Then Mary Alice held to the ladder and let Joan hold on to her, but the ladder-rungs were slippery, and Joan, although her finger-tips touched the precious lever, could not exert enough strength to move it.

Finally she gave up the attempt. "We're wasting our time," she urged. "Remember the corn-cob that was stuck in the door and held it partly open? The man must have left it there, so that he could get out; which means that he has a hard time reaching the lever."

"But what shall we do?" Mary Alice cried. "Never again will I be friendly with a black cat! But there is no use blaming it on Pickles, because I am the person who insisted on coming here, and now we're trapped in." The tears gathered in her eyes.

"Let's take the flash-light and go down the tunnel," Joan suggested desperately. "Maybe

we can find a place to hide and watch him come in at the other side; then we can get out there.”

For the first time they noticed the rest of the tunnel. By their wavering flash-light they could see that it was narrow, and that the walls were made of rough stone, somewhat similar to that in the fireplace. These walls had not been so well constructed though, for some of the rocks were bulging with the weight of the earth pressing behind, and crumbs of cement and an occasional small stone covered the floor. They ventured cautiously along, but found no unexpected turns or chambers that would conceal them while the man passed by.

When they had been walking for what seemed a long distance and hours of time, Joan saw a faint light ahead.

“He’s coming back,” she gasped, switching off the flash-light, while Mary Alice seized her arm in dismay.

As they watched in horrified silence, a round ball of white light from another flash-light came into sight near the top of the tunnel and slowly descended.

“He must be climbing down a ladder at the house-entrance,” Joan breathed. “Oh, Mary Al-

ice, what shall we do? Do you suppose that we can dash by him and get out at that end?"

"In this narrow tunnel? Besides, he would hear us coming and his light is turned our way."

They stood paralyzed, wanting to run, but afraid to stir. Slowly the light advanced, and they were able to make out the man's figure as he stopped to investigate the walls. He took his time, evidently feeling safe from observation, and carefully examined each wall as he came along. Once he dislodged a stone and it fell with a clatter, nearly making Joan cry aloud.

In desperation the girls flattened themselves against the wall, but Joan knew that they were sure to be discovered when he came closer. She hoped, though, that if he did not see them until he was right beside them, they could still make a dash for the other end of the tunnel and take their chances on getting out there.

Once he turned back towards the house, and the girls had hopes that he was returning to the kitchen, but he merely picked up something that he had laid down when he first started examining the walls. Whatever it was, he put it down beside him again, and once more inspected the walls, slowly approaching closer and closer. Finally

Joan knew that, as soon as he turned to examine the wall they were leaning against, his flash-light would fall on them.

She burrowed back into the wall, pressing harder and harder, until all at once it gave way with a crash. She clutched wildly to keep from falling with it, and managed to get one of her outstretched hands fastened to a firm rock, and she wavered back and forth until something hit her on the head. With Mary Alice's scream in her ears she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SILVER BOX

“JOAN, Joan!” Mary Alice was crying when Joan opened her eyes heavily and looked up into a blinding light.

“Joan, Joan, are you dead?” Mary Alice went on, holding the flash-light directly in front of Joan’s eyes. “Joan, speak to me!”

Joan blinked and tried to push the light away. It was a few minutes before she realized what had happened, and then she sat up quickly.

“Are we—did we ——” she began weakly.

“Oh, Joan,” Mary Alice gasped, “I thought you were never going to open your eyes. Are you badly hurt?”

“Was I a long time coming to?” Joan wanted to know.

“I suppose it was really only a few minutes, but I was so scared that it seemed like a year.”

“What about the man?”

“He was scared, too,” Mary Alice giggled nervously. “He fled past us, and I heard a terrific racket at the mill-end of the passage. He must have used Herculean strength to open the trap-

door; anyway I heard a lot of banging, and then everything was quiet, including you. And, imagine,—you had had the flash-light in your hand, and here I was in the dark, with all these awful noises around me! ”

“ What did you do? ” Joan cried.

“ I honestly don't know, Joan. I began calling you, and I think I fell down on my knees and began hunting for the flash-light. Then when I found it and found you, you were so white and still that I was scared all over again. Whew! ” Mary Alice sighed explosively. “ I must have a gray hair from that experience! ”

Joan laughed a little, shakily. “ I bet the man was scared, too. He didn't know any one was in the tunnel, and then, all at once, came that awful crash and your scream. ”

“ He was, all right. Why, he practically had to jump over you to get down the passage, but he didn't stop for a single look. ”

“ And when he got there and found the corn-cob out of the trap-door, he must have thought everything was conspiring against him. Do you suppose he knows who it was? ”

“ I suppose so. He didn't stop to look, but he might have guessed from my scream. Though I

don't believe that he took time to think until he was out of the tunnel." Mary Alice paused thoughtfully. "You are the one who should have screamed. Why didn't you?"

"I guess I didn't have time."

"What really happened?"

"All I remember is that I was leaning against the wall and it fell, and I just had an instant to try to keep from going with it before I was hit on the head and crumpled up here," Joan explained slowly.

"What do you suppose made the rocks cave in?" queried Mary Alice. "It's a wonder that you weren't buried under them."

"Why, no," Joan replied, "the rocks fell away behind me." She took the flash-light from Mary Alice's lap and turned it on the wall. "And there's the reason," she finished in amazement.

The rocks of the wall where Joan had been leaning had fallen until there was a door-shaped aperture. Through the opening they could see a tiny room, also with rock walls, and cluttered up with a heap of stones from the fallen wall.

"How lucky you are that you managed to keep from tumbling in, too. Some of those stones would have fallen on you."

“One of them did fall on me,” Joan complained. “Ugh-h, my head is sore.” She tenderly felt of a spot on her head.

“Surely not one of those big rocks,” Mary Alice remonstrated. “It would have killed you, or at least cut your head badly.”

“If you doubt that something hit the top of my head, feel of this bump!” She drew Mary Alice’s fingers gently over her head.

“Joan, that’s terrible. But I wasn’t doubting that something hit you. I was doubting that it was one of those big rocks.”

Joan let her flash-light play on the heavy jagged rocks lying on the floor of the tiny room. “I guess you are right.” She shuddered at the thought of any of those huge stones hitting her. “Maybe it was just a little chip off one of them. Why don’t you look in the room and see what I discovered?”

Mary Alice took the flash-light and went through the door to examine the room, while Joan sat still, not trusting herself to stand, for she felt dizzy and her head throbbed. She watched Mary Alice throw the light about the walls of the room and over the débris that cluttered the floor.

“It’s just a little alcove of some sort,” Mary

Alice said. "About large enough for four or five people to stand in."

"What do you suppose it is for?" Joan asked.

"I don't know. Maybe Mr. King had it put in as an extra precaution for his own family to hide in."

"He probably didn't want his 'women-folks,' as Uncle Ben says, to have to hide in the woods, as he told the negroes to do. But I shouldn't think any one would want to stay in there long. There can't be much air."

"I suppose they could just step in here," Mary Alice said thoughtfully, "if any of the marauders should chance to find the entrance to the tunnel and dash through it. I don't know what kind of a door they must have had then, but it evidently has been carelessly walled up since that time. There is very little mortar sticking to any of these rocks, so I suppose that what little there was has crumbled away, and when you leaned against the wall it caved in. It's a good thing that you didn't fall in, too, and hit your head on these jagged rocks."

"Mary Alice, I've told you twice that I didn't fall and hit my head; something hit me, and then I fell. And I wish I knew what it was," Joan went

on, nursing her sore head. "Somehow I don't think it was a rock."

"Well, I don't see anything but rocks. Maybe it was a small one, or just a glancing blow from a big one."

"Maybe," Joan persisted. "But bring the flash-light and let's look out here. I don't think it was any of those huge old stones."

"No need to look out there now," Mary Alice exclaimed suddenly. "Here is some sort of—box, I guess—over here. You hold the flash-light a minute and I'll see if I can lift this boulder out of the way."

She handed Joan the light and got down on her knees, throwing some small rocks to one side so that she could get at the big one. After a little tugging she held the rock up and Joan snatched away the box.

Excitedly the girls knelt side by side and turned the flash-light on their discovery. It was a very shallow box, about eight inches long and only three or four wide. The metal of the box was black and crusted over with dirt, but Mary Alice rubbed it with her handkerchief until both of them were sure that underneath the accumulation of years was a box of silver with an elaborate de-

sign on it. Two bands of silver went around it, ending in front with two tiny locks.

With an awed exclamation Mary Alice took the box in her hands and tried to open it. The bands of silver held it tight, and even when she poked the dirt out of the locks, they still held fast.

“It’s locked,” she finally asserted. “But some of our luggage-keys might open it if they were small enough.”

“Where do you suppose it was?” Joan asked, holding out her hands for the box. “It must have been imbedded in the door, to fall down and hit me on top of the head as it did.”

“I can’t see any place now,” Mary Alice said, after taking the flash-light and inspecting the walls and ceiling of the room in the vicinity of the doorway.

“Then it must have been mortared up in the door,” Joan insisted, inspecting the box closely for traces of cement.

“Joan,” Mary Alice exclaimed suddenly, “that man was searching these walls——”

“Yes?”

“He must have been hunting for this very place!”

“And probably for this very box!”

The girls looked at each other for a moment.

“Let’s get out,” Joan breathed, suddenly fearing that the man might come back.

Mary Alice guessed what she was thinking, and answered: “Oh, the man is gone for a while. You should have heard him run away; he was scared. Moreover, I don’t think he wants to be seen by any one.” But as she finished her gaze went past Joan, and down the tunnel in the direction of the mill. Her face became set in an expression of horror.

Frightened, Joan turned her head quickly. Far down the tunnel, where the rays of Mary Alice’s flash-light did not penetrate, were two glittering points of light. Joan, too, was transfixed with terror, and could only stare and stare in the direction of those immovable, glittering eyes.

All at once Mary Alice exclaimed, “Kitty! Pickles!”

A black form came bounding up to them, and Pickles sat down and contentedly licked her chops.

“You wretched cat,” Mary Alice grumbled. “We came in here to rescue you, and what do you do? You go off and eat a mouse and then sit in the dark and scare us.”

“Let’s go,” Joan urged. “I’m getting scared again.”

“All right,” Mary Alice consented readily. “You take the flash-light and the box, and I’ll carry Pickles.”

Pickles gracefully permitted herself to be captured, and thus laden the girls set out towards the opposite end of the tunnel from the one they had entered. In a few minutes Mary Alice stumbled over something and discovered that it was a pick the man had set against the wall.

“That’s what we saw him go back after,” she exclaimed. “And look, Joan, here’s a book underneath!”

“A novel-reading ghost,” Joan exclaimed, as Mary Alice tucked the book under her free arm.

“I suppose he had the pick to dig out some rocks, if necessary, when he found the concealed room,” Joan suggested, not pausing in her march.

Soon they came to the end of the tunnel. Here were other ladder-rungs in a little cubby-hole off the tunnel itself.

“I hope there isn’t a trap-door that won’t open,” Joan gasped, dismayed at the prospect.

Mary Alice looked up along the wall of the cubby-hole. “I can see light away up and up,”

she said. "Do you suppose this ladder goes clear to the roof, Joan?"

"I hope not. I don't believe that I can climb it if it does, for I still feel sort of wobbly, and that passageway is so narrow," Joan answered, standing so that she could see the little patch that seemed to be the blue sky.

Just then Pickles opened a sleepy eye, looked up, wriggled out of Mary Alice's arms, and scampered up the ladder. After about twenty feet she paused, gathered herself for a spring, and leaped at the opposite wall of the passageway. The girls gasped, expecting her to come hurtling back at them, but she disappeared from sight,—all, that is, except her long black tail. It waved back and forth a few times, and then it, too, quickly vanished.

"She has found the way out," Mary Alice spoke soberly. "I'll start up and find it, too, and then you come."

She climbed carefully up the ladder, while Joan leaned close to the rock wall and tried to throw the light up into the narrow passageway. When Mary Alice had about reached the spot where Pickles disappeared, she paused, surveyed the place, and chuckled.

“It’s very simple,” she whispered, and, taking hold of some bars that Joan could just distinguish stretching across the passage, scrambled awkwardly for a few minutes and gradually disappeared through the wall opposite the one that supported the ladder.

Joan hastened to follow her, and found that when she climbed about the same distance the ladder stopped. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the opposite wall also had stopped, and, peering over it, she saw another passage leading down. With the aid of the iron bars projecting slightly from the sides of both passageways, she scrambled over and started down. Here there was no ladder, but only more iron rods sticking out at intervals from the narrow sides of this new passage. She slowly descended, and, when the passage ended, stooped through a hole and found herself in the kitchen, with Mary Alice sitting on the floor grinning at her. She turned around and saw that she had come out of the fireplace.

“How simple it is!” Joan exclaimed in her turn. “And to think of the times we have looked up that chimney and have seen only the blue sky above!”

“Look back now, and that is all you will see,”

admonished Mary Alice. "It's the simplest and the cleverest arrangement that I can imagine."

Joan stepped through the opening and once more stood upright in the fireplace. Looking up, she could see far above her a patch of light, but in the darkness between she could not tell that the back wall did not go all the way.

"Well," she breathed in admiration, "that is a good idea, all right. You cannot see a thing, but you simply climb up on these rods that look as if they were made to hang kettles on, swing over the false wall, and there is the other half of the chimney to climb down!"

"But it makes me wonder," Mary Alice added thoughtfully, "about that little fire in the fireplace that they had while they were waiting for the night-raids."

"Um-m-m, that's true. You wouldn't be able to get in here, if there were a fire where I am standing. But, oh, Mary Alice, my idea of those people wearing gloves to keep from blistering their hands was right. You have to take hold of these iron rods, and if there were a fire, they would be hot."

"I imagine you are right. But I can't understand how they got over the fire in the first place.

If they threw water on it, there would be a clear trace left for the raiders.”

“Perhaps they had some sort of grate that pulled out and stood on the stone hearth while they climbed up the chimney. Still, that would leave a trail, too, unless the last man pulled it back in. He would surely have to scatter up the chimney, though, to keep from getting scorched and suffocated with smoke.”

“I know a simpler explanation than that—just as simple as the entrance itself, so it must be the one,” Mary Alice cried triumphantly. “I bet they had a bucket of ashes here, and simply threw them over the fire. That would put out the flames, and any one coming in would think the fire had been ‘banked’ for the night.”

“Of course,” cried Joan. “Why didn’t we think of it before?”

As the girls stood before the fireplace they heard the rattling of Miss King’s car driving into the garage, and, looking through the window, saw Miss King and Mrs. Oldham, each laden with packages, coming towards the house.

CHAPTER XIX

JOAN CHOOSES A WHITE DRESS

“THERE are Miss King and Mrs. Oldham already,” Mary Alice exclaimed. “What shall we do with the silver box?”

“We don’t want Mrs. Oldham to see it,” Joan added. But the approaching pair were too close to allow the girls time for words, so they snatched up the box and book and retreated through the dining-room into the library.

They had expected Miss King to pause in the kitchen, but they heard her come on into the dining-room. The girls had stopped in the center of the library, with the box and book still in their hands, and Mary Alice hastily stuck the book under a chair and Joan sat down on the box. Then they heard Miss King call to the house-keeper.

“Help me up-stairs with these packages, Mrs. Oldham, and then come down-stairs and find the girls.”

After a few minutes the speakers left the dining-room and went up the front stairs, and the girls had a chance to look around.

“That book,” Joan lectured Mary Alice, “is in plain sight under that chair. You know what a careful housekeeper Mrs. Oldham is; she would see it and pick it up the very first thing, before we have had a chance to look at it ourselves.”

“You are not so good at hiding things, either,” Mary Alice chuckled.

“You can’t see this box,” Joan maintained.

“No, but suppose Miss King had come into the room?”

“I don’t see ——”

“Well, you don’t sit crouched in a chair when she comes in, do you? You would want to get up, and then where would the box be?”

“That’s true,” Joan laughed. “Can’t you imagine me about half standing up to acknowledge her greeting, but trying at the same time to hover over the chair? I should probably have such an agonized expression on my face that she would think I was sick.”

“Instead of talking about how you might have looked, let’s talk about how you are going to look when Mrs. Oldham comes back, and we haven’t concealed these things.”

“Oh, quick,” Joan exclaimed. “Miss King told her to come down-stairs and look for us.”

“But where shall we hide them?”

“You put the silver box in the secret drawer,” Joan suggested hastily. “I’ll find a place to hide the book.”

Mary Alice snatched up the silver box and ran to the desk, and Joan reached for the book. She held it in her hand and began to look for a place to hide it. In all that room she could not see a space that would safely conceal a book! There were several drawers in tables and bookcases, but she could visualize some one walking in and opening one of them and being attracted to this book immediately. There was no room behind the bookcases, and she was afraid to stick it underneath, because of Mrs. Oldham’s thorough cleanliness.

Mary Alice raised up from shutting the secret drawer, and stared at Joan in amazement.

“Haven’t you put that book out of sight yet?” she cried. “I hear Mrs. Oldham coming down the stairs!”

Then Joan remembered a story of Poe’s that she had once read, in which a letter was concealed from skilled detectives by leaving it in plain sight in a letter-holder. With a chuckle of satisfaction Joan stuck the book among the other volumes

in the bookcase on top of the desk, just as Mrs. Oldham bustled into the room.

Joan thought that she gave them a sharp glance and scanned the desk quickly, too, but she only said, "Miss King wants you to come to her room as soon as you can."

The girls waited until Mrs. Oldham had gone to the kitchen and then scurried up the stairs and tapped at Miss King's door. She called a cheery "Come in" and they entered.

"Sit down," Miss King continued, "while I untie these packages."

"These packages" looked very fascinating to Joan, because they were labelled:

BOONE'S DRY-GOODS STORE

Unpack Immediately to Prevent Mussing

"I have brought out several attractive white frocks," Miss King said, smiling at Joan. "I think that we can find a satisfactory dress for you among the assortment. Let's try them on. Goodness," she added, giving Joan a closer scrutiny, "where did you get so dirty?"

Joan heard Mary Alice thrust her feet quickly under her chair, and she looked down to see her

own slippers dirty and scuffed, her dress dusty and cobwebby, and a great streak of black on one hand. It was tunnel-dirt, but she did not want to explain that to Miss King. She looked up in distress.

Fortunately, though, Miss King did not seem to think it unusual for girls to be mussed, for she had already turned back to the boxes.

“Run in and wash, and then hurry back,” she admonished them. “I’m anxious to see Joan in these frocks.”

The girls hurried out of the room and down the hall.

“Do give me something to wipe this dust off my shoes, and please brush that long cobweb out of your hair,” Mary Alice said as soon as they were in Joan’s room.

“All right,” Joan laughed. “But you wash your face; it has a great splotch all over one cheek.”

After a few minutes they returned to Miss King’s room, and Joan was soon considering a half-dozen white dresses. One, of heavy white crêpe, very plain, trimmed only with narrow tucks, fitted her perfectly and was just the sort of frock that Joan wore best.

"That's the dress you shall have," smiled Miss King, easily seeing which one the girl preferred.

"It's such a lovely dress," Joan exclaimed with pleasure as she slipped it carefully over her head and then stood caressing the soft fabric. "Do you—think it is all right for me to take the dress?" she added hesitatingly. "No one has ever given me a dress before, and Mother isn't here for me to ask."

"It is quite all right for you to take the dress, Joan. You are being a little companion to me for the next four or five months, and I am taking care of you."

"I am so happy to have it," Joan began when Mary Alice spoke.

"That's the best dress that Boone's have had all summer," she stated, "but I heard Mrs. Boone complaining the other day that no one in Fame appreciated it because it wasn't elaborate."

Mary Alice, Joan knew, intended only to praise her taste, but the words made her feel uncomfortable.

"I—I ——" she began, laying aside the lovely frock and picking up another dress, a dress with a big lace collar and a number of unnecessary ribbons hanging off. "I don't know the value of

these dresses, Miss King, but I would rather choose one of the least expensive ones."

"Nonsense," Miss King spoke firmly, taking the beribboned frock from Joan's fingers. "The tucked dress is the dress you are to have." And, to confirm her statement, she hastily tied up the others. "Mr. Boone said that he and his wife would be taking a drive to-night, and that he would stop and get the dresses I am not going to keep; so it is all settled."

"You are so nice to me," Joan whispered, slipping her hand into Miss King's and finding it easy to do. For Miss King, her cheeks flushed with interest and excitement, and her hair blown about by the drive home, did not look half so cold and forbidding as usual. Even Mary Alice noticed the change, for she said, "Why, Miss King, your hair is curly."

"Yes, it is slightly wavy. Hadn't you noticed that before?" Miss King laughed, smoothing the flying tendrils back with her hand, and then going to the dresser to pat them closer into place.

"Oh, no, don't pat it down hard," Joan begged. "It is so pretty as it is. I know it must be long. Would you let me comb it? I just love to comb any one's hair."

“Do let her,” cried Mary Alice, and Miss King, after a moment’s confused hesitation, consented.

Joan brushed the long strands of wavy gray hair; then pulled them softly over Miss King’s forehead and ears, and pinned a loose knot low on the back of her head. By the time she had finished Mary Alice returned from her room with a silvery-purple ribbon of velvet. She unfastened Miss King’s severe white collar, turned it back in soft lines around her neck, and tied the ribbon under it in a deft bow.

Although the girls had been watching the change, when they stepped back for a final view they nearly gasped at the transformation.

Miss King got up and turned to the mirror. She blinked her eyes once, as if she were not quite certain that it was May King; then she spoke in astonishment.

“Why—why, I didn’t realize that I had been looking so grim and—and unnecessarily unpleasant. What have you two magicians done to me?”

“We really didn’t do a thing,” Joan protested. “It was all there when we started; we just uncovered it a little.”

“I’m sure that it was magic.” Miss King

laughed a little, a sort of trickly, young little laugh that Joan had never heard before. "I shall have to have you come and dress me each morning," she added.

"I'd love to," Joan said earnestly.

"Shall we go down-stairs now? It must be nearly supper-time."

"Wait just a minute while I run for a hankie," Mary Alice cried, flying from the room.

Joan turned for a last glimpse of her lovely new frock. Miss King smiled at her.

"I'm glad that we found one that you like," she said.

"You are so nice to me," Joan half whispered. "I—I want to call you Auntie May. Do you—still want me to?"

Miss King stood still, staring into space. "I'm afraid," she murmured.

Joan knew that she was not speaking to her, but was talking to some part of herself that was far away.

"I'm—afraid," she whispered again, and then suddenly shook herself awake. "Yes, yes I do," she said to Joan, and put her arm around her. "I should love it."

Then Mary Alice came back, and Miss King,

with an arm around each of them, led the way down the long stairs.

Mary Alice chatted gayly, but Joan could not speak. She was too happy, for Miss King liked her after all. Now she could write to her mother that letter she had put off for so long. She could tell her how pretty Miss King was, with her soft gray hair and her flushed cheeks. She could talk unrestrainedly about the new frock and the room she was to decorate.

“Mrs. Oldham will not approve of my hair,” Miss King whispered to them chummily, as they entered the dining-room.

Mrs. Oldham, though, did not seem to notice anything, and, with her eyes on her plate, did not speak at all, except once when she looked up from her soup and remarked that her ball of twine was gone from the kitchen-cabinet.

The girls turned startled faces towards each other. They suddenly remembered that they had had the twine the afternoon they had measured the house for the secret room. Joan had no idea what they had done with it, and she knew from Mary Alice's confused face that she could not remember either. Miss King, noting their embarrassment, laughed and said, “I think the girls

have had it; they will hunt it up for you some time to-morrow."

By the time supper was over Mr. Boone and his wife arrived. They stayed until long after ten o'clock, while Mary Alice and Joan got sleepier and sleepier. Finally they left, and Miss King, who had noticed the girls' tired faces, advised them to run to bed, while she finished going over some accounts in the library.

Although they were sleepy, they had hoped to have a chance to get the silver box and take it to their rooms, but now there was nothing for them to do but go up-stairs without seeing it again.

They got ready for bed in silence, so tired from the events of the day that their eyes would hardly stay open. Finally Joan tumbled into her white bed, and a minute later she heard Mary Alice turn out her light and jump in.

Joan had closed her eyes and was half asleep when Mary Alice called softly, "I'm afraid to leave it there."

Joan knew at once what she meant. "I am sure that if we had it, some of our luggage-keys would unlock it," she called back.

"They will unlock it in the morning," Mary

Alice replied, "but I'm afraid to leave it there all night."

"Well, I'm afraid to prowl around to-night, because that man will undoubtedly be inspecting the passage to see what we were doing there. Besides, I'm so sleepy. Let's leave it in the desk until morning; it will be safe. When we found the secret drawers no one had looked in them for years."

"Maybe they hadn't," muttered Mary Alice, "but when I slipped the silver box in that drawer the picture of Consuelo was not there!"

CHAPTER XX

THE SILVER BOX DISAPPEARS

MARY ALICE woke Joan up the next morning.

“You are a lazy thing,” she exclaimed good-naturedly, as she pulled the pillow from under Joan’s head in an effort to get her up.

“I’m still sleepy,” Joan objected, clutching at her disappearing pillow.

“What makes you sleepy? Did you stay awake last night, or did you prow around in the middle of the night without waking me?”

“I went to sleep immediately. I suppose I was worn out from the tunnel trip and the bump on my head; anyway I went to sleep while you were still talking to me.”

“I know that you did. At least you heard me say that the picture of Consuelo was not in the desk when I put the silver box there?” Mary Alice queried, perching on the foot of the bed.

“That’s the last thing I heard, and I knew that I ought to be excited about it, but I was just about asleep, and I couldn’t bear to wake up enough to be excited.”

“I suppose, though, we should have expected the picture to be gone, because Mrs. Oldham was prowling around the desk when we found it.”

“She probably has it.”

“But what in the world does she want with it? If Consuelo lived here so many years ago, what importance could her picture have now?”

“And what connection can she have with the bright spot in the music-room carpet?”

“That dog-rug in the music-room certainly made an impression on you, Joan,” Mary Alice laughed.

“Well, I can’t have lavender-taffeta curtains and a lavender-taffeta pillow in a room with a great big dog on the floor. You don’t think Miss King will want me to, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Mary Alice consoled her. “I think Miss King will get a more appropriate rug, or find a piece of furniture to put there. Or, maybe, whatever was there will come back; maybe it came back last night!”

Joan chuckled and then continued soberly: “Well, that dog-rug may not be connected with Consuelo, but I am sure of one thing—the silver box is. It, at least, looks as if it might have been put in the tunnel in Consuelo’s time.”

“You know,” Mary Alice went on, “I didn’t say anything yesterday, but I don’t believe there was a thing in the world in that silver box. It was no heavier than the box itself should have been, and when I shook it, I couldn’t hear a thing inside.”

“I thought of that, too,” Joan answered regretfully. “Won’t it be disappointing if it is just an empty box?”

“Well, there is one way to find out,” Mary Alice said decisively, “and that is to go down and get it. Besides, I’m anxious to know if it is still there.”

“Oh, I think it will be there. Since Mrs. Oldham doesn’t know that we put it in there, she is not very likely to open drawers that she thinks are empty.”

“That’s true enough, but I’m a little bit worried. Let’s hurry down and see if it is safe.”

“All right.”

“You’ll have to get up first,” Mary Alice admonished.

But by the time Joan was dressed, Mrs. Oldham was calling them to breakfast and they did not have a chance to reach the library. The breakfast seemed a leisurely and long-drawn-out

meal to the impatient girls, but finally it was over.

Then, just as they sprang up, with their faces turned eagerly towards the dining-room door, Miss King spoke.

“Joan, come into the library with me. I want to talk to you for a few minutes. Perhaps in the meantime Mary Alice will help Mrs. Oldham with the dishes.”

“Of course I will,” answered Mary Alice, starting immediately to clear the table.

Joan and Miss King went into the library, where Miss King sat down by the table and motioned Joan into a chair near by.

“Joan,” she began abruptly, “did your mother tell you that I had suggested that you could attend the college in Fame while you are here? That will be, approximately, the first semester, and should enable you to start in at Mrs. Haddon’s School with your class the second semester.”

“I remember that you mentioned the Fame College in your letter to Mother,” Joan answered briefly. “I—I—Mother and I didn’t speak of it, though.” She hated the very word “school,” because it brought to her mind all the bitterness of her disappointment in not entering Mrs. Had-

don's with her chums. She and her mother had not mentioned the college part of the arrangements after the first day, when Mrs. Kellogg had said that there was not enough money for Joan to go to Mrs. Haddon's. Mrs. Kellogg had not referred to the suggestion in Miss King's letter, and Joan had rightly guessed that it was because there was not enough money even to pay the smaller tuition of Fame College.

Now Joan answered Miss King briefly, because she did not want to talk about her college work, and she hoped that Miss King would not speak of it any more. She did not want to tell Miss King that she had no money to spend on tuition or even books, and, remembering how she had cried when she had had to say that she could not afford a white dress, she hoped that Miss King would not press her for an answer now.

Perhaps Miss King understood Joan's silence better than she had when the white dress was mentioned. Anyway she continued slowly, "I wonder if you will do something for me, Joan?"

"Of course I will," Joan cried eagerly,—“anything that I can do.”

"I want you to let me send you to college this first semester. Now don't say anything until I

have finished," Miss King added hastily, as Joan started to protest.

Joan remained silent, but it was several minutes before Miss King continued: "Many, many years ago a very unhappy girl at your mother's home in New York City was getting ready to go to a Christmas party. She was unhappy because she had received a letter telling her that she could not finish her senior year in Mrs. Haddon's School since her father was in financial difficulties. Naturally the letter was a great blow to her, and there were traces of tears in her eyes when your mother came in to get her to go down-stairs. The girl was proud, and did not want to admit the truth, but your mother grew so worried for fear something unpleasant had happened during the vacation that the girl finally showed her the letter. Then ——"

Again Miss King paused, her gaze fixed on the distant window. When Joan stirred irresolutely, she quickly went on.

"That is almost all of the story, Joan. The girl, of course, was I. Your grandfather—your mother's father—offered me the money to finish my senior year, but my pride wouldn't let me accept, much as I wanted to. I went back from

the Christmas vacation at your mother's home very, very miserable, although, since the semester wasn't over until the last of January, I kept hoping that I would get a letter from my father saying that he could send the money. Instead, when the letter did come, it contained money for my fare home, and I went sadly to the office to tell Mrs. Haddon that I was leaving. You can imagine my surprise when she said that my tuition had been paid.

“ ‘ But,’ I gasped, ‘ I have just received a letter with money to come home! ’

“ Then Mrs. Haddon told me that the tuition had come with your mother's, and that she had written my father asking him to accept the loan, rather than interrupt my last year of college.

“ So my college career was unbroken, but the debt that I owed your grandfather was not paid when my father returned the money. It was a debt of kindness to a friend, and I want to pay it back to you. And I want you to accept it because it is a strange kind of debt,—one in which the debtor gets her satisfaction not in paying the debt, but in having the payment accepted, because then the debtor knows that she has a real friend.”

Miss King paused, and Joan sat silent. Much as she wanted to go to school and keep up with her class, she still found it hard to accept so great a loan from Miss King.

“I—I hardly know what to say,” she stammered. “I should love to have the chance to keep up with my class back home, but—but I would have to have money for everything, tuition, books, and even clothes if I went to school, and—and, although I know the money doesn’t matter to you because you have plenty, I hate to take so much ——”

“Yes, I have plenty of money for your semester at Fame,” Miss King answered with a strange little smile, “and I hope that you will accept it, Joan. Don’t think about the money part of it—think instead how happy you will make me by accepting. If you wish, we can call it a small loan which your father can repay any time that is convenient for him.”

“What do you think Mother would tell me to do?” Joan questioned thoughtfully.

“I am sure, from the tone of your mother’s letters, that the deepest regret she has is the fact that you cannot go to Mrs. Haddon’s this semester. My plan will make it possible for you to

go there next semester, and I am sure that your mother will feel that this is a sensible thing to do, and will not object to my sending you. But don't try to answer me now, Joan; think it over and write to your mother. While you are waiting for her answer, you and Mary Alice can study for the entrance exams. Mary Alice, you know, is going to Fame College this winter."

Just then Mrs. Oldham came in with the mail, and laid a sheaf of newspapers and letters and a large package before Miss King. Instead of leaving, the housekeeper stood in the doorway and announced that she was ready to sweep and dust the library.

"All right, Mrs. Oldham," Miss King replied, "you may have the library now. I'll go to my room to look over my mail, and Joan can find Mary Alice."

Joan hurried into the kitchen to tell Mary Alice that it would be another hour before they could look in the desk for the silver box.

"Then the thing for us to do," Mary Alice decided, after listening to her story, "is to help Mrs. Oldham dust, or this box will get away from us as the picture did."

So the girls ventured into the library and of-

ferred their services to Mrs. Oldham, which were accepted. For more than an hour they dusted nooks and crannies, carried rugs into the yard to be swept, gathered new flowers, and did innumerable more things that Mrs. Oldham named.

Finally, when they were beginning to be exhausted, Mrs. Oldham decided that the room was spotless enough to satisfy even her cleanly taste, and they were through. The girls sat down in the window-seat, ostensibly to rest, but they only waited until they could hear the housekeeper in the kitchen, beating eggs for a luncheon custard, and then they hurried to the desk.

“At last,” Mary Alice murmured, letting down the lid, “we are about to discover whether the box is here or isn’t here!”

“Don’t stop to talk,” Joan insisted. “Which drawer did you put it in?”

“The right one,” Mary Alice answered, sliding out the false bottom of the pigeonhole and pressing the spring.

Anxiously the girls leaned forward. Then Mary Alice turned to Joan with chagrin on her face.

“It’s just as I expected,” she complained. “The box is gone!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE LETTER

“ARE you sure?” Joan asked, although she could see, as plainly as Mary Alice, that the drawer was empty. “Maybe you put it in the other drawer?” she added hopefully.

“I’ll look in the other drawer,” Mary Alice replied. “But I know that it isn’t there. I put it in this one,—the same one that had Consuelo’s picture in it.”

The other drawer was empty, too, and the girls stared at each other in dismayed anger.

“Now we may never know whether there was anything in the silver box or not,” Mary Alice moaned, while Joan nodded regretfully.

For a few minutes the girls were silent, and then Joan exclaimed, “Well, at least the book is here. I saw it when I dusted.”

“Let’s have a look at it,” Mary Alice agreed. “It’s not as interesting as the silver box, but it may have the man’s name on the fly-leaf, or be inscribed, ‘To my best cell-mate and fellow prisoner.’”

“It will probably have absolutely nothing in

it," Joan answered morosely, taking the book from the place she had put it in the top of the bookcase-secretary.

"I don't imagine that it will, either," added Mary Alice, as Joan handed her the novel. "It's only a volume of Scott, and I know where the rest of the set is."

"You do?" Joan gasped.

For reply Mary Alice went over to one of the bookcases and slipped the book into the shelves, where it was immediately lost among ten or fifteen other volumes of the same binding.

"How did you know that?" cried Joan.

"I noticed this set of Scott when I was dusting," Mary Alice explained; "it has such an attractive red-and-gold binding. And of course I recognized the binding as soon as you handed me the book we found in the tunnel."

"The man evidently was borrowing it to read," Joan guessed. "He probably has lots of leisure time, despite the fact that he always seems to be prowling around."

"It's funny," Mary Alice mused, still standing by the bookcase, "that he should be so bold as to come into the library in the daytime, as he did that afternoon we were reading here."

“ Maybe he listened and didn’t hear any one.”

“ Perhaps, but it seems to me that he was taking a pretty big chance of running into somebody, Miss King, for instance.”

“ Mrs. Oldham probably told him that Miss King was driving her to her sick sister’s. That was the afternoon she went, you remember? Undoubtedly she tells him her plans.”

“ But he must have known that we were visiting here,” argued Mary Alice, “ and I don’t think he wants us to see him either.”

“ I have it,” Joan exclaimed, after a few minutes. “ Do you recall what Miss King said that morning when she told us she was leaving? ”

“ She said—she invited us to go along, or, rather, she said that she would have invited us, but that it was hot and she wanted to visit a friend who was ill.”

“ More than that,” Joan exclaimed triumphantly. “ She said that she had told Mrs. Oldham that she was going to take us, and had since remembered the sick friend! ”

“ And recall,” Mary Alice cried, catching the inference, “ how startled Mrs. Oldham was when she discovered that we weren’t going. She was flurried and angry. I’m sure that she had told

the man that the house would be vacant, and that he might come in."

"I know that is it," Joan agreed. "He came for his luncheon, and decided to take a book back with him."

Mary Alice had drawn the book again from its shelf and was looking at it curiously. "Imagine," she murmured; "he was reading *The Bride of Lammermoor* in that spooky old mill. I should have been scared—Joan!" Mary Alice broke off abruptly, and Joan watched in amazement as the book trembled in her fingers.

"What is it?" Joan breathed, as her friend continued to stare at the open pages of the novel.

"I've—I've found the picture of Consuelo May," she answered, her voice trembling with excitement. "It's here, stuck between the pages of this book."

Joan hurried to her side, and peered at the faded picture of the young Consuelo May as it lay calmly on the pages Scott had devoted to the struggles of the unfortunate Lucy Ashton.

"It's quite plain," Joan said quietly. "The afternoon we went to the mill to spy on the man, he came here, got the novel, and took the picture of Consuelo from the desk."

“Yes,” Mary Alice answered, and picked up the picture. Underneath was a sheet of folded paper that had been concealed by the picture.

Without a word Joan reached gingerly for the paper. It was spotted and yellow and crackled a warning when she carefully opened it. There was writing on the inside, but it was very dim. The girls ran hastily to the window-seat to read the faded lines. The words started abruptly:

so I left my jewel-case—you remember the secret hiding-place of my childhood, and how I once stuck my big dolly too far in, and she fell through? Oh, the tears that were shed then!

I had arrived at the mill too early, and, while waiting, I suddenly remembered what was in the jewel-case, and I dashed back to leave it. But some one was in the kitchen, and I was afraid to come in. I couldn't wait longer, because, as I have already written, Roderick didn't know whether I was coming to the mill or not—please believe me—and he had little hope of my fleeing with him, although I had promised to come to the mill to say good-bye if I would not go. So I left the jewel-case where I used to leave my dolly, and hastened back to the mill.

I will mail this letter the first thing when we land, although you must have guessed long ago where I went, and with whom.

I am very, very happy with my husband, a happiness that will be complete if you will write me just three words, “I forgive you.” C.

“Why—why ——” Joan exclaimed vaguely, handing the paper back to Mary Alice. “What does it mean?”

“It must be the last page from a letter. A jewel-case, it says first. Do you suppose the silver box we found was a jewel-case?”

“You think ——” Joan began, and then she suddenly saw the facts of the letter dovetailing with the facts of their visit to the tunnel.

“I understand part of it,” she cried. “The writer says that she was going to the mill, and then ran back to the kitchen and some one was there; so she left the case on her way back to the mill. And she left it in a hiding-place where her dolly had once fallen through. There must have been a niche of some sort in the walled-up door to the secret room. Probably a rock had fallen out, and here she had had a hiding-place, and here her dolly was stuck too far in and tumbled through to the secret room. And here, in her hurry, she stuck her jewel-case, knowing that it would be safe until this letter was received.”

“And, of course, when the rocks tumbled in with you,” Mary Alice went on with the story, “the jewel-case fell down and hit you on the head.” She hesitated doubtfully. “Still, Joan,

we didn't see any dolly, and we must have been the first ones to break through to the secret room."

"But a doll on a damp earth floor wouldn't be much of a doll after years, would it? Moreover, the rocks fell in and covered up the very place where it must have been lying," Joan continued.

"That's true," agreed Mary Alice thoughtfully, as she looked again at the letter. "It is signed 'C.' I'm sure that it is Consuelo, and that Consuelo is the white-satin girl."

"And she did get married after all," Joan agreed.

"And she eloped, don't you think? Doesn't it sound fascinating? Slipping out of the house—through a tunnel—meeting her lover in an old mill—and being married in that beautiful white-satin dress——"

"That last doesn't fit," Joan objected. "She says in the letter that when he came to the mill he didn't know she was going with him; so she must have made up her mind at the last minute. Under those circumstances I doubt if she would have an elaborate white-satin wedding-dress all ready to elope in."

"I suppose you are right," Mary Alice granted.

"But I do feel that Consuelo is the white-satin girl." She looked at the picture of the baby Consuelo May.

"So do I," admitted Joan, "but this baby, Consuelo May of Santiago, Chile, had to grow up for several years before she was big enough to elope."

"Here we are, arguing about the wedding-dress, again," Mary Alice said suddenly, "when the important thing in the letter is the jewel-case, and the important thing about that is why she decided at the last moment not to take it with her."

"We are both sure that there weren't any jewels in it when we found it," Joan replied thoughtfully. "Even the smallest ring would have made a rattle that we could have heard."

"Maybe she decided that she could carry her jewels more easily if they were not in that silver case," Mary Alice suggested. "But it seems rather funny that she took so much trouble about the empty case."

"But it wasn't empty," Joan objected, as she consulted the letter, "because she says that she came back with the case when she suddenly remembered what was in it. There was something

in there that she definitely did not want to take with her.”

“ I don’t know what became of it, then,” Mary Alice said, “ but I bet this letter explains what the man was looking for.”

“ A jewel-case with no jewels in it! ” scoffed Joan.

“ We are the ones who know that the case didn’t have any jewels in it. Look at the letter; if he had only this one page, he wouldn’t know that the case was empty, for the writer just says ‘ my jewel-case.’ ”

“ Yes, that’s true,” Joan agreed, scanning the letter. “ It only says ‘ jewel-case,’ and not a word about jewels being in it; or, for that matter, not being in it.”

“ At least he has the case now, and knows that it doesn’t have any jewels in it! ”

“ You mean,” Joan corrected, “ that the picture disappeared from the secret drawer, and he had it; and now the case has gone, and he probably has that, too.”

“ I insist that it is the same thing,” Mary Alice maintained. “ There is no doubt in my mind where the jewel-case is.”

“ There’s not much in mine, either. But let’s

put these things where he can never find them," Joan said, taking the picture and the letter in her hands.

"Let's do," Mary Alice agreed, returning the book to the case. "But is there such a place?"

"Of course there is," insisted Joan. "I am going to take them to my room and fold them up in a handkerchief and put them among the others in my handkerchief-box. I think that will be safe, don't you?"

Again Mary Alice agreed. "Hide them deep, and then come back and let's talk the whole thing over."

Joan hurried up the front stairs and ran quietly down the hall. Since she came first to Mary Alice's door, she opened it with a fleeting idea of putting the papers in the heavy dictionary in that room, in preference to the handkerchief-box. As she paused to shut the door behind her she heard a sound from her own room.

Startled, she leaned against the door and listened breathlessly. She could just make out the sound of footsteps stealthily crossing her floor, but she could not tell whether they were coming towards Mary Alice's room, or whether they were going towards the hall door. Then she heard the



THE INNOCENT LITTLE PINK-AND-WHITE ROOM WAS IN A WOFUL STATE. —Page 277.

hall door softly close, and she knew that the intruder had left her room.

For a second more she stood paralyzed, and then she dashed across Mary Alice's room and threw open the dividing door. One swift glimpse of her room left Joan almost more angry than frightened. The innocent little pink-and-white room was in a woful state. The dresser-drawers were standing open, with their contents pulled awry and half hanging out, her traveling-case had been dragged to the middle of the floor and emptied on the rag rug, and the pillows and covers of her bed had been hastily pulled off.

“If I hadn't scared him away, I wonder if he would have straightened things up before he left?” Joan muttered to herself as she shut the dresser-drawers, piled the clothing back into her bag, and remade the bed.

Then she went out, carefully closing the door behind her, and went slowly down-stairs to Mary Alice with the letter and the picture still in her hands.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SILVER BOX IS FOUND

WHEN Joan entered the library Mary Alice was sitting in front of the desk, eyeing it somewhat sternly.

“ Oh, Mary Alice! ” Joan cried excitedly.

“ Sh-h-h,” Mary Alice cautioned. “ You don’t need to tell any one but me.” Her eyes fell on the articles in Joan’s hand. “ I thought you went up-stairs to hide those? ”

“ I didn’t dare leave them in my room,” said Joan, lowering her voice and trying to sit calmly in a chair. “ Some one was searching my room! ”

“ What? Who? ” Mary Alice exclaimed.

“ Sh-h-h,” cautioned Joan in her turn.

“ You are justified in that retort,” Mary Alice grinned. “ I am properly subdued. But do tell me what you are talking about. Imagine some one searching your room! ”

“ All through my dresser-drawers,” Joan moaned, “ and they upset my traveling-bag, and mussed up the bed, and you know how I hate to make beds! ”

Joan went on to tell how she had entered Mary

Alice's room, heard the prowler, but had arrived too late to see him.

"Was anything missing?" Mary Alice cried as she finished.

"Not a thing that I could discover. My money was in my purse in the top dresser-drawer, and it wasn't touched, although the drawer was mussed up."

"Then I bet the person was looking for the very things you have in your hand."

"You mean the picture and the letter?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought," Joan said. "Whatever shall I do with the things though? I was afraid to leave them in my room."

"Put them in your pockets, out of sight, right now," Mary Alice admonished. "Mrs. Oldham may come in any minute."

"I suppose that it was the man in the mill who was in my room," Joan murmured. "As far as we know, he is the only person who knows that we have the Scott novel—only, of course, he might have told Mrs. Oldham. Do you suppose it was Mrs. Oldham?"

"I don't know, but I hardly think so. Somehow I can't imagine her making a muss in your

room as you describe it. She's too clean and orderly, even if she was in a great hurry."

"I think it was the man, myself," Joan admitted.

"Joan," Mary Alice said suddenly, "I don't believe the man was after the picture and the letter."

"What on earth was he looking for, then?"

"The very thing he was looking for in the tunnel."

"You mean the silver box?" Joan was puzzled. "But I thought we decided that he got the silver box out of the desk?"

"I don't mean the silver box, but what was in the silver box—Consuelo's jewel-case. You see, he knows that we probably found the jewel-case in the tunnel-room, and we know that he probably got it from the desk last night. Now I'm quite sure that it contained no jewels, but he must have expected to find something in it. At least a sane man would not hunt for an empty box. Now he got the box from the desk and found it empty. What would he naturally think?"

"That we had managed to get it open," Joan exclaimed.

“Exactly. So he looks in your room for the contents! And if you hadn’t interrupted him, he would probably have looked in mine too.”

“That sounds very logical.”

“I think it does, too,” Mary Alice sighed complacently. “Now I have explained your mystery; I wish you would explain mine.”

“Yours? Do you mean to say that something happened to you while I was gone?” Joan gasped.

“Yes.”

“Oh, tell me, Mary Alice. I didn’t make you wait.”

“Look at this desk closely,” Mary Alice said.

“It looks very neat, as it should, since Mrs. Oldham has just been cleaning in here.”

“But look at it closely, Joan. Don’t you see anything different?”

“Why, no,” Joan was bewildered. “It looks just as it did the day we hunted and hunted for the spring to the secret drawers.”

“My, but you are unobserving,” Mary Alice laughed. “I should make you find the change yourself, but I’ll give you a cue. Do you remember how we convinced ourselves that there was a secret drawer in the desk that day?”

“Why, yes,” Joan exclaimed. “We stuck a

piece of paper through that little crack in the panel.”

“What crack?” Mary Alice was enjoying herself hugely.

“Why, Mary Alice, this crack in the pa——” Joan broke off abruptly, and leaned closer to the desk. She spoke slowly, dazedly: “There isn’t any crack here!”

“No, the crack is gone,” Mary Alice agreed complacently.

“Are we dreaming? I can’t understand it at all,” Joan cried. “Where could a crack go?”

“I guess it went with the desk.”

“You mean——”

“This isn’t the same desk!”

Joan stared at Mary Alice, so astonished that she could not speak for several minutes. “Oh, but that’s preposterous!” she finally exclaimed. “The books are just as they were; everything looks the same.”

“Does it? Are you sure, Joan? The crack is gone, and the only explanation that I can think of is that this is another desk. Now that is the only difference I can really see, but somehow, when I stand back and look at this desk, I just feel that it isn’t the same one. Somehow the at-

mosphere of having come from England to Charleston many years ago, and of having seen years of service right here, seems to be gone. I suppose that is all fancy, but, Joan, I really thought of it before I noticed that this panel is not cracked."

"But who could have changed the desk?" Joan cried. "And where, anyway, did this desk come from?"

"Maybe it was sitting on the carpet in the music-room," Mary Alice suggested.

"No, not there," Joan decided. "That spot is long and narrow, and this desk is shorter and thicker."

"I guess it is," Mary Alice admitted. "Then I haven't the least idea where this desk came from, nor why it came, either."

"Mary Alice, this mystery isn't amusing any more. I'm going to tell Miss King."

"But remember what she said to us the other time we tried to tell her about the man in the mill and Consuelo?" Mary Alice answered, but Joan knew from the tone of her voice that she was in sympathy with the resolve.

"I remember. But I can't believe that she knows everything that has been going on. I

don't think that she knows anything about this man," Joan argued hotly, not so much with Mary Alice, who showed no signs of disagreeing with her, but with herself. "I am sure that Miss King would not let him search my room if she did." She felt that she had to know whether Miss King was being kind to her and offering to send her to school and wanting to be friends, and then, behind her back, letting some man search through her personal belongings.

"All right. Let's go to her once more," Mary Alice agreed. "But you have to tell her."

"I will."

Joan closed the desk and added: "She must be in her room now. Anyway, the last time I saw her she was going up-stairs to read her mail."

"Let's go up the back stairs," Mary Alice said. "I want to get a drink."

"All right, but let's hurry."

The girls went into the kitchen and Mary Alice went on to the back porch, to pump a drink of cool cistern-water. Mrs. Oldham was not in the kitchen, and the custard she had been cooking was on the table, still in the cooking-pan.

"It's strange that Mrs. Oldham, with all her cleanliness," Mary Alice commented between

slow sips of water, "should cool a custard in the pan."

"Oh, let's quit seeing things unusual," Joan cried, so upset by her unpleasant thoughts about Miss King that she hardly knew what she was saying. "Maybe, after all, we have just worked ourselves into a state of mind when natural things seem mysterious."

"Um-m, maybe," Mary Alice said dryly. "But I would hate to think that everything that has happened lately has been an everyday occurrence."

By this time the girls were at the top of the stairs, and Joan paused a minute to look in her room, partly from curiosity, but mostly because she was a little timid about approaching Miss King.

"Has any one been back?" asked Mary Alice.

"I don't think so. It is just as I left it."

Then they went on down the hall to Miss King's room, and Joan tapped on the door. There was no answer until she rapped again quite loudly. Miss King's faint "Come in" was entirely unlike her usual calm voice, and with a feeling of uneasiness Joan opened the door.

Miss King was sitting in a low rocking-chair

by the window, staring abstractedly into space. In the hand that dangled by her side was a legal-looking document, and on her lap lay the silver box.

“The jewel-case!” Mary Alice exclaimed, but Joan could say nothing. Her heart grew heavy as she realized that Miss King had the jewel-case instead of the man, as they had thought. So perhaps Miss King had had her room searched, or, worse and worse, had searched it herself.

As Mary Alice spoke, Miss King had given a little start, and turned towards them with a vague gesture.

“What do you know about this jewel-case?” she asked sadly, and Joan thought that she had been crying.

“We know that it once belonged to Consuelo,” Joan slowly replied, “and that she left it when she eloped.”

“If I only could have found it years ago,” Miss King muttered desperately, “the heartaches it might have saved!”

The girls were quiet, not knowing what to do or say. Finally Miss King brushed the tears from her eyes, looked sadly at the jewel-case as it lay on her lap, and then turned abruptly to Joan.

“I didn’t know,” she began, “I didn’t know that she left the jewel-case. When you understand that, you don’t feel that I treated her so badly, do you, Joan?”

“I don’t know, Miss King.” Joan spoke gently. “You see, we don’t know much about it at all.”

“Of course you don’t,” Miss King cried excitedly, holding her hand to her head as if it were whirling around. “I seem to be confused. But sit down and let me tell you. I must talk to some one. You are unprejudiced; maybe you can tell me whether I acted unjustly, whether it was all my fault.”

Awed and half frightened, the girls silently sat down on the floor at her feet. They were very quiet, and after a while Joan began to think Miss King had forgotten them.

But finally she began slowly: “I hadn’t been home from Mrs. Haddon’s School very long when my father died. After his death this house seemed lonelier than ever. My grief for him was only intensified by the absence of any relatives or friends, so I decided to get some one to stay with me. I didn’t want to get just a paid companion,—the friendship we can buy is never satisfactory,—but I had no near relatives or

friends. However, I remembered a cousin of my father's who had gone to California and married into a Spanish family. Shortly after the marriage her husband had decided to return to Spain and she was forced to go, too. I had known her well at one time, and we still corresponded at long intervals. I knew that she had, by now, a large family and that they were very poor; but it is probable that I would never have thought of taking one of her girls had she not at this time sent me a picture of her youngest daughter ——”

“Consuelo May ——” Joan breathed.

“Why, yes; that is, just Consuelo—Consuelo Galdos. The pictured face fascinated me, with its mixture of Spanish indolence and King sturdiness. Eventually I sent for her, and the little girl who came to me was a lovely, timid child. I was twenty-four then, and she was only a child, but I soon felt like her older sister, and became more and more attached to her as the years went on, until I forgot that she didn't belong to me, and that others had a claim on her. By the time she was seventeen and a beautiful young girl, my whole life was devoted to her, and all my thoughts and plans were for her.”

Miss King paused for a minute, and there was

a tender smile on her face as she thought of the girl whom she had loved.

“Then, abruptly, her mother wanted her back. The family in Spain had prospered with the years, and by this time all the children had married; so the mother began to want the one she had sent to me in her less fortunate days. Needless to say, I was panic-stricken. I could not bear the thought of parting with Consuelo. You can see how I must have felt?” Miss King begged of Joan, her voice rising hysterically.

“Yes, I understand,” Joan soothed her. “It would have been a terrible shock to have the girl whom you had grown to love snatched away.”

“A shock,” she exclaimed eagerly, “a terrible shock. That is what it was. The first letter had only hinted tentatively at the idea, and I did not tell Consuelo, but I knew that the demand was inevitably coming. I was sure that she did not want to return, for although her father was a Spaniard, her mother was an American and a King. And she had been so happy in America compared to the poverty-haunted days in Spain. Her friends here were the sweetest of the girls in Fame and the manliest of the boys, and Consuelo always mingled gracefully and happily with

them. The gay times this old house saw then ——” Miss King’s voice trailed away, and Joan’s mind went on and on, visioning the merry picture of the gay young people, as she knew Miss King was doing.

Finally Miss King drew herself together with a jerk. “Just at the time her mother’s letters were growing more and more insistent, without, just yet, having come to a definite demand, I found a way to keep Consuelo. A very good friend of mine, a man older than Consuelo, but attractive, intelligent, and a prominent man in the State, asked me for permission to marry her. I knew that if she were married, her mother would not ask her to return to Spain, and, although she would not be so much mine, she would still be close to me. So I arranged the wedding.”

“But what did Consuelo think of the man?” whispered Mary Alice in the long silence that followed.

“Consuelo was a starry-eyed young girl, who was rather vague about everything at the time,” Miss King answered carefully. “Coming from Spain, she was accustomed to the parents arranging the marriages, and, although I insisted that she had the right to do as she wished, she

seemed very content with my plans. I can see now that she did not know at that time what love and marriage meant. She liked and respected the man, though, and thought that whatever I did was right, and made not the least objection to the marriage; so I went on with the plans.

“How I enjoyed arranging the wedding!” Miss King continued, pleasant memories softening her voice. “We made a trip to Kansas City for her trousseau, and had a white-satin wedding-dress made while we were there,—the same dress, Joan,” she broke off, “that I thought we could make over for you.”

“Yes, I know,” Joan answered. “Mary Alice and I were sure that the dress was for Consuelo. We called her the white-satin girl before we knew her name.”

“The white-satin girl! How that fits her. She looked so beautiful in the dress, with the lace veil making her dark hair all misty, and the cream of the satin fading into the cream of her skin.

“When we came back from Kansas City there was only one more week before the wedding. There were innumerable parties being given for her in Fame, and I sent her in to stay, for the long drive back and forth was too trying for her,

and I was busy with a general grand cleaning and great sessions of baking for the wedding."

Miss King paused, and when she continued her voice was miserable. "Consuelo stayed with a girl chum whose brother had a friend, a young mining engineer, who had stopped to visit on his way to Chile. The end of it was that the young stranger and Consuelo fell in love."

"Chile," whispered Mary Alice to Joan in the pause. "The picture of Consuelo was from Chile and not from Spain!"

"But," Joan objected, also in a whisper, "the picture is of a little girl, and Consuelo was grown by the time she eloped to Chile, if that is what happened."

"Don't you see?" Mary Alice finished. "The picture is Consuelo's daughter—and her middle name is for Miss King herself!"

"Consuelo May," breathed Joan; "it must be."

"Consuelo came back the day before the wedding," Miss King went on, "and I knew nothing of what had happened, although I knew that she seemed strangely quiet and sad, but I only thought it the natural reaction of a young girl who was to be married the next day.

“That night I gave her my wedding present. We were sitting in her bedroom,—your room, Joan, the little pink-and-white room,—and all her wedding finery was laid out, since she was to be married early in the morning. Her bag was nearly packed for the wedding-trip, and her jewel-case lay open on the dresser, this same silver jewel-case containing only some little things of her mother’s, for she didn’t have any valuable jewels. My wedding present was a deed to the pasture-land of Scared Acres. I intended,” Miss King stopped to explain, “to rent the land back from her, so that she would always have an income and be independent of her husband. Though I didn’t realize it at the time, I can see now that my wish to make her independent of her husband was not so much pride as it was a feeling that Consuelo did not love the man she was marrying.

“She seemed very tired when she thanked me; so I laid the deed in her open jewel-case—it just fitted—and kissed her good-night.”

“It just fitted,” whispered Mary Alice; “that is why it did not slip around and make any noise when we had the silver box.”

When Miss King went on her voice was un-

steady. "That was the last time I ever saw her. Some time that night she went away with the young engineer. You can imagine what a blow it was to me,—not only to my love but to my pride. I was up early the next morning, but I did not go to waken Consuelo until time for her to dress.

"She had left no note, but fortunately the chum's brother missed his guest, and, suspecting the affair, called me. In spite of our frantic telephoning some of the guests arrived for the wedding——" Miss King broke off abruptly. "I sha'n't try to discuss that harrowing morning. I would not see any one, and after my friends had gone and I was here alone I knew some moments of black, black misery. My whole being was hurt with the thought that Consuelo had deliberately deceived me. You can imagine my feelings; it is too painful to retell them even now.

"I remembered the deed. Although she did not take any of the lovely trousseau—how I wish she had, poor little Consuelo with her stolen romance—she had taken the deed. Not that I didn't want her to have the land,—even in those first black days I didn't wish that,—but it seemed such a breach of love and faith to elope and take

with her my wedding-present for her marriage to another man, the man of my choice. It was one of those things that brand the people who do them—if you understand me. I felt that my very deep love for Consuelo had been tossed back to me in a careless, unfeeling way, and that she did not even value my good opinion. Then it was that I forbade the servants to mention her name, and, because I would not speak of her, the few people who knew of the romance with the young engineer respected my wishes and did not tell, so that her disappearance took on the aspects of a mystery.”

Again Miss King's fingers caressed the worn surface of the silver box. “But now that the jewel-case has come to light, I realize that Consuelo probably snatched it up that night without thinking of the deed, and when she got downstairs she remembered it and left the case with the deed still in it.

“So, Joan, that is the reason I have been so upset over the finding of this silver box. To think that it has been in this house all these years that I have been refusing to have Consuelo's name mentioned in my presence. But I can't understand why she did not write to me.

I can imagine that that night she could not bring herself to tell me,—that is what made her so sad and distraught; but afterward she might have written, asking my forgiveness. I would have given it so readily if she had only asked ——” Miss King’s voice died away in a sob.

“She did write to you,” Joan breathed softly.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST OF THE MAN IN THE MILL

“No.” Miss King shook her head in denial of Joan’s statement. “I have never had one word from Consuelo. The man with whom she eloped was on his way to Chile, and I suppose they went there. I might have traced them through the firm of engineers for which he worked, but when Consuelo was willing to leave me so heartlessly after all of our years together, and made no effort to communicate with me, I would not write to her, although to know nothing about her wrung my heart again and again.”

“But ——” Joan was puzzled, and fumbled in her pocket for the page of the letter, “but isn’t this part of a note to you?”

Miss King reached for the paper, without seeming to understand what Joan was talking about. She read it slowly, still dazed. She looked up once with a puzzled face, and then suddenly she uttered a sharp cry, and read through the page hastily.

“Joan, Joan, where did you get this?” she cried, falling to her knees before Joan and grasp-

ing her shoulder. "It's—it's from Consuelo; I know her handwriting. My dear Consuelo—she did write to me, she didn't leave me without a word."

"Even when you gave her the deed for a wedding-present she wasn't sure that she was going," Joan cried softly in justification of the white-satin girl; "and then, after she went, she begged for your forgiveness to make her happiness complete."

"And I never sent it to her," Miss King moaned; "but I never saw this letter before. The paper's old and yellow. Where has it been all of these years while Consuelo has been waiting for my forgiveness? Where did you get it, Joan?"

"The man had it," Joan stammered.

"Man, man! What man?" Miss King cried as she stared blankly at the girls. "Oh, am I losing my mind? I can't seem to understand you. What is it you are saying to me, Joan?"

"The man in the mill had the letter."

"The man in the mill? You might as well say the man in the moon. There is no man in the mill." Miss King spoke sharply, seemingly embarrassed by the emotion she had displayed. She

got up from the floor and sat down again in the low rocking-chair.

“What do you mean?” she repeated. But Joan could only stare at her happily, a great relief flooding over her as she realized that Miss King had not known of the man who had been sneaking about the place.

“Speak,” Miss King commanded impatiently.

“Oh, please,” interrupted Mary Alice, “we have discovered that there is a man living on the upper floor of the old mill.”

“A tramp, probably,” Miss King suggested, with an effort at calmness. “There is often one stopping there, and so long as they don’t come around the house I never molest them. I suppose, by some of the strange signals they have, the fact is generally known in trampdom. But,” her voice grew lower, “but Consuelo’s letter was not left in the mill for a tramp to find years later, was it? Oh, surely she would not leave it in the mill; she knew that I never went there.” Miss King’s eyes sought the letter again. “No, it couldn’t have been left there, for she says that she will mail it as soon as they land, and that means Chile, I imagine. Where, Joan, did you find this letter?”

“I don’t think the man in the mill is a regular tramp, Miss King. He—he seems to know—at least, he comes to the house; and one day we followed him into the tunnel, and he heard us and fled, and left behind a book with this letter in it.”

“The tunnel?” Miss King questioned in amazement. “You mean the secret passage to the mill? It was boarded up years ago. I—why——” she broke off, and scanned the letter. “Consuelo left the jewel-case in the tunnel and not in the desk, didn’t she? She must have, because I remember so well her little hiding-place where a stone had fallen out. How she cried one day when she stuck her dolly too far in and it tumbled through into a secret room that Grandfather King had built into the tunnel as an extra precaution. But—but how did the jewel-case get in the desk?”

“I put it there,” ventured Mary Alice.

Miss King stared at the girls. “You have been here for five days, and you have discovered a man in the mill, have been in the tunnel, and have found a secret drawer in my desk that I didn’t know was there! You—you have been very busy.” As she said the last she smiled wanly,

and her eyes were sad but kind; so Joan found courage to explain further.

“The tunnel’s not boarded up,” she stated. “Mary Alice and I have been through it. I fell through the rocks that had closed up the entrance to the secret room, and the jewel-case must have fallen down and hit me on the head. Then the man heard the noise and ran away, leaving a book with this letter in it.”

“I don’t seem to understand at all,” Miss King said slowly. “The tunnel and the jewel-case and the man—what does it all mean?”

“Well, you see,” Mary Alice began, “we shouldn’t have found the tunnel or the jewel-case if it hadn’t been for the man in the mill.”

“I think,” interrupted Miss King decisively, “that we should question the man in the mill. Let’s go there, and on the way you can start at the beginning and tell me the whole story.”

At the mention of going to the mill the girls looked fearfully at each other, but Miss King was already standing up, and did not seem to think that there was any cause to be frightened, so they followed her without protest. On the way they hastily told her the part of their adventures that concerned the man: the story of the day that they

had stumbled on the mill-room, with its tray of dishes from the kitchen, and then how the man had appeared in the library, and later in the tunnel.

Miss King said nothing at all during the narrative, except to ask them to repeat one or two statements, but her face grew harder and harder and her lips set firmly.

“Who do you suppose the man is?” Joan asked as she finished the story. “And how did he learn about the tunnel, and where did he ever get hold of a letter you have never seen, although it is written to you?”

“I can see one explanation,” Miss King said harshly. “But wait until I see the man.”

By this time they were at the mill, and Miss King walked boldly in, with Joan and Mary Alice close behind her. The girls, remembering their other experiences in the old building, were tiptoeing, but Miss King’s footsteps rang out clearly in the silence. She went firmly up the old stairs, only pausing for a moment while Mary Alice pointed out the new board that had been put in.

When they reached the second floor the girls peered fearfully about, but everything was just as it always had been. The door into the walled-

off room was closed, but Miss King did not hesitate as she walked over and turned the knob.

It was locked! For a minute she looked rather startled, as if for the first time she realized that the story she had just heard was a reality. She recovered herself quickly and rattled the knob authoritatively.

“Who is inside?” she asked. “Open this door!”

There was no answer, but Joan thought that she could hear a stealthy movement. Miss King spoke once more, and this time, when she received no reply, she put her shoulder against the door and pushed. The whole flimsy partition shook, but the door held until the girls crowded around her and pushed, too. Then it gave way with a quick breaking, and they were catapulted into the room.

Joan went with so much force that she nearly fell against Mrs. Oldham, who was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. As Joan straightened up she saw that the small window was open, and that a rope tied to the bed hung out of it. She ran to the window and looked out, but there was nothing to be seen except the end of the rope swaying in the breeze.

Miss King was the first to speak. "Mrs. Oldham," she cried, her swift eyes surveying the room, "what are you doing here, and who is living in this room?"

Mrs. Oldham did not raise her head. Her face was still buried in her hands, and her whole attitude was one of resignation.

"Answer me," Miss King commanded.

"Arthur," Mrs. Oldham half whispered.

"I guessed as much when I heard the girls' story." Miss King's voice was severe. "You remember, do you not, Mrs. Oldham, that when I took you back as housekeeper it was with the understanding that you were to have no communication with Arthur."

Mrs. Oldham raised her head and darted a quick look at Miss King.

"But, Miss King," she whined a little, "it was a long time ago that you sent me and Arthur away because you caught him stealing one of your horses and selling her. And—and I remember that you said, when you finally took me back, that I wasn't to have anything more to do with him. But that was a long time ago, and I thought by now that you wouldn't be so strict. Besides, I thought you guessed that the reason I always in-



SHE SAW THAT THE SMALL WINDOW WAS OPEN, AND THAT A ROPE TIED TO THE BED HUNG OUT OF IT.—Page 303.

sisted on going to the mail-box for the mail was that I might hear from him once in a while; and I thought when you agreed that it was not only because you didn't like such fussy little errands, but because you were willing for me to get a letter from him once in a while without your knowing it." Mrs. Oldham did not look at Miss King as she spoke, and hurried on as if she were afraid of being interrupted or questioned.

"Arthur has been out West since you sent him away from here, promoting, promoting—well, just promoting, I guess. But not long ago his partner played him false, and involved him in some affairs which made it necessary for him to clear out for a while. He was out of money, and it was just natural for him to come to his mother for help. We figured that he could live in the mill a while without any one tracing him, and then, when the investigation out West quieted down, he could leave again. He wasn't going to bother any one, and I didn't think it was any harm for him to stay in the old mill; and there wouldn't have been any, and you wouldn't have known anything about it, if it hadn't been for these girls prowling around where they don't belong," Mrs. Oldham finished defiantly.

“Why, Mrs. Oldham,” Mary Alice spoke angrily, “we didn’t do any more prowling around where we didn’t belong than your son did. We ——”

But the housekeeper scowled at the girls and interrupted hastily, speaking to Miss King and ignoring Mary Alice’s words. “Arthur has gone now. He was just ready to go when you knocked on the door. I couldn’t get him to stay and face you, so I helped him out of the window.” She gestured towards the rope and then continued: “And—and I might as well tell you that I’m leaving, too. I’ve decided that I won’t stay any place where I can’t see my son. My sister will never be well enough to do her own housework, the doctor says, and I’m going to live with her. I’ve saved most of my wages,—what I haven’t sent to Arthur,—and I don’t need to work any longer.”

When Miss King spoke, it was as if she had not heard the last of Mrs. Oldham’s words at all.

“It occurred to me at the time, when you insisted on going for the mail, that you were probably hearing from Arthur. I overlooked it, for I didn’t mind; it was only natural that you should care for him, even though he is a thief.” Miss

King's voice was cold and sharp as she moved until she was directly in front of Mrs. Oldham. "Now I have cause to doubt that your daily trips to the mail-box were to get your letters from Arthur before I should see them. I think that you are still lying to me, Mrs. Oldham. Answer me again. Is that the only reason you have been going for the mail all these years?"

Mrs. Oldham darted a glance at Joan through narrowed eyes. "What have these nosing girls been telling you?" she sulked.

"They have told me what I should have known long ago," Miss King said. "You intercepted and kept this letter Consuelo Galdos wrote to me!" And she whipped the page in Mrs. Oldham's face.

The housekeeper shrank back. For a minute Joan thought she was going to deny it; then she suddenly burst into tears.

"Yes, yes," she sobbed. "I got it and kept it, Miss King, but I was so tempted!"

Miss King stood erect and stern before Mrs. Oldham. Her voice did not lose one bit of its coldness as she said, "You were tempted, Mrs. Oldham?"

"Yes, yes. You remember that it was right

after Miss Consuelo ran away when you took me back. You were angry with her, and you had your old will destroyed and made a new one in which you left all the property to me,—that is, all but the land you had deeded to her—because you had no one else, and because I had been a faithful nurse to your father in his last illness.”

Miss King nodded her head sadly. “Yes, my father had asked me to take care of you, and I had always regretted that I sent you away when Arthur stole from me.”

“Well, the very day that you told me about the will this letter came from Consuelo. I carried it around for two days, and then, one day, I steamed it open and read it. Even then I did not mean to keep it; I intended to seal it up and give it to you. But I knew as soon as I read the letter and discovered that Miss Consuelo had not taken the deed to the pasture-lands, as you thought she had, that you would forgive her and change your will again.

“Then, while I had this letter open on my dresser, thinking how unjust it was for you to raise my hopes of getting the property, I accidentally turned over a bottle of medicine on it. I was scared, then. I knew that if I sealed it

up, as I had intended to do, and gave it to you, you would know that I had opened it. I grew frantic. I tried to take off the stains, and ruined the pages entirely. The one you have—the last page—was underneath, and did not have many stains on it. Finally I grew so worried and confused that I burned the other sheets and hid this one in the secret drawer of Mr. Phil's desk. I thought that it would be safe there, because I knew you didn't know anything about the secret drawers. Mr. Phil told me about them one night when he was ill and delirious. He had me get a letter from one of the drawers and destroy it. The letter he said proved that the desk was not a real Chip—Chipper ——”

“Chippendale,” Mary Alice contributed excitedly.

“Yes, that's it. Well, it was a letter from a famous furniture man in England, and it said that the desk was not a real Chip—Chipperdale because of the way the very secret drawers opened. You know how much Mr. Phil thought of his furniture, and that night, when he was delirious, he decided that he didn't want people to know that the desk wasn't genuine. Anyway, he made me promise not to tell you, and I didn't.

In fact, I almost forgot about the secret drawers until I was trying to think of some place to hide the page of Consuelo's letter. Even then, Miss King, I did not think of keeping anything in particular from you. I thought Consuelo would write again and tell you about the deed, and you would merely think the first letter had been lost in the mails."

"She was as proud as I," Miss King murmured. "It was like her not to write again."

"As I was saying," Mrs. Oldham went on, evidently relieved to be telling a secret that she had had on her mind and conscience for many years, "days passed, and no letters came from Consuelo and Chile. Finally I began to think that none would ever come, and that I might inherit this ranch after all, and have it to leave to Arthur. It was not so much for myself, Miss King," Mrs. Oldham pleaded, "that I wanted your property, but I thought if I could have it for him, he would come away from his bad associations and settle down here and go straight. He was always interested in this old place, and used to write me long accounts of what we would do with it if we ever got the land. So when Miss Consuelo didn't write any more, I began to look for the deed, for

I knew that if you ever found it, you would take steps to get in communication with her. But I could never find it. I didn't know about the tunnel then, and I couldn't understand the directions on the page of the letter I had saved."

"You and Arthur had been sent away when Consuelo found the tunnel. She discovered it when she was playing about the mill, and considered it a great secret. She never told me of her discovery until she lost her dolly, and then I forbade her going there for fear it might cave in some time."

"But it's funny Mr. Phil never mentioned the tunnel, or that none of the neighbors knew about it."

"We never told any one about the tunnel," Miss King explained sadly. "It was sort of a family secret, because knowledge of it would only have served to convince the people who knew the story of my grandfather that he was insane." Miss King paused and then continued slowly: "Evidently the night—the night that Consuelo ran away, it was through the tunnel, for fear some one would see her going to the mill. A few days after she had gone I climbed up the fireplace chimney and fastened some boards across the

other half of the passage and considered the tunnel closed.”

Miss King seemed to have forgotten her anger, and she and Mrs. Oldham were talking quietly and calmly to each other, both absorbed in the unravelling of the story.

Mrs. Oldham nodded her head at this explanation and went on: “The way I found out about the tunnel was through Arthur. He was looking around the mill the first day he came, and found the entrance to it on that end, and then one night we pulled down the boards in the fireplace, so that he could have a way to come to the kitchen for food. I had been taking his food to him on a tray after night.”

“Those were the noises we heard the first night I came,” Joan whispered to Mary Alice.

“You were right,” Mary Alice whispered back, “when you said that they sounded like some one pulling nails out of things!”

Mrs. Oldham paid no attention to the girls, but continued her story to Miss King. “To go back,” she said, “three or four years passed after I hid the letter in the secret drawer, and there was no word from Consuelo and the deed was never found. I began to feel safe, and then one

day I went to the mail-box and drew out—oh, how well I remember that day! I had not thought of my secret for a long time, and I reached carelessly into the box and drew out the papers and a letter. What a terrible sensation of coldness I felt when I glanced down and saw a black-bordered envelope with a foreign postmark I knew only too well!”

“Black-bordered?” whispered Miss King.

“Yes,” Mrs. Oldham spoke sympathetically. “There were only a few words in the letter—it was from her husband—and he said that Consuelo had died of a fever, and had asked him to send you a picture of her little girl, Consuelo May.”

Tears were running down Miss King’s cheeks, but she did not wipe them away. She seemed to have forgotten Mrs. Oldham and Joan and Mary Alice, and to be talking to the girl she had known and loved so many years before. “Consuelo, my dear,” she murmured brokenly, “I—I didn’t write to you, I didn’t answer your letter; you must have thought that I hated you, but you had forgiven me. I know you had, Consuelo. It is like a wordless message of forgiveness, your naming your baby girl after me—May—Consuelo May.”

In the silence that followed Joan thought of the picture in her pocket, and drew it out and slipped it into Miss King's hand. Miss King did not notice her, but stared and stared at the picture. "I have felt for years, Consuelo, that you were dead," she whispered. "But you live again in your baby; her eyes, her smile, her black curls are all yours."

"Yes, that's the picture he sent," nodded Mrs. Oldham. "I burned the letter, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to burn that little picture. It seemed that if I was found out some time, you might forgive me for the other things, but not for burning that little picture; so I wrapped it up and hid it also in the desk.

"And then when Arthur found the tunnel I remembered the directions in the first letter and got them for him. He scolded me for leaving the things in the desk, and said to get the picture and he would destroy it. But the girls were here by then, and with so many people around I had a little trouble getting it ——"

"She never suspected that we were trying to keep her from getting in the desk," whispered Mary Alice; and Joan nodded assent.

"Arthur began to search the tunnel for the

deed in the jewel-case," Mrs. Oldham continued. "You see, he was pretty scared over his last fracas, and he was thinking about getting this place and living straight, and he wanted to find the deed and destroy it, so that there would be no chance of its being found some day and making you hunt up Consuelo May. He had just started to search the tunnel when the girls discovered him. Later, from the looks of the place they had been, he decided that they had found the jewel-case. He was searching their rooms this afternoon when one of them heard him, and as they had already had a glimpse of him, we decided that he had better leave before you caught him here. He's gone away now for good. You won't tell on him, will you, Miss King?"

"No, no," Miss King said sadly. "I don't know what he has been doing; I don't know anything to tell, or any one to tell."

"And—and me?"

"I forgive you, Mrs. Oldham, as I can only hope that Consuelo has long since forgiven me." Miss King turned slowly towards the door. "I'll go back to the house and make out a check for this month's wages and for a month in advance, and leave it on the kitchen-table."

“I’m all packed to go,” Mrs. Oldham said stoically, “and I have telephoned for my brother to meet me at the end of the lane. I’ll send for my trunk to-morrow.”

Still holding the little picture of Consuelo May tenderly in her hands, Miss King turned and left the room, and the girls heard her walk slowly down the stairs. They hastened to follow her, after a last glimpse at Mrs. Oldham sitting dejectedly on the bed while with one hand she mechanically thrust a pin into her hair.

CHAPTER XXIV

“MY AUNTIE MAY”

MARY ALICE and Joan silently followed Miss King back to the house, and walked mechanically through the kitchen, through the dining-room, and into the library. Miss King was sitting at the desk, blotting a check. As they came in she smiled wanly at them.

“Will you, please,” she asked, holding it out to Mary Alice, “put this check on the kitchen-table?”

Mary Alice took the check and left the room. Joan stood beside Miss King and found herself staring in fascination at the little uncracked panel. Without thinking she spoke: “This isn’t the same desk.”

Miss King looked at her in surprise. “So you have discovered that, too?” she asked slowly.

“Oh, you knew it then?” Joan cried, disappointed that, after all, Miss King was going to be connected with some of the seemingly underhand happenings in the house.

“Of course, I knew,” Miss King laughed a lit-

tle, shortly. "It was my desk; I should know where it is."

Joan was inexpressibly hurt by her answer. She turned abruptly and left the room, feeling that, after all, she and Miss King were never to be friends and comrades.

When she was half-way up the stairs Miss King came out of the library and ran to the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, Joan, Joan dear," she begged, "please wait for me. I can't bear to have you go away misunderstanding me."

She hurried up the stairs to Joan's side, took her hand, and led her into her room. She motioned her to a footstool and sat down in the low rocker.

After a few minutes Miss King began slowly. "Joan, I do want you to love me, now—now more than ever. My pride and coldness and selfishness have deprived me of friendships, just as they took Consuelo away from me twenty years ago. And a minute ago I was sacrificing your friendship on the same altar. But it mustn't be, Joan. Maybe, though, I've grown so grim and forbidding that you can never make a real friend and confidant of me ——"

“You are my friend,” Joan protested, feeling very much embarrassed.

“But not the kind I want to be,” Miss King went on, sadly. “I want to be a dear, dear friend and a real comrade, and share all your joys and sorrows, and help you when you need help, and comfort you when you are homesick. But as it is, you don’t even find it easy to call me ‘Auntie May.’”

Joan started to speak, but Miss King went on.

“No, don’t deny it. I have watched your face, and heard the inflection in your voice. Let’s talk real truths now, Joan, and maybe we can find our friendship when we fully understand each other.

“You see, Joan, when you first came I was glad to have you, for I was very, very lonely, and I was glad to help your mother in her troubles, but I kept telling myself that I mustn’t learn to love you. You see, I was afraid of love, because once I had loved one girl so very much that I never recovered from what I thought then was her ungratefulness. But when you came, you were so bright and cheerful that I found myself liking you from the very first. At the same time, though, having you around reminded me so much of the first young girl I had had here, that at

times I was harsh and brusque. And generally, Joan, when I was coldest to you, I was really the unhappiest down in my heart. And all the while that I was telling myself that I mustn't like you too much, I was wanting you to like me very much, and was trying to win your love. I found that I wasn't doing it ——”

“I didn't understand,” Joan pleaded. “When you would be suddenly cold and abrupt I thought you didn't want me here, and that you had just taken me because of Mother.”

“How unhappy I must have made you, Joan. But I had been alone for so long that I didn't know how to be nice to a little girl, and I tried to help my cause by giving you things ——”

“The white dress ——” Joan cried, hurt to think it had been, after all, a sort of bribe. “And the semester of school ——”

“Please, Joan,” Miss King begged, “don't think so fast. It isn't as if I didn't want to give them to you. I did; I loved doing it. But I can see now that if I had taken you into my confidence and told you that I couldn't afford to give them to you, and let you help me—in other words, if I had conquered my pride—it would have saved a great deal. I was trying to do that when I got

out Consuelo’s wedding-dress. I thought maybe we could have a chummy time fixing it over ——”

“I acted terribly over the dress,” Joan cried. “I have been so miserable and ashamed about it ever since.”

“The fault was mine. I didn’t realize that dresses and styles and materials had changed so much, and when I got out the dress it revived so many memories that I grew cold again. Then, too, my pride was hurt because I was too poor to give you the sort of dress you needed, and I thought maybe you were despising me for suggesting that we make over the impossible wedding-dress ——”

“Oh, Miss King,” Joan exclaimed, “you say that you were too poor to buy me a dress, but I—I thought you were rich. And I let you buy me that expensive white dress. I’ll—I’ll never forgive myself, but you see I didn’t know ——” Joan was nearly crying.

“Don’t cry, Joan dear. It was very natural for you to think that I had plenty of money. I did have when your mother knew me. At my father’s death I inherited this ranch, but only a small amount of money. But Scared Acres was extensive then, and it brought me a large income.

I went on purchasing cattle and fattening them for market on our pastures. For a time I prospered; then a change came.

“A great factor in the cattle business, as you may not know, is getting the cattle to market at the right time. If you don't get a good market, you sometimes do not even make expenses, particularly if you have had a year of bad crops and have been forced to buy feed. Naturally, being a woman, I did not lounge around the hotel lobby in Fame where the cattlemen collected and talked and exchanged opinions and news on the market.

“One of them though, a neighbor of mine, had been advising me when to ship. Then one year he tried to buy my pasture-land, and when I would not sell it —— No, I won't finish that sentence. But, anyway, there were some bad drouths and the corn was a failure, and when I shipped I struck a slump in the market and lost money heavily. That left me without funds to buy cattle, and I would not mortgage the pasture to buy them for fear I would fail again and lose Consuelo's land. For, Jean, although the deed I had given her had never been recorded—I was going to have it recorded in her new name after the wedding—and the pasture-land was still mine

legally, I considered that it was really Consuelo's, and that I was only keeping it for her. Well, I had to give up the cattle business, and with it, of course, went my income. I rented the pasture to the neighbor, and that rent is all I have had to live on for many years now.”

“What a thrilling story,” Joan whispered, “your struggle, alone, to take care of the ranch.”

“Perhaps. I seem to remember only the loneliness and the worry, and a sort of ingrowing resentment that everything seemed to go wrong. I might have had sympathy and help, I suppose, but I was proud, and I didn't let any one know how bad my affairs had grown. My banker is the only person that I have told until now, but the people around here have probably guessed some of it. However, I never lived lavishly after Consuelo left, and I let them understand that my renting the land just meant that I was retiring from active farming.”

“If I could only have known,” Joan cried, “I would never have let you buy me an expensive dress.”

“All I have been telling you has only been a prelude to this: I couldn't afford the dress, but I found it impossible to be frank with you and

say so. Besides, I wanted you to have it, and what I would not do for myself, I took delight in doing for you. Did you by any chance, that night after the episode of the white-satin frock, hear some strange noises?"

"Steps coming down the stairway," Joan exclaimed, "and a crash?" That was the night she and Mary Alice had sat on the back stairs trying to discover the opening of the tunnel, and had heard some one sneaking down the front stairs.

Miss King smiled. "A crash? It must have sounded like that. Well, Uncle Ben and I were carrying an old chest down from my room. Oh, how carefully we crept along!" Miss King laughed softly. "I can see Uncle Ben yet! He had taken off his flappy old shoes, so that he could be as quiet as possible. He had the front end of the chest, and his shapeless stockinged feet would wave around uncertainly as he felt for the next step of the stairs. He couldn't bend over to see the steps, and when he touched the carpet of the hall floor he was startled,—the stairs are uncarpeted, you know,—made an extra little jerk, and some way pulled me forward, so that we made a heap in the hall, Uncle Ben, the chest, and I. We were aghast at the noise we had made,

and just sat there for a long time, waiting to hear a movement in your rooms. Finally we gathered our courage and tiptoed into the music-room with the chest and left it with its twin. There were two of the chests just alike; one had been in my room for a long time, and the other had stood in the music-room for years ——”

“And had kept the gray-green carpet from fading,” Joan cried.

“Why, yes, there was a place in the carpet where the chest had stood. And since at that time I didn’t want you to know that I was selling my furniture, I covered up the spot with a rug from the hall the next morning when I opened the music-room for you and Mary Alice. But that night I just left the chest there and went on up-stairs while Uncle Ben waited for the men to come for them.”

“Mary Alice and I saw them come—the men with the flash-lights! But still I hardly understand how your twin chests and my white dress are connected?”

“No? Well, some of the furniture in this house is very old, and I have had many chances to sell it. Mr. Hays, an antique collector in Fame and a very good friend of mine, has long coveted some

pieces I have. So when I needed money I decided to part with the twin chests. That morning I called him over the telephone, and told him that if he would bring his truck to the entrance of the lane he could have the chests. I told him to come at midnight because I was too proud to let the neighbors know that I was selling my furniture, and also because I did not want you to know, for fear you might refuse to take the dress."

"And you sold your twin chests to buy me a dress," Joan cried, slipping her hand into Miss King's.

"Yes. And I loved doing it. The joy of unselfish giving, Joan, is the greatest joy of all. Well, as I was telling you, the next morning when I went in to get my money from Mr. Hays and buy your dress, he repeated his offer for the bookcase-secretary. I knew immediately that I had found a way to pay for your college tuition many times over, and I decided to sell the desk. That same night he came for it. Did you hear us then, too?"

"No. That is the day we explored the tunnel and we were very sleepy ——"

"And we were very quiet. Besides, the carpets

down-stairs are heavy, and I didn't need Uncle Ben's help.”

“But I don't understand the desk that is there now.”

“Oh, that! Mr. Hays tried many years ago to buy the original desk from my father. He, of course, refused to part with it, but let Mr. Hays have a copy of it made for his own house. When I sold him the real desk, he brought out his copy for me.”

“And that is the night we put the jewel-case in the old desk, and of course the next morning could not find it in the copy.”

“Yes. When Mr. Hays got home, he was naturally gloating over his acquisition and inspecting it, and immediately found the jewel-case. He sent it to me through the mail, and that was the package I got this morning.”

“Oh, Miss King,—I mean Auntie May, for I'm never going to say ‘Miss King’ again—everything has been so mixed up. And I've been so wrong about it all because I didn't understand——”

“We understand now, though,” Miss King cried. “And it is all due to you girls that I have found out the truth about Consuelo. I can never,

never thank you enough for that, Joan." Miss King paused for a few minutes and then continued, "Let's see, you have been here for five days, so we have only lost five days of being friends, and we have five months to make up for it."

"Let's start making up for it right now," Joan said shyly, and put her arm around Miss King, and Miss King leaned down and kissed her, and they smiled at each other understandingly.

"You run down and get Mary Alice and set out whatever you can find for luncheon," Miss King exclaimed happily. "I'll be down in a few minutes, and then after luncheon we will go to Fame for the new curtains and everything else we need for the music-room, and Scared Acres will live again!"

Once in the kitchen, Joan told Mary Alice the story of the furniture, and they chattered happily as they found baked ham and fresh bread and a part of a cake for luncheon. They cut too many slices of everything, but in the joy of being rid of strange visitors and mysterious noises and unpleasant thoughts, they felt suddenly ravenous.

Just as everything was ready, Miss King came into the kitchen. And what a changed Miss

King! Her hair was pulled softly around her face, her cheeks were pink with excitement, and her plain lavender dress looked charming with crisp organdie collar and cuffs and a soft white tie.

“Oh, girls, girls,” she cried, utterly oblivious of two bright little tears that crept down her cheeks, “it does seem that this is to be a momentous day in my life. I—I—when I got my mail this morning I opened the package containing the jewel-case first, and did not look at anything else. And now, what do you think I’ve discovered in this little white letter from California? Oh, you can never guess. It’s from Consuelo May!”

“The little girl of the picture!” Joan exclaimed joyously.

“Consuelo’s daughter!” echoed Mary Alice.

“Yes, Consuelo’s daughter. But she isn’t a little girl any more. She’s—she’s as old as you are. She’s about the same age her mother was when I last saw her.”

“And in California?”

“Yes. She is visiting her father’s relatives. And she writes that her mother had always planned for her to go to Mrs. Haddon’s School because it was my school; so now that she is

ready, her father is sending her there. And we are going to write to her and tell her that she must—simply must—stop at Scared Acres on her way east.”

“To think that we shall really see her!” Mary Alice exclaimed, happily.

“And she is going to Mrs. Haddon’s School!” cried Joan. “I’ll write to every one of my girl friends that she is coming, and they will take care of her. We don’t want her to be lonesome, even the very first day.”

“That’s sweet, Joan.”

“But I’ll challenge her to learn as much the first semester at Mrs. Haddon’s School as I shall learn here in Fame College with *my* Auntie May!” Joan finished, slipping her arm around Miss King and smiling happily at the real friend she had just found.

THE END

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