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Title: Dorothy Dale's Queer Holidays

Author: Margaret Penrose

Release date: April 18, 2005 [EBook #15653]

Most recently updated: December 14, 2020

Language: English

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**DOROTHY DALE'S
QUEER HOLIDAYS**

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "DOROTHY DALE: A GIRL OF TO-DAY," "DOROTHY DALE AT GLENWOOD SCHOOL," "DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET," "THE MOTOR GIRLS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

1910

BOOKS BY MARGARET PENROSE

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"SHE PROCEEDED TO BRING OUT FROM THE CLOSET THE 'GHOST'"—[Page 78](#).

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DOROTHY DALE'S QUEER HOLIDAYS

CHAPTER I

THE SAME OLD TAVIA

"She very probably will miss her train, we will miss her at the station, she will take a ride up with old Bill Mason, stay talking to him until dinner is too cold to wait any longer; then—then—well, she may steal in through a window and give you a midnight scare, just for a joke. That's my recollection of Miss Tavia."

"Nat, you're too mean—Tavia is not always late, and she doesn't purposely upset plans. Some things can't be prevented."

"Right, little coz, they can't. That's right. Tavia is one of the things that can't be prevented from ___"

"Quit! quit there! Easy with young ladies' names! You don't have to—to put her up for the registry," and the last speaker swung around in mock challenge, with his fist very close to his brother's aristocratic nose.

The three were Dorothy, Ned and Nat. Dorothy Dale was the "coz," a very pretty and attractive young girl, while her two good-looking cousins, Ned the elder and Nat the jollier, were sons of Mrs. Winthrop White, of North Birchland.

Dorothy, with her father, Major Dale, and her two brothers, Joe and Roger, the latter about two years younger than his brother, who was not yet in his 'teens, made her home with Major Dale's sister, Mrs. White, where they had lived for the past few years. It was now holiday time, and Dorothy was awaiting the arrival of her chum, Tavia Travers, of Dalton, the former home of the Dales.

We may say Dorothy was waiting, but the boys were—well, they may have had to wait until Miss Tavia got there, but one of them, Nat, evidently did not find "waiting" very pleasant employment. The fact was, Tavia was a very good friend of Nat, and because of this his brother enjoyed teasing Dorothy about her chum's shortcomings, especially when Nat was within hearing.

"She said the 4:10, didn't she?" asked Nat for the fourth time in as many minutes.

"And meant the 10:04," put in Ned, before Dorothy could reply.

"Neddie, I've warned you——" and Nat "squared off" in a threatening manner.

"Boys! boys!" pleaded Dorothy, stepping in between them with her hands raised to prevent possible trouble.

"Well, if you insist," said Nat, with a very gallant bow. "In deference to a lady's presence I will not exterminate the—the bug."

"Bug!" echoed Ned, stepping closer.

"Yes, I said bug," repeated his brother. "They are such—such unpleasant things to have to exterminate."

The two boys had now assumed attitudes generally supposed to be the very best possible in preparation for a fistic encounter, and Dorothy had just jumped upon a chair to be able to reach her taller cousin and prevent anything serious happening, when a very gentle voice from the doorway interrupted the little scene.

"Children! children!" exclaimed Mrs. White, "Boxing in the library!"

Instantly the trio turned toward this beautiful woman, for she was beautiful indeed.

So stately, so tall, so queenly, and gowned in such a simple yet attractive house robe. Youth may have its glories, but surely mature womanhood has its compensations, for a queenly woman, in

the ease and luxury of home costume, is to the eye of love and to the eyes of discriminating persons the most beautiful of all the pictures that femininity is capable of inspiring.

Such was Mrs. White, and no wonder, indeed, that she had such good-looking sons, and no wonder, either, that Dorothy Dale was proud to be told that she resembled her Aunt Winnie.

Mrs. White's Christian name was Ruth, but the Dale children, having another aunt of that name, had always called this one Aunt Winnie, a sort of contraction from the name of Mrs. White's late husband—Winthrop.

This afternoon, when our story opens, was one of those tiresome "strips of time," with nothing to mark it as different from any other occasion, but, as Nat expressed it, "everything seemed to be hanging around, waiting for Christmas, like New York, on Sunday, waiting for Monday."

The little party were vainly trying to make themselves happy in the library, where every reasonable comfort and luxury surrounded them, for The Cedars, as this country estate was called, was a very beautiful place, its interior arrangements reflected not only ample means, but a display of the finely original and cultured taste for which Mrs. White was famous.

Mrs. White was not afflicted with the "clutter" habit, and, in consequence, her room rested instead of tiring those fortunate enough to be welcomed within the portals of The Cedars.

So on this afternoon the wintry winds outside accentuated the comforts within, and our friends, while restless and naturally impatient for the arrival of Tavia, could not but appreciate their happy circumstances.

You may not all be acquainted with the books of this series, in which are related many important events in the lives of Dorothy Dale, her family and her friends, so something about the volumes that precede this will not be out of place.

In the first book, "Dorothy Dale; a Girl of To-day," was told of Dorothy's home life in the little village of Dalton. There Dorothy and her friend Tavia grew like two flowers in the same garden—very different from each other, but both necessary to the beauty of the spot.

The dangers of the country to children who venture too far out in the fields and woods were shown in the startling experience Dorothy and Tavia had when Miles Anderson, a cunning lunatic, followed them from place to place, terrifying them with the idea of obtaining from Dorothy some information which would enable him to get control of some money left to a little orphan—Nellie Burlock.

Real country life had its joys, however, as Dorothy and Tavia found, for they had many happy times in Dalton.

In the second volume, "Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School," there is given the natural sequence to such an auspicious beginning as the days at Dalton.

There were jolly girls at Glenwood, and some strange "doings" took place, all of which went to show that a girl need not go to college to have plenty of fun out of her schooldays, but that the boarding-school, or seminary, is well qualified to afford all the "prank possibilities" of real, grown-up school life.

In "Dorothy Dale's Great Secret," the third of the series, there is shown what it means for a girl to be allowed too much liberty; to grow ambitious before she has grown wise; to act imprudently, and then to have to suffer the consequences.

It was Tavia who ran away to go on the stage, it was Dorothy who found her and brought her back. And Dorothy kept her "secret," though what it cost her only she knew.

The book immediately preceding this volume, entitled "Dorothy Dale and her Chums," tells the story of Dorothy, Tavia, Urania, a gypsy girl, and Miette, a little French lass. Dorothy had plenty of trouble trying to civilize Urania, and quite as much trying to save Miette some strange hardships. Dorothy was instrumental in bringing Miette into her own family rights, and if she did not entirely succeed in "taming" Urania, she at least improved her marvelously.

In all four of the preceding books the friends, whose acquaintance some of you are forming for the first time, played their respective parts as best they might, and now, as we find them on this wintry afternoon, they are ready to take part in other scenes, no less interesting, I hope.

Dorothy, Ned and Nat, at the sound of Mrs. White's admonition as she entered the library, turned to look at her in some surprise, for they were taken unawares.

Ned and Nat were always going to "fight," but they never actually did get at it. In fact, they were both blessed with a reasonable amount of good nature, and this, coupled with correct training, was destined to make them men of patience and common sense.

Of course, this time they were only joking, so the "boxing" their mother had somewhat jestingly accused them of was all part of the game.

Dorothy smoothed the cushions of the divan as her aunt advanced into the room. Ned and Nat both attempted to poke the same log in the open grate with the same poker, and the blaze that most unexpectedly shot up at this interference with a well-regulated fire, attending strictly to its own affairs, caused both young men to leap quickly back out of reach of a shower of sparks.

"Whew!" exclaimed Nat, falling over an ottoman that Dorothy had been lately sitting on, and landing very ungracefully at his mother's feet. "Mother, I adore you!" he suddenly exclaimed as he found himself in a suppliant attitude. "Only," he went on ruefully, rubbing his shins, "I did not intend to adore you quite so hard."

"A three-bagger," joked Ned, for indeed his brother's position over the "bag" was not unlike that of a baseball player "hugging the base."

"But you were just saying, as I came in," spoke Mrs. White, "something about Tavia's coming. She has not sent any word—any regrets, or anything of that sort, has she?"

"Why, no," answered Dorothy, "We were just saying that she might be here before we know it —"

"Who said that?" demanded Nat, promptly scrambling to his feet.

"*Before* we know it," repeated Ned, with special emphasis on the "before."

"However do you bear with them, Doro dear?" asked Mrs. White. "They seem to grow more unmanageable every day."

Then Dorothy, making herself heard above the argument, said:

"Boys, if we are going to meet Tavia——"

"*If* we are going to meet her!" exclaimed Nat, interrupting his pretty cousin, and putting a great deal of emphasis on the first word. "There's no 'if' in this deal. We are going," and he sprang up and continued springing until he reached his own room, where he proceeded to "slick up some," as he expressed it, while Ned, and Dorothy, too, prepared for the run to the depot in the Fire Bird, as speedy an automobile as could be found in all the country around North Birchland.

"Take plenty of robes," cautioned Mrs. White as the machine puffed and throbbled up to the front door. "It's getting colder, I think, and may snow at any moment."

"No such luck," grumbled Nat. "I never saw such fine, cold weather, and not a flake of snow. What's that about a 'green Christmas, and a fat graveyard'? Isn't there some proverb to that effect?"

"Oh, I surely think it will snow before Christmas," said Dorothy. "And we have plenty of robes, auntie, if the storm should come up suddenly."

"Come down, you mean," teased Ned, who seemed to be in just the proper mood for that sort of thing.

Dorothy laughed in retort. She enjoyed her cousins' good nature, and was never offended at their way of making fun at her expense.

Presently all was in readiness, and the Fire Bird swung out on the cedar-lined road and into the broad highway that led to the railroad station.

"I would just like to bet," remarked the persistent Ned as the station came into view at the end of the long road, "I would just like to bet almost anything that she will not come."

"Take you up!" answered Nat quickly. "I know she'll come."

"Oh, you feel her presence near," joked Ned. "Well, if she comes on time this trip there may be some hope for the poor wretch who may expect her to make good when he has fixed it up with the parson, the organist and——"

"Silly!" cried Dorothy gaily. "A man never pays the organist at—at an affair of that kind," and she blushed prettily.

"No?" questioned Ned in surprise. "Glad to hear it. Here, Nat, take this wheel while I make a note of it. A little thing like that is worth remembering," and he pretended to take out a notebook and jot it down.

When the train glided into the station, with a shrill screeching protest from the sparking wheels and brakes, and when quite a number of persons had alighted and gone their several ways, Dorothy and Nat, who had peered hopefully and anxiously at each passenger, looked rather ruefully at each other. Tavia had not come.

"Well?" asked Nat.

"Let's wait a little longer," suggested Dorothy.

Finally the train started up again, the private carriages and hired hacks had been driven off with scores of passengers and their baggage. Then, and not until she had looked up and down the deserted platforms, did Dorothy admit to Nat:

"She hasn't come!"

"Looks like it," replied the lad, plainly very much disappointed.

Ned, who could see what had happened, clapped his gloved hands in unholy glee.

"Didn't I tell you she'd duck?" he demanded triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you so?"

"Aw shut up!" growled Nat in pardonable anger.

"Ha! ha!" laughed his brother.

"Well, you're enough to hoodoo the whole thing," retorted Nat.

But Ned simply had to laugh—he couldn't help it, and when Dorothy and Nat took their places again in the machine Ned was chuckling and gasping in a manner that threatened to do serious damage to his entire vocal apparatus.

"It would have been a pity to have disappointed you in your fun," remarked Nat sarcastically after a particularly gleeful yelp from Ned. "What you would have missed had she come!"

"But I can't understand it," said Dorothy. "There is no other train until eight o'clock to-night."

"And that's a local that stops at every white-washed fence," added Nat.

"Oh, well, then she'll have plenty of time to think of the fine dinner she has missed," went on his brother. "Of all mean traits, I count that of being late the very meanest a nice girl can have."

"Oh, so then she is nice?" inquired Dorothy with a smile.

"Well, she can be—sometimes. But she was not to-day—eh, Nat?"

"For the land sake, say your prayers, or do—do something!" exclaimed his irritated brother.

"I might," retorted Ned, "but, being good is such a lonesome job, as some poet has remarked. Now, having fun is——"

"Look out there!" cautioned Nat suddenly. "You nearly ran over Mrs. Brocade's pet pup."

A tiny dog, of the much-admired, white-silk variety, was barking vigorously at the Fire Bird on account of the danger to which it had been subjected by the fat tires. And the dog's mistress, Mrs. Broadbent, nicknamed "Brocade" on account of her weakness for old-time silks and satins, was saying things about the auto party in much the same sort of aggrieved tones that the favorite dog was using.

"Wait until she meets you at the post-office," Nat reminded Ned. "Maybe she won't rustle her silks and satins at you."

But Ned only laughed, and kept on laughing as his mother appeared in the vestibule with a puzzled look at the empty seat in the tonneau of the Fire Bird.

Dorothy was the first to reach the porch.

"She didn't come," was her wholly unnecessary remark as Mrs. White opened the outer door.

"Isn't that strange!" replied the aunt. "Do you suppose anything could have happened?"

"I don't know. I hope not. She promised so definitely that I can't understand it," went on Dorothy.

Nat remained in the car as Ned drove it to the garage.

"I'm so sorry, after all the extra trouble to get up a good dinner," apologized Dorothy as she laid aside her wraps.

"Oh, well, we can all enjoy that," replied Mrs. White, "although, of course, we had counted on Tavia's presence. She is so jolly that the boys will be much disappointed."

"I'm just ashamed of her," went on Dorothy in a burst of indignation. "She should have learned by this time to keep her word, or else send some message."

"Yes, I am afraid Tavia does not care for the conventionalities of polite society," remarked Mrs. White. "In fact, I almost suspect she enjoys disregarding them. But never mind! we must not condemn her unheard."

CHAPTER II

WHAT HAPPENED TO TAVIA

It must not be understood that Nat was a very silly boy. Not at all. He did like Tavia, but he liked his own sweet cousin Dorothy, and would have been just as disappointed, if not more so, had it been Dorothy who had missed her train and not Tavia.

But the fact that all seemed to need Tavia to finish up the holiday plans, and that now she had not come put Nat in a very restless mood, and when the dinner, which was served immediately upon the return from the depot, was over, Nat decided he would find something to do that would occupy his time until the eight o'clock train, when, of course, they would again go to the station.

Electricity was this young man's "hobby," and he had already fitted up the cellar with all sorts of wires and attachments for regulating the household affairs, such as turning on the heat by touching a button in the stable where the hired man, John, had his quarters, and lighting the gas in the coal-cellar by touching a button at the cook's elbow; in fact, Nat really did arrange a number of most convenient contrivances, but the family, all except Joe and Roger, thought his talent misapplied. They insisted he ought to study "railroading."

"Or laying pipes," Ned would tell him when Nat pointed out some improvement in the miniature telephone system.

But Joe and Roger loved to watch their big cousin make the sparks and turn on the signals, the latter task always being assigned to Roger, who had a very small engine of his own to practice on.

"Come on, boys," said Nat to the youngsters, when, dinner being over, Major Dale and his sister, Mrs. White, went to "figure out Christmas secrets," and Dorothy turned to the piano to put in her time until the hour for going out again, "come on, and we'll rig up something."

Instantly both little fellows were at Nat's heels, through the back hall to the cellar-way, where Nat stopped to don his overalls, for he always insisted that the first principle of true mechanics was "good, stout overalls."

Nor were the clothes protectors unbecoming to Nat. In fact, he looked the ideal workman, except he was not exactly of the muscular build, being decidedly tall, and having such a crop of light, bushy hair.

"I'll show you how to make gas," said Nat as his two young cousins waited impatiently to hear the program announced. "We can produce a very superior article by the mere use of bark from a white birch tree, and a common clay pipe. You cut the bark up into little pieces with a pair of scissors, fill the bowl of the pipe, and then make a cover or plug for the bowl by using clay or a mixture of salt, ashes and water. Stick the bowl of the pipe in the stove or furnace like this," and he opened the door of the big heater; "the fire causes the birchbark to give off a gas, it comes up into the pipestem, and can be lighted at the end, thus——"

"What was that?" interrupted Joe. "A wagon outside?"

"Might be," admitted Nat, "but what's that got to do with making birchbark gas?"

"I thought I heard some one call," apologized Joe, again taking his place in front of the heater.

"There is some one calling," declared little Roger. "I just heard them."

"Well, I guess we had better give up the gas business," said Nat impatiently, "and you kids might as well go out and interview the night air." And with this he threw down the long-stemmed pipe, which broke into a dozen pieces. Then, while the younger boys made their way back to the kitchen, Nat started for the yard.

"My, it's cold!" he could not help exclaiming as he stepped out into the clear, frosty air.

Then he brushed against something.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't knock me down!" came a voice, struggling between cold and laughter.

"Tavia!" he gasped, recognizing the tones in spite of the chattering teeth and the forced laughter.

"Yes, it's yours truly, Nat. And for gracious' sake, do let me in. What isn't frozen is paralyzed."

"Where in the world did you come from?" asked the astonished boy as he led the way to the side door.

"From some place too dark for the earth and too cold for—any other place. I think, it must have been Mars," Tavia finished, "and Mrs. Mars forgot to light the lamps."

"But there was no train," remarked Nat, waiting for some one from within to open the door in answer to his hasty knock.

"As if I didn't know that, Mr. White," replied Tavia saucily. "Do you suppose I am the kind of girl who rides in a dump-cart in preference to taking a red plush seat in a train?"

By this time the commotion had been heard, and the door was opened by almost the entire family.

"Mercy sakes!" exclaimed Dorothy, dragging Tavia in bodily.

"No mercy about it," objected Tavia, giving Dorothy a peremptory hug. "I'm simply dead and buried, without insurance. Frozen stiff, and disjointed in every limb. Why, I rode here in a dump-cart!"

"Let the girl sit down," interrupted Major Dale, who left his armchair to welcome Tavia. "My, but you are cold! No, don't go too near the fire. Sit here on the couch. Children, run off and fetch a hot drink," he added, for he saw that Tavia was indeed too cold to be safe from possible harmful consequences.

Tavia dropped into the offered seat, and then she saw Nat—in the light.

"Glory be!" she exclaimed, staring at his costume, which he had entirely forgotten. "Is it the plumber?"

"Gas man!" sang out Roger gleefully. "We had just turned the meter on when we heard your noise outside."

Nat was not proud, but he had not calculated on being in overalls when he met Tavia. Ned nearly went in kinks at his brother's discomfiture. Dorothy and Mrs. White had hurried off to fetch warm drinks for Tavia.

"You'll have to get up a 'visitor alarm,' I guess, Nat," said Joe, noting Tavia's plight and Nat's embarrassment. "If we had heard the dump-cart on the drive we would not have kept her so long out in the cold."

"That's right," answered Nat; "we will surely have to rig up something to send signals from the gate."

"Like the coal office scales," suggested Roger. "When any one stepped on a platform at the gate the clock would go off in the house."

"Say," interrupted Tavia, "I'm not a regular circus. Suppose you let me get my things off and give us all this signal business later."

"Great idea," acquiesced Nat, being glad of the chance to change his own costume.

"Come, now, drink this beef tea," commanded Dorothy, as she brought from the pantry a steaming cup of the fragrant beverage. "You must be perished inside as well as out."

"Oh but you should have seen me in that cart!" began Tavia as she sipped the tea. "You know—I ___"

"Missed the train," broke in Ned, who had been just a little joyful that all his predictions had turned out to be correct.

"Never," replied Tavia; "I was on the 4:10, but I stayed on it."

"Why?" asked Dorothy in surprise.

"Couldn't get off," replied Tavia. "I was talking to the cunningest little boy, and never knew it until the train was out on the branch, going for dear life toward—land knows where."

"And you went all the way out to—"

"Indeed I did. I went all the way, and then some. I thought I had gone even farther than that before the conductor would make up his mind to stop and let me come back."

"But that train couldn't stop nearer than a telegraph station," volunteered Ned. "If it did there might have been a collision."

"I would have welcomed even a collision if some one only had to walk back home my way," said Tavia. "But to be put off a train at such a place! Why, I just made a bolt for the first black speck I could see with a light in it. It turned out to be a farmhouse, and I simply told the man he must hitch up and drive me here."

"What was the name of the place?" asked the major.

"Oh, something like Gransville, or Grahamsville. I wasn't particular about remembering the name, major; I really hoped I would forget it."

"Do you mean to say you rode from Gransville in a cart? And we have let the man go away without giving him a warm drink or anything! Why, Ned, call up the stable and see if John can catch the fellow; he may not be out on the road yet," and at the major's order the three boys hurried to overtake the man, Roger and Joe wrapping quickly in their warm coats and running out toward the drive, while Ned 'phoned the stable for John to stop the cart if he could do so.

This interruption left Dorothy and Mrs. White with Tavia, for the major, too, had left the room, and presently, when Tavia had "thawed out" sufficiently to move about, she went with Dorothy to the alcove room, one of the twin guest chambers in the suite always given Dorothy and Tavia the girls were at The Cedars.

"My, how like Christmas you look already!" exclaimed Tavia as she glanced about at the table of packages, and at another table of things that were to be in packages.

"Isn't it time?" asked Dorothy, getting out one of her own pretty robes for Tavia. "Why? it is only ten days off."

"Please, Doro, dear, don't be exact. It makes me think of work—school is still in existence, I believe. Had a letter from 'Ned' the other day, and the old place hasn't burned down, or anything."

"From Edna? How are they all?" and Dorothy helped Tavia into her house garments.

"Able to sit up," answered Tavia facetiously. "Cologne is pining for you, I believe."

"I did hope Rose-Mary could come over for the holidays, but she has written she cannot."

"Sorry for you, Doro, dear, but I really like The Cedars all to myself."

"And the boys?" asked Dorothy archly.

"Well, if you like, I'll take the boys too. Don't care if I do." And Tavia stood before the oval mirror inspecting herself in Dorothy's blue and white empire gown with the long sash at the side.

"What a pretty new dress you have!" remarked Dorothy as she picked up the one that Tavia had so carelessly discarded.

"Like it? I suppose it's all rumples and crumples after the cart. But really, Doro, if I had had only some one to talk to, I believe I should have enjoyed it. It was too funny! The man had a mouth without any backstop in it——"

"Palate?"

"Maybe that was it. Anyhow, when he spoke the words seemed to evaporate, and you had to guess what he meant. Likely there's a trail of frozen words all the way from here to—Mars."

"Hurry a little," urged Dorothy. "I am sure they are all impatient to talk to you. And the boys are just dying to hear about your adventure."

"All right, Doro, I'm ready. But say!" and Tavia stood still for a moment "You look—like—a picture in that princess. I do wish I could wear a 'clinger,' but I'm too fat. You have gotten—ahem—prettier in the short time since I saw you at school. But I don't wonder. Oh, that abominable old school!"

"Aunt Winnie had this gown made for me last week," replied Dorothy, ignoring all of Tavia's criticism save that which referred to the blended gold and white princess. "Isn't it sweet?"

"Matches you as if you had been made for it," replied Tavia, in her way of saying things backwards. "Your hair seems all of a piece."

"Come on down," called Roger at the foot of the stairs, "It will soon be bedtime, and we want to hear all about it."

"All right, honey," replied Tavia. "We're coming."

Mrs. White had Tavia's dinner brought into the dining-room, so it was there, between mouthfuls, that the tardy one tried to tell of her mishap on the train, and the strange adventure that followed it.

CHAPTER III

A LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

"I was worried thinking something had happened to you," said Dorothy as she poured Tavia's tea.

"And that was the very time that your worry was properly placed," said Tavia, "for something did happen to me. In the first place, I knew I would have bad luck, for I dropped my comb while I was dressing."

"Break it?" asked Ned slyly.

"Yep," replied Tavia; "and it was a nice one, too—dark, didn't show——"

"Tavia!" exclaimed Dorothy warningly, for Tavia usually kept Dorothy busy correcting her possibly impolite speeches.

"All right, Doro. It simply was 'a nice one,' and when I dropped it I knew perfectly well that I would 'bust' something."

"Did you?" asked Roger, not noticing Tavia's slang.

"Well, I don't know about the cart, but certainly I nearly strangled yelling at the man with the reins."

Dorothy looked annoyed. She did not mind Tavia's usual queer sayings, but she knew perfectly well that her aunt would not like such vulgar expressions. The boys might smile, but even they knew a girl should not forget to be ladylike in an attempt to be funny.

Dorothy hastened to relieve the tension.

"But when you got out to Gransville, was it dark?" she asked.

"Almost," continued Tavia. "The blackness seemed to be coming down in chunks. Well, I finally reached the old shack and bribed the man into hitching up the cart. Of course, it was awfully cold, and he didn't relish the drive."

"Don't blame him," put in Nat.

"What?" asked Ned. "Not even with Tavia?"

A sofa cushion flew in Ned's direction at that, but Tavia continued:

"The strange part of it was we had to pass a haunted house."

"Haunted house!" repeated Joe, all eager for the sensational part of Tavia's recital.

"So the man declared. At least, I think he declared, or tried very hard to do so. You see, I could scarcely tell when he was guessing, declaring or swearing——"

"What a time you must have had," remarked Mrs. White, with some show of anxiety.

"Well, I suppose I am exaggerating," said Tavia apologetically, "but I am so accustomed to tell things as big as I can make them. Brother Johnnie won't listen to any tame stories."

"But the haunted house?" questioned Joe.

"We are almost there," said Tavia as the dinner things were cleared away. "Did you ever see an old castle off toward Ferndale?"

"The Mayberry mansion?" suggested Ned.

"Perhaps," replied Tavia. "It is set in a deep woods or some sort of jungle."

"Why, that's Tanglewood Park," declared Nat. "How in the world did you get over that way?"

"Took a short cut through a lane," replied Tavia, "and when we got right in the thick of it the old man meekly pointed out the haunted house."

"Did you see the 'haunt'?" asked Dorothy jokingly.

"Saw what my friend declared was the haunt," Tavia replied, "A light running all over the place as if it might have been tied to a cat's tail."

"A light in the house?" asked Ned and Nat in one breath.

"Certainly. Not on the roof, but behind the big old stone walls. I could see the place was made of stone, although it was almost dark."

"Why, that place has been deserted for years," declared Nat.

"Then the deserter has returned," answered Tavia, "and the old man told me folks around there are just scared to death to be out after dark."

"Folks around there? Why, there isn't a house within half a mile of the park," Ned corrected.

"But don't they ever go to sleep in trains and have to take short cuts through the lane?" Tavia asked. "They don't exactly have to live in the park to have occasion to go past it now and then."

The boys laughed at Tavia's defense, but Joe and Roger were impatient to hear all about the ghost, and they begged Tavia to go on with her story.

"What did the light do?" asked Roger, edging up so close to Tavia that his curly head brushed her elbow.

"Why, Roger, dear," said Dorothy kindly, "you must not believe in such nonsense. There are no such things as ghosts."

"But Tavia saw it," he insisted.

"No, she only saw a light," corrected his sister. "There are lots of reasons for having lights, even in empty houses. Some one might have gone in there for the night——"

"Or the rats might be giving a pink tea," joined in Nat with a sly wink at Joe.

"Or some one might be trying to make gas," Joe fired back, "and perhaps they were interrupted by the sound of wheels."

"Will you please state, young lady," said Ned, imitating a lawyer questioning a witness, "just what you saw? Confine yourself to the question."

"I saw a light—l-i-g-h-t. And I saw it all over the place at the same time."

"A flame, like a fire?" asked Nat "Perhaps the place is all up in smoke by this time."

"No, no," said Tavia. "It was about as big as a candle and as rapid as a—a——"

"Searchlight," suggested Joe.

"See here, children," exclaimed Mrs. White, leaving her place on the cushioned leather couch and going toward the library, "if you do not stop telling ghost stories you will have the most dreadful dreams."

"Oh, I'm not afraid, Aunt Winnie," said Roger, taking the caution, as intended, entirely for his

benefit.

"But you might walk downstairs," insisted his aunt, "and you know how dreadfully frightened you were the night after the party, when you did walk down in your sleep."

"Oh, that wasn't ghosts, auntie, dear. You said, don't you remember, that was cake with frosting on it."

"Do you prefer ghost-walks?" asked Nat. "I do believe most fellows like 'the ghost to walk.' That's what they call pay-day, you know."

"Well, that will be about all," said Tavia as a finish to the recital of her queer ride. "There is really nothing more to tell."

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Roger, "you didn't tell us—about the light. When it——"

"Went out——" interrupted Ned, teasing his young cousin.

"Didn't wait for that," explained Tavia, "for the old man made the horse go, I tell you, when he saw that light floating 'round."

"Well, we will have to go and interview that ghost some day, dear," said Dorothy, putting her arm around her small brother. "Doro is not afraid of ghosts, and neither is her great big brother, Roger."

Interview the ghost? How little Dorothy knew that her promise would be fulfilled, and how little she dreamed how the strange interview would be brought about!

With the arrival of Tavia at The Cedars Dorothy felt her Christmas vacation had actually begun, for the days spent in expecting her guest were almost wasted in the little preparations that Dorothy always loved to make to welcome Tavia. But now the real holiday had come, and it was with hearts and heads filled with a joyous anticipation that the young folks at The Cedars finally consented to go to bed that night and start out on the morrow to fulfil at least some of the many plans already arranged as part of the Christmas holiday.

CHAPTER IV

THE TANGLED WEB SHE WOVE

The day following was clear and crisp, with biting, wintry air, but there was no sign of snow to make the boys happy, and give them an opportunity of realizing the much wished for sleigh ride.

"We had better go to town and get some of the shopping over with," suggested Dorothy to Tavia, when they had convinced the boys that it was too cold to go auto riding, and that this was the very best day in the week to do Christmas buying.

"All right, Doro," answered Tavia. "You're the coacher. I'll go wherever you like, only please don't ask me to select anything to go out to Glenwood—I want to forget there is such a place as Glenwood School."

"Why, Tavia!" exclaimed Dorothy. "You are surely going to send some remembrance to Mrs. Pangborn! Surely you would not forget the principal, even if you do overlook the teachers."

"Not a thing," declared Tavia, shaking her bronze head decidedly. "Fact is, I'm awfully hard up, Doro, and I would rather forget Pangborn than—go without a month's supply of fudge."

"Hard up! Why, Tavia, you wrote me you had five dollars to spend."

"So I did—then, but I lost it since."

"Lost it? How? Wasn't that too bad!"

"I should say so," replied Tavia, turning to her memorandum book, as if to dismiss the subject.

"But how did you lose it, Tavia?" persisted the sympathetic Dorothy.

"Oh, I didn't exactly lose it, but I had to spend it for other things," said Tavia with a show of impatience.

"Then I'm just going to divide with you," declared Dorothy, for she knew perfectly well that Tavia was not in the circumstances that she herself enjoyed, surmised that indeed Tavia did have to spend her holiday money for some needed articles.

"Oh, no, thank you," objected Tavia, the color racing into her cheeks, "I suppose I might have done without——"

"Now, you must let me have my way, Tavia," insisted Dorothy, instantly opening her pretty beaded purse to divide its contents.

"But, Doro, dear," faltered Tavia, "you don't understand. It was not for anything for myself——"

"Then all the more reason that you should be reimbursed," insisted Dorothy. "I don't want to know anything about it, but you must let me share with you. Why, what fun would I have giving and buying, with you just looking on?"

So Tavia said no more, but as she accepted the money from her loyal little friend a guilty flush would persist in staining her cheeks, and she avoided Dorothy's wondering blue eyes when she asked:

"Now, what are you going to send home? We must get the things first that will have to be sent away."

"I've fixed all that," stammered Tavia. "I won't have to get anything to send home."

"I didn't want to take her money," Tavia tried to tell herself, "and I was willing to tell her all about it, but she wouldn't listen. Now, if only I can manage to get Nat to keep quiet. But, at any rate, I did not mean to deceive Dorothy."

But all the same Tavia did not relish the handling of Dorothy's Christmas savings, and somehow she took little interest in all the possible gifts Dorothy made notes of, in preparation for the day's shopping in the city.

"I will have to tell Nat, I suppose," she was thinking, as she finally picked up the little shopping bag and was ready to start off with Dorothy. "I'll tell him to-night—but I do hate to. I wish Doro would not be so over-generous," and she crushed the money in the leather case and put it securely within the satchel.

"Come, Tavia, we will surely miss that train if you do not make haste," declared Dorothy for she could not understand why Tavia should not be more alert and more interested.

"I forgot my muff," pleaded Tavia, "and had to go back for it. I suppose I would forget my head, as mother says, if it were not tied on."

Dorothy smiled and hurried on, with Tavia following.

Surely Christmas shopping was something any girl should love, Dorothy thought, as she wondered why Tavia appeared so indifferent.

Meanwhile, Tavia was struggling with her conscience. She had accepted Dorothy's money reluctantly, it might have been, but at the same time she had taken it. And she told Dorothy her own money was spent for—

Tavia jerked her fox fur boa impatiently. How complicated the whole thing was getting! What difference did it make to Dorothy for what the five dollars had been expended? It was Tavia's own money. Her mother—

"Dear me!" sighed the girl secretly. "That makes it so much worse! Mother did try so hard to save that money for me so that I might not always have to depend upon the goodness of Dorothy and her folks."

"There's the train," called Dorothy, who was somewhat in advance of Tavia. "We will have to run! Look out for your purse!"

The mere mention of purse or money brought the hot blood to Tavia's cheeks again.

"I'll just tell her the whole thing when we get on the train," she promised herself. "If there is one thing I simply cannot stand it is a secret that threatens to pop out every time one turns around," and with that satisfying assurance Tavia was able to put aside her worry for the time being, and was soon sitting comfortably beside Dorothy in the city express, awake at last to the joys of holiday shopping and the prospect of being able, after all, to get some gifts for dear ones, "and perhaps," she pondered, "the old five dollars will stop haunting me."

But alas for the hope of forgetting evil! How strange it is that when one is tempted all shame and all self-respect seem to vanish, only to return with such gigantic power when the deed is done.

Tavia wanted to tell Dorothy what had become of the precious Christmas money. In fact, she was on the very point of unburdening her mind when the attention of both girls was directed to a frail little woman, who occupied the seat directly opposite them.

She was dressed in black, and had the palest face, and such great hollow eyes.

As if by some magnetic attraction both Tavia and Dorothy discovered that this woman was watching them very closely. In fact, she had her eyes so fastened on Dorothy's money, which Dorothy had been counting in her lap, that it actually appeared the woman must be unconscious of her own actions.

"Good thing eyes are not magnets," whispered Tavia, and Dorothy understood her perfectly.

"But how ill she looks!" answered Dorothy. "Perhaps her mind is not—right."

"Perhaps," acquiesced Tavia. "But I wish she would turn those black eyes in the other direction. She makes me creep."

Dorothy tucked her little purse away securely, and once more consulted her memorandum.

"I must get a little more ribbon for Aunt Winnie's bag," she began, "and I must not forget about Joe's magnifying glass. He is so fond of his nature work at school it will be useful as well as enjoyable. Then Roger's steam engine. I wonder do boys ever outgrow steam engines?"

"I promised Johnnie one," said Tavia before she could repress the exclamation. But the next instant she realized her mistake in mentioning home things.

"Then we will get them both alike," said Dorothy, all enthusiasm. "The boys are both the same age, and what one would like the other would love. Oh, isn't it just splendid to have little brothers to get toys for? After all, the toys are the best part of Christmas."

Tavia wanted to speak then—it was the time to tell Dorothy, the very opportunity for confessing the whole miserable affair. But what would Dorothy think? She never made such blunders, if it might be called by so charitable a name. And Dorothy had always warned her against writing letters to strangers. Oh, if she had only taken that advice! If she had only been satisfied with that sacred five dollars, money so dearly saved by her good mother! How many things that mother might have bought for herself, for Johnnie, or for Tavia's father, Squire Travers, with that fresh, clean five-dollar bill! But with what a world of love the indulgent mother had, instead, placed the note in Tavia's hand, with the remark:

"Now my little girl will have her own Christmas money. Now my daughter will be as good as any one else."

"Oh, mother!" thought Tavia now, as she tried to summon courage to confide in Dorothy. "If I only could be 'as good as other people,' as good as Dorothy, and as—honorable!"

"Excuse me, miss," spoke the strange little woman in black, leaning over to Tavia's seat, "but you dropped a paper."

"Thank you," replied Tavia as she hurried to secure an envelope that had flurried to the floor from the depths of her muff.

"What was it?" asked Dorothy innocently, as Tavia hid the envelope again.

"Oh, just a letter," replied the other, avoiding Dorothy's glance. "I thought I had destroyed it."

Attaching no significance to the remark, although Tavia turned about uneasily, Dorothy put away her shopping notes, and as the train slacked up under the great iron sheds of the city depot the girls made their way through the crowds, out into the wintry day, along the broad pavements, where the shop windows beamed in all their splendor of holiday goods and Christmas finery.

"Be careful of your purse," cautioned Dorothy, making her own secure within her squirrel muff.

"Oh, yes," replied Tavia with some impatience. It did seem as if Dorothy thought of nothing but purses and money.

"We will have to be careful, too, where we buy," persisted Dorothy, "else our money will scarcely go around."

Again Tavia felt annoyed. Was it because Dorothy had shared her money with her that she made such a fuss about it?

"We must get the boys' things first," went on Dorothy. "The little fellows must have their steam engines."

Then the face of her little brother Johnnie seemed to come before Tavia's bewildered eyes. How he beamed when she promised him that engine! And how fondly he kissed her when she declared it would make real steam! But she had her own five dollars at that time. That was before she had made—the mistake.

"I wish I had had a chance to caution Nat," thought the girl, as Dorothy made her way into the big department store. "I will have to tell him, first thing when I get back. But what ever will he think of me?"

"Tavia! Tavia!" called Dorothy, who by this time was scanning the mechanical toys on the great center tables. "Why don't you come and see? We will be crowded away from the best things if you don't hurry."

"There's the little woman who was on the train with us," replied Tavia, making her way to the clear spot Dorothy was saving for her. She must be sightseeing."

"She hardly looks well enough off to be buying mechanical toys," agreed Dorothy. "But Christmas goods seem to attract every one. See, isn't this cute?" and she held up a small tin automobile, the details of which revealed to what a nicety the real machine could be made in miniature.

"I do believe she is following us," whispered Tavia without regarding Dorothy's remark. "Let us get out of the crowd."

CHAPTER V

SHOPPING AND SHOPLIFTERS

Toy automobiles and steam engines were soon forgotten, for Dorothy and Tavia were anxious to free themselves from the jostling throng of eager shoppers, and from the risk of the deliberate elbowing of the little woman in black.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Dorothy, "I did intend to go right on with our list. And now we have to stop and wait. What can she mean by always keeping in our tracks? Perhaps she is weak and has not the strength to make her own way through the crowds."

"Then she should have stayed at home," replied the practical Tavia. "I see no reason why we should be inconvenienced by her infirmities."

"But she may have babies. Come, we will go to the jewelry counter. I must get a pretty comb for Mrs. Pangborn."

"Comb?" repeated Tavia indifferently. "I thought Mrs. Pangborn had a head full of combs."

"I know she wears them, which shows she is fond of them," replied Dorothy, "and I do think in her kind of lovely white hair pretty combs are so attractive. I want one with a band of enameled forget-me-nots."

With some remorse in her heart for the mother who had made such sacrifices to give her daughter "her own Christmas money," Tavia looked for the little neck pin for Mrs. Travers. It must be carefully selected, with a view to economy as well as with the purpose of obtaining the best possible value for the money.

It took some time to accomplish this, as the clerks were too busy to attend to customers, save as they might be able to note them by turns.

Finally Tavia had decided upon a pin. Dorothy was pleased with it—the enameled clover-leaf was simple yet effective.

"I do wish people would not crush so," complained Tavia, as some one crowded her against the glass showcase.

"Hush!" whispered Dorothy, "It is not well to let people see ill nature. We will get along better if we just take things as they come."

Tavia felt the rebuke—she had spoken loud enough to attract attention, and people did stare. At the same time it was not comfortable to be carried with the tide and be unable to direct one's own movements.

"Is that the little woman in black?" she asked as a dark figure glided past.

"Looks like her," replied Dorothy, smiling, anxious to have Tavia recover her good humor. "Seems as if we cannot lose her."

"I think it was she who pushed me that time," Tavia explained, "and it made me angry."

"I did not see her then," said Dorothy, somewhat surprised.

"No, she was directly back of you, and had your purse been in that open bag I fancy she might have—made a mistake in judging to whom the bag belonged."

"Nonsense," protested Dorothy. "She would not do anything like that. She simply happened to be interested in the same line of goods we were seeking."

"Well, I never saw such greedy eyes," insisted Tavia. "If she could get our cash with them I am quite sure we might walk home, for all of her. A muff is a great thing in a crowd."

"Suppose we go to the rest room and look over the list," suggested Dorothy. "I feel we have not begun to shop yet, although we have been in this store almost an hour. It will straighten us out to start fresh."

Dorothy turned, and Tavia was directly back of her. Both noticed that the clerks seemed excited—one was talking over the desk telephone, while others looked excitedly into trays and boxes.

Presently it seemed that all eyes were directed toward Dorothy. She felt the implied charge instantly, and her face crimsoned.

"What are they gawking at?" asked Tavia aloud, with her usual recklessness under excitement.

But before Dorothy could reply she was tapped lightly on the shoulder, and, turning, she beheld a young woman, tall, dark and most important-looking.

"You must step into the office," she said authoritatively, at the same time taking Dorothy's arm.

"Shoplifting!" exclaimed some one. Tavia clutched Dorothy's arm.

"Tell her she is mistaken!" exclaimed Tavia, holding Dorothy back.

"You had better come along quietly," the tall woman directed, urging the girl to accompany her. "There is no use or sense in making a scene."

Dorothy turned deathly pale.

"Arrested!" she heard people saying. Then she faced them and somehow walked with the woman detective toward the business office.

CHAPTER VI

WHO STOLE THE RING?

There were no preliminaries and less ceremony about searching Dorothy. Within the office she was confronted by the superintendent of the store, and then the woman detective explained that a valuable ring had been taken from a tray on the counter, and she had reason to believe Dorothy or Tavia knew something about the missing article.

Tavia could not, or would not, keep her anger within bounds. She simply declared the whole thing an outrage, and promised that Dorothy's father would demand satisfaction for the insult.

Dorothy almost forgot her own predicament in trying to calm Tavia. She assured her it would be all right—was all a mistake, and, after all, what would it matter? When the detective would be satisfied they knew nothing about the ring—

Dorothy's little Indian bag had been looked into by the superintendent, and now he stood before her with something in his hand.

"Is this it?" he asked of the woman detective.

Tavia and Dorothy stood speechless. He held up to their gaze a handsome ring!

"In my bag!" faltered Dorothy.

"If this is your bag," replied the man.

"Then some one put it there," declared Tavia promptly.

"No doubt of that, miss," said the man significantly. "It did not walk in there."

"I mean some one who tried to get us into trouble. The little woman in black!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I knew she had a motive in following us!"

But this assertion had no effect upon the store people. They were evidently accustomed to persons making ready excuses, and paid no heed to Dorothy's appealing eyes, her flaming cheeks, or her general astonishment.

"I never saw that ring before," she managed to say.

"You will have to explain all that to the police," the man declared, while the woman detective was smiling "audibly" at her catch.

"But I tell you it is all a mistake!" Dorothy almost shrieked, realizing now she must do or say something to defend herself.

"A woman has been following us all day," added Tavia, "and at the jewelry counter she almost pushed me through the case. I am positive she stole the ring, and got scared, or something. Then she must have tossed it in Dorothy's bag."

"You should go on the force," said the man with a sneer. "You know how to make a case out, all right."

"And you know how to impose on innocent girls," cried Tavia, while Dorothy begged her to be quiet.

Just then another young lady entered the office. She proved to be head clerk from the jewelry counter, and had been sent for by the superintendent.

He questioned her sharply as to the actions of Dorothy and Tavia while they were in her department. Did they appear hurried, or did they seem to crowd others? These and like questions were put to the clerk. Dorothy felt by this time that the whole thing was a farce. How could they help crowding? And why would they not appear in a hurry, when there were not half enough clerks to attend to the customers?

Miss Allen, the head clerk, looked at Dorothy keenly. She had that plain face, honest face, fearless in its simplicity, ready to stand up for the truth, whether to praise or denounce.

"This young lady," she said, still with her eyes fixed upon Dorothy, "could not possibly have taken the ring. I waited on these girls myself, and noticed they never left their stand at the counter. The tray with that ring in it was at the extreme other end of the case."

Dorothy could have hugged her.

"Oh, thank you so much!" she stammered. "I was sure some one would know."

"And did you notice the little woman with the pale face——" Tavia began, but the superintendent interrupted her.

"That will do, if you please," he ordered. "Miss Allen, we found the ring in this young lady's bag."

For an instant the clerk looked surprised. Then she regained that satisfied look, and seemed to wave her head defiantly.

"An open bag is a handy thing in a crowd," she said.

At this the woman detective flushed up and left her seat at the desk. She approached the young clerk.

"Are you in league with these—shoplifters?" she sneered.

"Very likely," replied Miss Allen with provoking coolness. "I can just about afford to lose my place for the sake of an opal ring."

The bitterness of her tone as she said this was as frank as were her eyes when she first looked at Dorothy and declared her innocent.

The superintendent bowed his head as if to say: "You are right, Miss Allen, you cannot afford to risk your reputation in this store, and I am convinced you would do nothing of the sort."

At this the woman detective, quick to see the possible turn in her case, hurried to strengthen her evidence. She picked up the telephone and called for another clerk from the jewelry counter. But her eagerness to fix the blame on Dorothy became all the more apparent and did not serve to help her case in the eyes of the superintendent.

Tavia showed her impatience—she could see no reason why they should be thus detained unjustly. Dorothy had lost her fear now, and appeared satisfied to await developments. Miss Allen's manner was reassuring.

Presently the clerk called for entered.

"Miss Berg," began the superintendent, interrupting the detective's attempt to put a question, "did you see these young ladies at your counter?"

The clerk glanced from Dorothy to Tavia. "Yes, sir," she replied. "I showed them some rings!"

"Rings!" exclaimed Dorothy. "We never looked at a ring!"

"There!" sneered the detective triumphantly, "I thought Miss Berg would know."

Miss Allen fairly glared at the other clerk.

"You showed them rings?" asked the superintendent. "What kind of rings?"

"Why, I had the tray—with the mixed pieces——"

"Just a minute," interrupted Miss Allen. "Miss Berg, what time did you ask permission to leave the floor?"

"At 10:15," replied the other promptly.

"And the ring was lost, or missed, at 10:20. You were not on the floor when it happened, at all."

"She ought to know her own business," snapped the detective.

"And I ought to know mine," replied Miss Allen. "I gave Miss Berg fifteen minutes, and she was not there when that tray was out of the case."

"You should be very careful in a matter of this kind," cautioned the superintendent.

Dorothy left her place and stood straight before the big flat-top desk.

"My name is Dorothy Dale," she began clearly, "and I tell you, honestly, I know nothing about this ring. I never looked at a ring at the counter, and never touched an article except those in the tray with the small pins. I feel you must believe me, but if you are not satisfied you may call up my father, Major Dale, of The Cedars, North Birchland. He will give you any security you may demand."

The speech was just like Dorothy, unexpected, simple, clear in its avowals, and sharp in its purpose. The superintendent looked pleased and Miss Allen smiled. Miss Berg was frightened—she had made a mistake, but the woman detective seemed to know, and she had followed her leading. The detective turned away to hide her disgust.

"Well," said the superintendent, "I am satisfied to drop the matter. I believe you, but should I be mistaken in the matter I am willing to let it drop at any rate because of your youth. You may go, young ladies." Then he continued to the employes: "Be careful not to leave tempting goods under the hands of a Christmas throng."

But the detective waited. She had missed a case—perhaps she would lose by it, if not money, some fame as a detective.

"Miss Dearing," said the superintendent, addressing her, "be very careful to cause no false

arrests. It appears in this case you have missed the actual culprit, and followed a line pointed out by the clerks."

"But several of the clerks——"

"Mere hearsay," interrupted the gentleman. "Now, miss," to Dorothy, "I am sorry you have had your morning spoiled, and I hope you can make up the lost time."

His manner said plainly that he, too, had lost valuable time, so, with a hasty word of thanks, Dorothy and Tavia left the office.

"Well, you are the coolest kid," began Tavia with a loving little tug at Dorothy's arm. "You go to pieces on small things, but seem to glory in a good big scrape. I would simply have hauled off and landed one on that high-up lady's pug nose."

Dorothy laughed at Tavia's attempt to cover up the experience with her joke. She knew Tavia did not really want to use common slang, but understood her way of teasing and jesting under pretense that Dorothy would be shocked and give her a "good scolding." But this time Dorothy disappointed her—she was too well pleased to get out of "the scrape," and had no intention of checking Tavia's suddenly-freed spirits.

"Now for steam engines," she declared, "and if anything else happens to prevent us from buying our Christmas gifts——"

"We will make trouble ourselves," finished Tavia, and then they darted off in the direction of the toy department.

Some one jostled them as they neared the arch.

"That woman!" whispered Tavia. "I am perfectly sure she took that ring and threw it in your bag."

"Hush!" cautioned Dorothy. "She can hear you!"

"I intend her to," replied Tavia. "I guess she made enough trouble for us."

"But we only think she did," corrected Dorothy. "It is just as easy for us to be mistaken as it was for the others."

"If she did not intend some wrong, why in the world is she tagging around after us?" persisted Tavia.

"And if she did do wrong I cannot imagine why she would keep after us," objected Dorothy. "I am sure if she had anything to do with the ring she would be glad of a chance to get out of the store. Dear, I fancy every one is looking at me!" as some one turned at the sound of Dorothy's voice. "It must be awful to be tempted and actually do wrong."

"It is," replied Tavia, and Dorothy wondered how she would know enough about such things to speak as decidedly as she had spoken.

CHAPTER VII

THE HAUNTED WOODS

That night Dorothy Dale retired to her own cozy little room with her head swathed in cooling cloths. The excitement of the day had cost her more than mere experience and an unexplainable interest in the pale little woman in black.

When the whole matter had been discussed, Major Dale was naturally indignant, and declared in plain terms that the unwarranted zeal some detectives evinced in trying to convict supposed wrongdoers without sufficient evidence would some day bring these selfsame sleuths into serious trouble.

Mrs. White, too, was annoyed and anxious. Dorothy was not the type of girl who would soon forget her experience. The boys, even to little Roger, declared the whole thing an outrage, and they wanted to go right to town and tell somebody so.

But Dorothy tried to make the best of it, and said her head would be all right after a night's rest.

"If you are really better, Doro," whispered Roger, kissing her good-night, "we may go to Tanglewood Park for the Christmas tree. Nat promised we could—and then perhaps we will see Tavia's ghost."

"Tavia's ghost?" repeated his sister. "Oh, you mean the ghost Tavia was telling us about. Well, I am sure to be better, and then we may have a chance to prove that there is absolutely no such thing in this world as ghosts," and with a fond embrace Dorothy dismissed the boy with the yellow hair, so like her own, and eyes just as blue. Surely Roger and Dorothy belonged to the Dales, while Joe, with his dark, rich coloring, was like the other branch of their family.

It was not an easy matter, however, for Dorothy to actually get to sleep that night. So many

thoughts crowded her brain: Tavia was acting queerly about something, and it was perfectly plain to everybody she wanted to talk to Nat alone, directly after the evening meal. Tavia was not a silly girl—she would never risk such criticism if something quite serious did not make it necessary. Then how that woman in black looked at Tavia when they entered the train for home! She had to take the same train to get back from town; that was easily understood, as few trains passed in and out to the city, even in holiday time. But why did she sit opposite them again?

And Tavia was sure she just wanted to confess—about the ring.

So Dorothy's thoughts ran riot, and her head ached proportionately. Finally she heard Tavia steal into the room; felt she was looking down to see if slumber had come; then, being satisfied that Dorothy was actually asleep, she went out and turned the hall light very low.

Dorothy was asleep. She dreamed of everything—the superintendent's office, of Miss Allen's sweet face, of how confused the other clerk became—it was all perfectly clear yet so closely interwoven as to be inextricable, after the manner of most feverish dreams.

It seemed she had been sleeping a long time when she heard whispering at her door—or, rather, just outside the second door that led into Tavia's room.

"But it was so foolish," she heard some one protest. "I wouldn't think it so wrong as so foolish."

It was Nat's voice. Then she heard Tavia whisper:

"Hush! she might be awake!"

"I'd advise you to make a clean breast of it," insisted the other. "It is bound to leak out some way."

"Not unless you tell," said Tavia.

"As if I would," spoke Nat again.

By this time Dorothy was wide awake, and realized that she had overheard a conversation not intended for her ears. She coughed and cleared her throat. Tavia was beside her almost instantly.

"Do you want anything?" she asked, with ill-concealed anxiety. "Is your headache better?"

"Yes, I guess so," faltered Dorothy. "I slept well, and just awoke."

She had no idea of deceiving Tavia, but she did intend to set her mind at ease concerning how much of the whispered conversation she might have heard.

"Then turn right over before you get too wide awake," advised Tavia. "Here is some lemonade Aunt Winnie said you were to drink." Tavia always called Mrs. White Aunt Winnie. "And you are to remain in bed for breakfast. Oh, for an aristocratic head that would ache! And oh, for one dear, long, luscious, lumpy day in bed! With meals à la tray, and beef tea in the intervals. But I must not talk you awake. There," and she kissed her friend lightly, "I'll tumble in, for I really am dead tired."

"It must be late?" asked Dorothy.

"Not so very," answered Tavia evasively.

"Good-night," called Dorothy.

"Good-night," replied Tavia.

But Tavia's head did not ache. She "tumbled in" as she promised, but did not immediately try to sleep. She was, instead, trying to arrange some things clearly before her much-confused faculties—trying to decide what she should write home. She had her mother's pin and Johnnie's steam engine, thanks to Dorothy's good nature, but what about paying Dorothy back? Where was the money to come from, and what possible explanation could she make? Tell her she had not spent her own five dollars, but instead had mailed it to a strange woman in a strange place, on the printed promise that in place of five she would get—

"But how on earth can I ever tell so silly a thing to Dorothy?" she found herself answering. "Why, it is too absurd—"

She deliberately got out of bed, went to the drawer of her dresser and took from it an envelope. It was the very one she had dropped in the train, and which the strange woman noticed.

Closing the door softly, Tavia took from the blue envelope a printed slip. She looked it over critically, then with a look of utter disgust replaced it in the envelope, and folding that so it would fit into a very small compass, put it away again.

"And to think I should have gotten Nat into such a thing!" she was thinking. "It was good of him to be so nice about it—but, all the same, I did feel awfully, and I wish this very minute I was at home in my own shabby little room, next to Johnnie's."

Tavia rarely cried, but this time she felt there was simply nothing else left to do. Bravely she struggled to choke her sobs; then at last fixing her mind successfully upon a plan to straighten out her difficulties (or, at least, she thought it would adjust them), the girl with the tear-stained, hazel eyes and the much-tangled, bronze braids, found herself forgetting where she was, what

she was thinking about, whether she was Nat or Dorothy.

And then Tavia was asleep.

The cracking of everything out of doors next morning brought both Tavia and Dorothy to the realization of the fact that another day had come—another day bitterly cold.

They had hoped for snow, but Tavia, being first to reach the window, called to Dorothy that not a single flake had fallen.

"Then perhaps we can ride out to the woods and get a Christmas tree," said Dorothy, mindful of little Roger's wish of the previous night.

"We would freeze," declared Tavia. "Why, everything is snapping and cracking—but there must be fine skating," she broke off abruptly.

"Likely," answered Dorothy, "but I am anxious to get the tree, and if we do not get it before the storm comes we will have to take a boughten one. But I do so love a hand-picked tree. It has always been a part of our Christmas to get one."

Tavia was not at all particular about that part of it—whether it was hand-picked or peddler-purchased, and she said so promptly.

But the severe cold of the morning precluded the idea of an auto ride in search of the tree, and the time was spent in many little preparations for the holiday—odds and ends that ever hang on, in spite of the most carefully-laid plans to get through in good time.

By noon, however, the weather had moderated. Clouds hung thick and heavy, and not a glimmer of sun appeared, but the cold was less keen and the winds had almost entirely subsided.

Joe and Roger went off to the skating-pond directly after luncheon, and Dorothy, eager to get the tree before the storm should break (for every one said it would surely snow before nightfall), proposed the trip to the woods.

Nat and Ned, as well as Tavia, readily agreed, and with plenty of extra wraps, as well as the patent foot-warming attachment from the auto radiator in operation, the party started off.

"Now, where?" asked Ned, who was at the wheel.

"I saw a dear little tree over Beechwood way," said Dorothy, "but perhaps you boys know where we might find a larger one."

"Never bother about pines or cedars," answered Nat, "but I would first rate like a spruce—I love the smell of a good fresh spruce. Makes me think of—a good smoke!"

"Next day in the best lace curtains," added Tavia. "That's about how much spruce smells like real smoke."

"Try the Duncan place," interposed Nat. "Used to be plenty of pretty trees about there."

Following this suggestion the Fire Bird was directed toward the Glen, where, set in a deep clump of trees, could be seen one of the very old residences of the township.

"Is it inhabited?" asked Tavia as they swung into the rough drive.

"Oh, yes," replied Nat. "Old Cummings and his wife live there. It's a fine old place, too. Pity all the old places are allowed to go to rack and ruin."

"No Christmas trees around here," declared Ned, wheeling about along the turn in the drive. "Queer, I would have bet I saw spruce in this grove."

"I'll tell you," exclaimed Nat. "Tanglewood Park. That's the very place for a choice selection of real old cheroot spruces."

"Yes," groaned Ned, "five miles away."

"I don't think it's very cold," ventured Dorothy.

"But the air is full of snow," announced Ned.

"Well, do we go to Tanglewood Park or back to The Cedars?" asked Ned.

"How long will it take to go to the Park?" questioned Dorothy.

"Oh, we may as well try it," concluded Ned, turning the Fire Bird in the direction of the open road and starting off.

"Your haunted house, you know, Tavia," said Nat as they whizzed along. "Now we will, have a chance to make the very intimate acquaintance of a real, up-to-date ghost."

"Oh, is that the place?" said Tavia in surprise. "Well, I'll just be tickled to death to pay a visit there. I have never quite made up my mind whether the light was in the house or—"

"A halo around the head of old Bagley, your tongue-tied driver. Now, take it from me, Tavia, it was simply the brilliancy of your own—"

"Oh, here, quit!" called Ned from the front seat. "If there is one thing I like more than another on a day like this it isn't spooning."

"There's the snow!" announced Dorothy as some very large, lazy flakes tumbled down into the laps of the party in the Fire Bird.

"Won't amount to much," Nat predicted. "Never does when it starts that way. The larger the flakes the shorter the storm. Like a kid howling—the louder he starts the sooner he quits."

"Well, that's worth knowing," said Tavia, laughing. "I won't feel so badly next time the baby on my right starts in."

Meaning Nat, Tavia enjoyed her little joke, but the young man pretended not to understand.

Lightly the Fire Bird flew along the hard road, and soon the tall trees of old Tanglewood Park could be seen against the dull, dark landscape.

"We won't have time to get half a dozen trees, Doro," said Ned, "so if you have it in mind to supply all the poor kids between here and Ferndale, as you usually do, you had best cancel the contract."

"I did hope to get one for little Ben," confessed Dorothy. "He is always so delighted when I tell him how things grow away out in the woods. Poor little chap! Isn't it a pity he can never hope to be better?"

"It sure is," replied Ned, with more sympathy in his voice than in his words. "But I really think it will be dark very early this evening."

"Almost that now," put in Nat, who had been listening.

"Better for ghosts," declared Tavia. "I have always heard that no respectable ghost ever comes out in the bold, broad light of day."

"Here we are!" announced Ned as he turned into the darkly-arched driveway of Tanglewood Park.

"My, but it's spooky!" murmured Tavia, trying to crawl under the robes.

"I thought you particularly wanted to see the ghost?" teased Nat. "There, what's that? I am sure I saw something up in the castle. Come on, let's get out and try the old knocker. If some of the antique fellows knew old brass affair was on that door they would come over and get the door."

"Oh, don't go up to the house," faltered Tavia, who really showed signs of fear.

"Not pay our respects to the light of ages—or whatever you might call it? And we on the very spot! For shame, girl!" continued Nat. "Methinks thou art a coward."

"Think away, then," snapped Tavia, "but if you go up to that old ramshackle house I'll just——"

"Scream! Oh, do; it will add greatly to the effect," and Nat, in his boyish way, continued to joke and tease, until Tavia was obliged to laugh at her own fears.

Presently Dorothy espied a tree—a pretty young spruce—that seemed to meet all the requirements of a Christmas tree.

"Over there," she directed Nat, who with hatchet in hand was making for the desired tree.

The particular tree was situated near a side path, quite close to the old mansion. Dorothy left her seat and followed Nat, but Tavia remained behind in the car with Ned.

Suddenly they were all startled by a noise—a shrill scream—or perhaps it was some wild bird.

"Oh!" cried Tavia, "let's get out of this creepy place. Dorothy! Dorothy!" she called, "do come along and never mind the tree. I feel I shall die, I am so—frightened!"

"You!" said Ned with a light laugh. "Why, I thought you just loved ghosts."

"Now, just stop!" insisted the girl. "If you had gone through the scare before, as I did, perhaps you would not be so merry."

Dorothy and Nat came toward the car. They had heard the shriek, and could not understand it. The tree still stood on its frozen mound and was likely to remain there, for one more night, at least.

"I was not frightened," explained Dorothy, "but I heard you call. Perhaps we had better go. It is almost dark."

"But I would first rate like to bag that owl," said Nat. "I believe I could teach a bird like that to talk English."

"It certainly said some thing," his brother added. "Well, I suppose we will have to please the ladies and turn out," he finished. Then Dorothy and Nat climbed back into the car, and the pretty Christmas tree was left behind with the other queer things in Tanglewood Park.

CHAPTER VIII

A MAGAZINE GHOST

That evening the boys had no end of fun teasing the girls. That Dorothy and Tavia should have been so easily frightened, that Tavia should have "turned turtle," as Ned put it, and that Dorothy "should have run under fire," and left the coveted tree behind, seemed to the boys beyond explanation.

Listening to their telling of the affair, Major Dale became interested, and soon discovered that the old Mayberry Mansion, in Tanglewood Park, was none other than the former home of a veteran of the war, who had been in the same regiment with the major.

"I knew him well," volunteered Dorothy's father. "He was a fine fellow, but always a little queer. Seems to me he had a sister or step-sister. Her name was—Pumfret. Yes, that was it. I always thought it such a queer name, and many a time saw it written by the captain on his letters home."

"And was he killed?" asked Tavia. "Do you suppose it is his ghost that haunts the castle?"

This provoked a very gale of laughter, even little Roger considering it a great joke that Tavia should take the matter so seriously.

"Indeed, he was not killed," replied the major. "He had done good service and was made captain. Seems to me the last I heard of him he was traveling abroad."

"Then it's Miss 'Plumpet's' ghost," declared Nat. "I'm sure, Uncle Frank, you must have forgotten that name. More likely to be Plumpet than Pumfret."

"Oh, no; I remember very well. It was Pumfret, and I used to think she would have plenty to 'fret' about when Nick Mayberry went home, for he could keep a whole regiment busy while in service."

"Then he has turned the castle into a barracks," declared Joe. "I'll wager that solves the mystery. He has got a lot of old 'vets' walled up in there, and they——"

"Go on parade every night about time for reveille. Now we have it. And I propose we take a trip out there some evening at about the same hour," put in Nat.

"Leave the girls at home," suggested Ned, with an arch glance at Dorothy.

"Indeed, I'm not the least bit afraid," declared his cousin. "I did hear something like a scream, and I don't believe in ghosts. Therefore I should very much like to have a chance to investigate the matter."

"Now, see here, children," put in Mrs. White, "I want you all to retire early. There are so many little things to do for the holidays, and I will need a lot of help to-morrow."

This order broke up the evening party, and as the girls were quite tired after the run to the woods and its consequent incidents, they made no protest.

There was, however, some whispering between the boys before they left the room. Then Nat stayed behind and detained the girls—he had something very important to consult them about. Ned and the younger boys went directly upstairs.

A half hour might have passed, during which time Nat seemed at his wits' end in his efforts to keep the girls interested. Finally Dorothy jumped up and declared she was going upstairs. Tavia followed, but Nat managed to reach the second landing in advance of them by going up the servants' stairs.

He called good-night from the hall that led to his own room, and soon all was quiet, and the ghost of Mayberry Hall evidently forgotten.

Between the two alcove rooms, occupied by Dorothy and Tavia, was a long wardrobe closet. Into this both girls put such belongings as might not be used daily—a sort of "dress-up" clothes' closet. It was in this closet that street apparel was placed, so that on the night of the auto ride both Dorothy and Tavia had something to hang on the padded hooks there.

"I'm going to town in the morning," said Dorothy to her chum as she went to the hall closet. "I simply could not do any shopping the other day. Do you want to come, Tavia?"

"I don't think so," replied Tavia; and as she spoke a shadow crossed her face. "I simply hate to shop."

"Oh, very well," said Dorothy somewhat stiffly. "I only thought you might have some more things to buy."

"I'm—I'm—broke," declared Tavia frankly. "I always am at this time of the holiday season," and she seemed anxious to restore a more genial atmosphere.

A moment later she followed Dorothy out to the hall closet. Dorothy had stepped back to make room for her chum. Tavia pushed some garments rather roughly aside to make a place for the heavy cloak, thrusting her arm well into the depths of the closet. No sooner had she done so than

she jumped back, uttering a scream of fright.

"What's that?" she cried. "I thought I felt—Dorothy, turn up the light!"

Then, as the fear took greater hold on her, she cried:

"Oh, help! There's a man in the closet! Run, Doro! run! Help, somebody!"

Dorothy did not pause to turn up the lights. She swung around and fled with Tavia, who continued to scream, while Dorothy, too, uttered frightened cries. There were calls sounding throughout the house—voices anxiously demanding to know what the matter was. The girls ran down the front stairs, and then swung around and darted up the rear flight that they might reach the room of the boys without passing the closet which contained something that had frightened them so terribly.

"Oh!" screamed Tavia, pounding on the boys' door. "Do come out—quick! There's a man in the big hall closet! He—he almost grabbed me!" she panted.

But somehow the boys could not seem to hurry. Dorothy and Tavia were almost in hysterics before Ned finally opened the door, just as if nothing had happened. He was fully dressed, and it did seem as if he might have responded more quickly to the frightened summons.

"What did you say?" he asked, as if just awakened from a sound sleep.

"A man—a man—in the hall closet—he nearly grabbed me!" cried Tavia, "I put my arm in—to hang up my cloak—I shoved the clothes aside—then I—I felt—something—terrible. Then I'm sure I saw—oh, for pity's sake get help—don't go alone—he may kill all of us!"

Tavia trembled and seemed about to fall in a faint.

"Oh, come on," exclaimed Ned as he stepped out into the hall. "I guess we can manage a little thing like this. Come on; we'll see what it is that frightened you. Likely it was only Tavia's excited imagination."

"Oh, please don't go alone!" pleaded Dorothy, holding her cousin back by the arm. "I—I saw—him—it—too. The awfulest-looking—"

"Ghost!" finished Ned with a laugh. "Well, I'm not afraid of anything, from ghosts to—gillies!"

At this he lightly shook off Dorothy's detaining hand, and started down the long hall toward the closet. Nat and the other boys were in the hall now, and in spite of her terror Dorothy noticed that they were all dressed, though it was supposed they had all retired—especially Roger and Joe, who should have been asleep long ago.

"Now, come on out, whoever you are!" exclaimed Ned as he strode up to the open closet. "Where is he?" he asked, poking through the garments hanging on the rear hooks. "Nothing doing here."

"Then he has hidden himself in some other part of the house," declared Tavia.

But at this Joe and Roger could hold back their laughter no longer. The others also joined in. But Tavia would not be convinced.

"I certainly saw—him—it," she insisted. "It did not look like anything human!"

"Come and see if it's here now," invited Ned, who could not seem to find a trace of whatever it was that had frightened the girls.

"Never! never!" cried Tavia. "I had enough in that one look! Didn't you, Doro? No more ghosts for mine, thank you!"

"Well," put in Nat, "it's a good thing to know when you've had enough—even of ghosts."

"I'll go and take a look," volunteered Dorothy. "There can be nothing harmful there if Ned did not discover it."

She advanced toward the closet, in which her cousin was partly hidden, seemingly hunting for the ghost.

"Be careful," cautioned Roger, "He'll eat you up, Doro."

At that moment Dorothy leaped back. She did see something.

"Look there!" she cried to Ned.

"Where?" he asked innocently, "I don't see anything. Look again, Doro."

She had the courage to look again.

Then she covered her face with her hands and burst out laughing.

"You horrid boys!" she exclaimed as soon as she could do so. "To play such a trick!" and she proceeded to bring out from the closet the "ghost." "I might have known you were up to something!"

"Then why didn't you?" asked Joe, still dancing about; jubilant over the success of their joke.

"Just look at this, Tavia," said Dorothy, dragging from the closet the stuffed figure of a man. "Isn't he perfectly lovely? Such a—"

"Fine figure," ventured Tavia, now quite calm, and perhaps a trifle embarrassed, for she had made such a fuss, saying he almost grabbed her, and all that.

The joke surely had been a success, and it took some time to allay the spirits of the boys, from Ned to Roger.

Each seemed to attribute the success of the "ghost" to his own particular talent in that line, and when finally Mrs. White insisted that every one go to bed, echoes of laughter would peal out from behind closed doors, and the girls promised to get even, if they had to do so out in Tanglewood Park, "where the real ghost would not stand for any nonsense."

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE WOMAN IN BLACK

Again Dorothy invited Tavia to go to the city with her, but Tavia refused on the plea that her head threatened to ache, and she thought it best to stay at home. So on the morning following the boys' joke with the stuffed man, Dorothy got ready early and hurried for the business train to the city.

She reached the station just in time—merely had her ticket bought when the train steamed in—and making her way among the crowds of men, she was able to reach a seat in one of the coaches where a few women were scattered in with the many gentlemen who patronized the express.

She had unconsciously followed the one woman who boarded the train at North Birchland, and now took the same seat—the other getting close to the window and leaving the half seat free for Dorothy.

It was some moments before the girl chanced to look up and observe her companion. When she did so, she was startled to find her none other than the little woman in black.

The stranger seemed to note Dorothy's surprise, and turned directly to her.

"We meet again," she said pleasantly, in a voice Dorothy thought at once cultured and peculiarly sweet.

"Yes," replied Dorothy, also smiling. Surely she and Tavia had been mistaken in their unkind opinion of this little body.

"I go into the city almost daily," continued the woman, "and now, in the busy time, I try to make this early train. I do so dislike to get in the dense crowd."

"It is unpleasant," said Dorothy a little guiltily, for at each word the woman spoke she felt more positive this gentle person could never be what they had supposed her—a shoplifter.

"I wanted to speak to your friend the other day," went on the stranger, "but I couldn't seem to get an opportunity. I suppose I might—send her a message—by you?"

"Why, yes—certainly," Dorothy stammered, really surprised this time.

"I saw when she dropped the envelope in the train that her name was Travers, and I thought if she would call on me I might be able to help her in a little business matter. It is of rather a delicate nature," the woman added, smiling, "so you will excuse me for being so mysterious."

"Why, of course," was all that Dorothy could think to answer. "I am sure Tavia—Miss Travers—would be glad—"

"Here is my card," interrupted the woman, evidently noting Dorothy's embarrassment. Dorothy accepted the piece of cardboard, and glancing at it read:

MISS ESTELLE BROOKS
Expert Penman
Envelopes addressed, etc. Benson Road, Ferndale.

As she read the card it flashed through Dorothy's mind that after all the woman might simply be trying to get trade. There seemed to be some connection between Tavia's envelope and the business advertised on Miss Brooks' card. But whatever could she want of Tavia? Surely she could not imagine a young girl needing the services of an expert penman?

"I saw your trouble in the store the other day," Miss Brooks ventured, "and was so sorry for you. I did want to help you—to tell that young woman detective just what I thought. But experience has taught me that it is not always best to interfere in such cases. It often only adds to the difficulty."

Dorothy could not find words in which to reply. Whatever she might say would either seem stupid or perhaps suspicious. And of the subtle ways of women "sharppers" Dorothy had often heard. It was, she decided, almost impossible to be sufficiently alert to offset their cunning. Perhaps this

woman was one of that class—an adept at it.

"Is there any particular time you would like Miss Travers to call?" Dorothy asked, turning the subject sharply.

"I am always at home on Thursdays," replied Miss Brooks, "and she will have no trouble in finding me. I board at the Griswold."

Dorothy knew the Griswold to be a rest resort, a sort of sanitarium where fashionable people went to recuperate from home or social duties. This Miss Brooks did not appear to be in the circumstances of those who frequented the Griswold, the girl thought.

"I'll tell her," she said simply.

"She is just a friend?" ventured Miss Brooks questioningly.

"A very dear friend," replied Dorothy warmly, at the same moment making up her mind that the stranger would not learn from her any more concerning Tavia or her character.

"I thought so," went on her companion. "Well, she is evidently impetuous; that is why I feel I may help her. Ordinarily I would not interfere—it is really a trifle risky for me, but she seems so young; and—well, I'll take my chances this time."

Dorothy was completely mystified. She could not guess at any business or circumstances which might occasion such remarks. But somehow she felt that the woman spoke with knowledge of something about Tavia. What that something might be Dorothy was absolutely at a loss to conjecture.

"I know I surprise you," said Miss Brooks, divining her thoughts, "but some girls do strange things. Miss Travers is evidently one of them."

Dorothy's cheeks flamed at this remark. Why should she speak so of Tavia?

"I have known Miss Travers since she was a child," flashed Dorothy, "and I have never thought her—strange."

Scarcely had the words been uttered than all Tavia's pranks and follies seemed to come up before Dorothy's memory like some horrid, mocking specters.

Surely Tavia had always done "strange things," and very likely only Dorothy's powerful influence had kept her from risking greater dangers.

But Dorothy could not listen to anything against her nearest and dearest friend. No stranger had a right to condemn her.

The train was slacking up as it steamed into the big, arched station. Here Miss Brooks would go her way, while Dorothy would be left to think over the unexpected happenings of the brief railroad journey.

There seemed to Dorothy something almost patronizing in the stranger's manner as she bade her good-by. Perhaps she did pity her—but why? What was wrong, or what might happen on this day's shopping venture?

"I really do believe I'm getting queer myself," mused the girl, trying vainly to shake off her fears and suspicions. "Well, so many queer things do manage to happen in a single holiday vacation I don't wonder that I catch the germ; it must be infectious."

Dorothy's little fur toque fitted gracefully on her beautiful blonde head. Her cheeks matched the poinsettia, or Christmas flower, and her eyes were as blue as the sapphires in the jewel shops.

With some slight agitation she entered Boardman's. It was in this store that the ring incident had occurred, and the thought of her experience was not exactly pleasant to the sensitive girl.

"But I saw such pretty things in there," she insisted secretly. "I must go back and get some of them."

Timidly she approached the jewelry counter. Surely the clerks, or Miss Allen, at least, recognized her. The latter stepped directly up to the place where Dorothy stood.

"Good-morning," began the clerk, smiling pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

Dorothy was hardly ready to make her purchases. She answered the greeting and said so. Then Miss Allen leaned over the counter.

"I wanted to tell you that Miss Dearing, the woman detective, has been discharged."

"Oh, has she?" asked Dorothy. "I'm sorry."

"Well, you needn't be," Miss Allen assured her. "She didn't much care how you fared."

"But she only made a mistake," pleaded Dorothy.

"Perhaps," and Miss Allen shrugged her shoulders; "but she took the trouble to come to me and ask your address."

"My address!"

"Yes; wanted it awfully bad, too. I wouldn't take any customer's address off a tag; not for all the detectives in the house. But I happen to know some one else did."

"But what did she want my address for?" asked Dorothy as quietly as her voice could speak in spite of her agitation.

"Don't know," replied the clerk, indicating she might be able to guess; "but it might be handy some day. When she gets time to think it over, you know."

Dorothy was now almost as greatly mystified as she had been when the woman on the train spoke of Tavia. But Miss Allen went to wait on another customer, and when Dorothy had finally succeeded in selecting some trinkets she left the counter with Miss Allen's words ringing in her ears.

"Whatever does it all mean?" she asked herself. It was some time before she had her answer.

CHAPTER X

THE THORNS OF A HOLLY WREATH

"Loafing is not resting; labor is the grindstone of life's dull edges," quoted Dorothy Dale on the evening of her return from the city.

"Copyrighted?" asked Tavia in a grave tone of voice.

"No; but all rights are reserved," answered her chum. "It took me all the way from the city to North Birchland station to work that out. What do you think of it?"

"Great for the grindstone, but hard on life," commented Tavia. "No sharpening for mine. I make it 'Labor is the sharp knife that cuts all the good things out of life.'"

"But your motto will not stand the test," declared Dorothy. "I happen to know—I found out to-day. Going in on the train I 'loafed' all the way, and the process tired me. Coming out I was tired from shopping, and that tire rested me."

"Well, if you're all right, I'm glad I'm crazy," declared Tavia facetiously. "There's just one thing I want to get to heaven for—one great, long, delicious loaf! If I cannot rest without labor, then please pass along the 'loaf.'"

"But, seriously, Tavia, I particularly want to speak to you," began Dorothy, putting away numerous small packages and then dropping into her favorite seat—the window-bench in her own room.

"Go ahead and speak, then," answered Tavia. "I hope what you have to say has nothing to do with work."

"Now, dearie, listen," commanded Dorothy. "Who do you think was on the train with me this morning?"

"The conductor?"

"Likely," replied Dorothy; "but he did not occupy the entire ten coaches, although he managed to circulate through them rather successfully. But I did not refer to him. I sat in the same seat with—our little woman in black!"

"*Our* little woman in black! Please do not include me in that class. Did she want your purse?"

"Now, really, Tavia, I am almost convinced that we have greatly wronged that woman—she was just as nice as she could be——"

"Oh, of course, she was—nice. That's what the laws are for, keeping people nice. They don't have much trouble to make that clear to you, Doro, dear."

"Well, of course, you are entitled to your own opinion, but I do wish you would listen. She sent you a message."

"Sent me a message! It was to you she owed the apology. She has her cases mixed."

"Tavia, she gave me this card to hand you with the request that you call upon her on Thursday morning."

Tavia glanced at the card. Then she read the inscription aloud.

"Of all the—nerve!" she exclaimed, seemingly at a total loss to grasp any other word. "To ask me to call on a handwriting expert! Does she think I want her services?"

"I was, and am still, just as puzzled as you are, Tavia; but she seemed so serious. Said you were young, and that perhaps she could help you——"

Tavia seemed to catch her breath. The next moment she had recovered herself. "I might call—just for fun. Then, again—I might not," she said indifferently.

"So many queer things contrived to happen," continued Dorothy, noting the slight agitation her chum betrayed. "The clerk at the jewelry counter—Miss Allen, the pleasant girl—told me the woman detective, Miss Dearing, had been discharged."

"Nothing queer about that," exclaimed Tavia. "The wonder is they ever employed such a person in that capacity. Why, I fancy she would arrest a baby to fix her case. Too ambitious, I guess."

"Perhaps," acquiesced Dorothy. "But Miss Allen said she asked for my address. Now, what could she want that for?"

"To apologize, likely. Surely she owes you some sort of apology."

"She was merely mistaken," corrected Dorothy, "and did what she considered her duty."

"The sweetness of forgiving," soliloquized Tavia.

"Simply a matter of justice," added Dorothy. "But it does seem strange to me. However, we will have to await developments. Meantime, we must get ready for Christmas."

"I sent my things off to-day," said Tavia in a relieved tone.

"So early?"

"It is a little early, but they say express packages are always sure to be delayed at this season, and I would simply not live through it if Johnnie did not have his steam engine for Christmas morning. It was awfully sweet of you, Doro, to lend me that money."

"Why shouldn't I when you had to spend yours for needed things? I only wish it had been twice as much. You would have been welcome to it, Tavia. I don't forget chewing-gum days in dear old Dalton."

Tavia's brow was clouded. What an opportunity for her confession! Why did she so dread to tell Dorothy what her own five dollars had gone for? Nat said it would positively leak out some day. Yet he promised not to tell.

"Do you want me to go with you to see Miss Brooks?" asked Dorothy suddenly.

"Why," stammered Tavia, "I don't know that I will go at all. Such a wild-goose chase! I am really not so curious as some might think me. I can overcome a desire for further knowledge of that peaked little thing. In fact, she makes me—creepy."

"Just as you like, of course," replied Dorothy, her manner somewhat strained. "I only thought you might not like to go alone."

But Tavia had made up her mind to precisely that thing.

"I must sew the ribbons on Aunt Winnie's bag," went on Dorothy pleasantly after a pause. "Don't you think it pretty?" and she displayed a small bag made of white oiled silk and fitted up with all the little pockets needed in traveling. One for the wet sponge, another for the toothbrush, then a place for soap; in fact, a place for everything necessary in the emergency of traveling.

"It is dear," agreed Tavia, looking the prospective gift over carefully. "I don't see how you have patience to do such fine work."

"Oh, that is not fine," replied Dorothy. "See my lace pieces. They are what I call fine."

"Oh, they are simply beyond my understanding altogether. Like geometry, you know. But I forgot to ask Nat something. I wonder if he has gone up to his room yet?" and Tavia rose to ascertain.

"It's nearly ten," Dorothy told her, "and he usually retires before ten o'clock."

"Well, I'll just run down to the library and find out. I may forget it by morning."

Dorothy could not help thinking that so urgent a matter as one which required that attention would scarcely be so easily forgotten, but when Tavia left the room she put her little gifts away and soon forgot all about Tavia's sudden determination to seek Nat. Dorothy had so many other more interesting things to dwell upon.

"But I do hope she will not sit up late," came the thought, when some time after Tavia's exit Dorothy remembered that no sound had since indicated that her chum had come toward the room. "Aunt Winnie does not like these little late conferences."

Then she turned off her light and continued to listen for Tavia's footstep.

Meanwhile, Tavia was talking very seriously to Nat. She had told him about Dorothy's message from the strange woman, and he had suggested that the handwriting expert might in some way be connected with the Chicago firm to which Tavia had written, and through which she had made her financial—mistake.

"But how would she know me?" asked Tavia, deeply perplexed.

"You said she saw your name on the envelope that dropped in the car," Nat reminded her, "and

she might have had an envelope with your name on. Those—sharks send names all over the country."

"Then do you think I ought to go see her?" asked Tavia in a whisper.

"Certainly. She can't eat you," replied the young man, "and she might be able to help you."

"Then I'll go—next Thursday," decided Tavia. "But I'll have trouble to slip away from Dorothy."

"Course you will," Nat assured her promptly; "and you'll have trouble all along the line if you don't do as I say, and make a clean breast of it."

But Tavia, having so long delayed that telling, felt unequal to going through with it now. She would simply "await developments," as Dorothy herself had suggested doing in the other matter.

CHAPTER XI

GATHERING EVERGREENS

"I have it all planned," announced Mrs. White the next morning. "The boys are to go for evergreens, and the girls are to assist me here. It is rather early, but it is best to have the greens on time."

Ned and Nat groaned. It would be dull enough to go for evergreens, but with the possibility of "a scare in the woods" for Dorothy and Tavia it might be bearable, whereas, if the girls would be obliged to remain at home—

But Mrs. White's sons did not object. She had "planned the day," and that settled it.

Joe and Roger were delighted. They felt that girls often proved unequal to all "the bear hunts and wild beast chasing," so dear to the hearts of healthy, young boys.

"We might build a campfire," suggested Roger enthusiastically when Joe told him he was to go to the woods.

"Too cold for camping," Joe reminded his small brother. But the fact of it being very cold seemed to Roger all the more reason why a campfire should be built, and he said so.

"Well, I'll ask Ned," agreed Joe, "and if he says so we'll take bacon and things to roast."

Ned and Nat thought seriously over the prospect of hunting evergreens with two "kids." They liked their little cousins—in fact, were very fond of them—but it did seem to the larger boys that there would not be much fun in scouring the woods for greens, and answering small boys' questions, unlimited.

"Let's ask Roland Scott and Tom Jennings," suggested Nat. "They came home yesterday, and likely would enjoy a fly in the Fire Bird."

"Good idea," agreed Ned. "Just run over, and do the asking. I saw Tom cross the lawn a short time ago. He is sure to stick close to Roland."

One hour later the Fire Bird was "on the wing," and in the car were the boys from The Cedars and their guests, two young men just home from college for the holidays.

"Whew!" whistled the handsome Roland as soon as the party got away from The Cedars. "What a stunner your blonde cousin is, Ned! Seems to me you might have prepared a fellow. I almost had a spell when she came to greet me."

Now, Ned White never relished hearing other fellows admire Dorothy. It was a strange fact that while he knew Dorothy to be pretty he was never prepared to hear others say so. Nat picked up the end of Roland's remark. He knew Ned would not say anything very agreeable to it.

"But what do you think of the other?" asked Nat. "Now, I prefer the burnished type."

"A tomboy, isn't she?" ventured Tom, referring to Tavia.

"Oh, just a good fellow," answered Nat. "Always ready for a lark, if that's what you mean."

"Jolly! I thought so," responded Tom. "Well, I do like a girl with some go in her, if she doesn't happen to put all the go in my direction."

"In other words," assumed Nat, "you like the tomboy type—in the abstract."

"Guess that's it," answered Tom. "But certainly those two girls are equal to putting you through a lively holiday. Wish we had a pair like them down to The Elms for this spell. Gee—I just dread this Christmas stuff. Aunts and uncles have my bedroom lined with 'secret packages' already. I went on the 'collar button crawl' this morning, and nearly fainted when I saw the stuff under my bed. Aunt Molly runs some kind of a charity jinks, you know, and she has picked out my room as the safest place to hide her trash."

"Oh, yes," remarked Ned, "I heard Dorothy say something about it yesterday. Seems to me she said she was going to help."

"Oh, then the stuff may remain under my bed," quickly spoke Tom. "If Miss Dorothy is interested—so am I."

"I had her first," objected Roland, joking. "I may buy a couple of rag dolls myself. Does Miss Dorothy prefer the rag variety?"

Ned seemed all attention to the car. Occasionally he turned to speak to Joe and Roger, but otherwise he took little part in his friends' badinage.

"Where are you bound for?" asked Tom as Ned guided the Fire Bird into a narrow lane.

"We'll try old Hemlock Grove first. There should be plenty of green stuff there," replied Ned.

"Yes, and if I mistake not," added Nat, "there is in those woods a cabin—old Hume's place. We may be able to lay out there for dinner."

"Goody!" exclaimed Roger, whose eyes had been continually on the big basket of stuff which Norah, the good-natured cook at The Cedars, had put up for the boys.

"Right," concluded Ned; "there's a chimney and all. Just the place for a layout. Let me see, where did that shanty used to stand?"

"I see something like a cabin over there," said Joe, pointing to a corner in the woods where great oak trees towered above all others in the grove. Even in December some brown leaves clung to these giants of the forest, that now rustled a gentle welcome to the boys in the Fire Bird.

Ned swung up as close as the wagon road would allow, and presently the party had "disembarked," and were scampering through the woods toward the abandoned hut of an old woodchopper.

"Great catch!" exclaimed Tom. "If there is one thing I like it is an outdoor hut with an indoor place on a cold day."

"We've got a bag of charcoal, you know," Roger reminded them, for Norah had secretly given that part of the equipment to Roger personally.

"That's right," assented Ned, "Then run over to the car and fetch it. Norah is an all-right girl, isn't she?"

"I would call her a peach, whoever she may be," added Roland as he gathered up some dry bits of wood on his way to the cabin.

"Norah's our cook," declared Roger with an implied rebuke in his voice, for it did seem to him every one should have been aware of that important fact.

"Beg your pardon," said Roland. "I have a profound respect for such a cook as your refreshing Norah—I say refreshing advisedly," making a grab at the basket Joe and Nat were carrying.

"Here we are," called Tom, who was somewhat in advance. "And the door is not barred."

Roger was back with the bag of charcoal, and now they all entered the old hut. The place had evidently been long ago left to the squirrels and wood birds, but it was clean, save for the refuse of dry leaves and bits of bark, remnants of other winters, when the broken windows accepted what the winds chose to hurl in and scatter about the old woodchopper's cabin.

"Hurrah!" shouted Roger, inadvertently spilling his prized bag of charcoal.

"We don't light the fire there," said Nat "Better pick that up and dump it on the fireplace. Isn't this great, though? Glad I came! Fellows, help yourselves," and he stretched out on a rude board bench that lined one side of the place.

"Get up!" insisted Tom. "Do you suppose for one instant that you do not have to work? I assign you to the task of striking the matches."

It occurred to Roger that some boys, big ones at that, might be just as silly as girls—in fact, more silly than most girls, for when they said foolish things they invariably took the trouble to laugh at their own attempts. Now, thought Roger, girls never do that. Close upon the heels of that thought sprang into the little fellow's heart the wish that Dorothy might have been along. She would know just how to arrange the dinner so that the big fellows did not get the best pieces.

Nat had already begun at his task—he was striking matches furiously by the old stone fireplace, watching the dry leaves blaze up and then die out quickly.

"Here, quit!" called Roland. "Do you think we fellows are lined with matches? We really might want one for the fire, you know."

"Oh, certainly," assented Nat, discontinuing his pastime. "I was just trying the flue."

"But I say, fellows," remarked Tom seriously, "isn't this great? What do you suppose the place stands for?"

"A woodchopper's cabin," Ned replied. "There was fine wood in these parts some years ago,

before the telephone company bought up all the tall trees. Uncle Frank—Major Dale, you know—was telling us only the other night about it. Some ten years ago a telephone inspector came out here and bargained for the whole grove—that is, all the good, sound trees. Then the woodchoppers went back to Canada."

"Glad they left their hut, at any rate," remarked Tom, tossing an armful of dry wood on to the stone hearth. "What do we cook?"

"Bacon, potatoes, cheese to toast, and—let me see. What else?" queried Nat, rummaging through the basket of supplies.

"Bread and butter, pepper and salt, and a whole cake," announced Roger with unconcealed glee.

"I guess that'll do," drawled Tom. "Sorry we didn't think to fetch something ourselves."

"Oh, this is my treat," replied Nat.

"It was I who thought about the lunch," Roger reminded him.

"That's right, kid, you did. But then, you are always hungry, which may, in a measure, account for your wonderful forethought."

The blazing fire had by this time warmed the place comfortably, and it was jolly, indeed, to prepare the meal over the strong embers of good solid oak.

An old grate had been found about the place, and upon this the sliced bacon was spread, while the potatoes were dropped directly into the embers. Norah had thought of everything, even paper napkins and picnic knives and forks. There was, too, a bottle of olives and some cold ham in the very bottom of the basket.

"What's to drink?" asked Ned, his tone implying that anything to drink had been forgotten.

"Oh, the jug of coffee!" exclaimed Joe. "That's in the car. I'll run and fetch it."

The jug of coffee had been placed in a deep, enameled pan, which was to serve as coffee-pot in the warming process.

"Well, I say!" exclaimed Roland. "Think I'll change quarters. I would like first rate to meet your Norah."

"I'm first there," put in Tom. "I met her at the kitchen door as I went around for the oil can. And I must say I rather like that shade of hair. Our shortstop had it, and he claimed it was classic—called it mahogany, too."

The bacon sizzled merrily, the potatoes smelled "brown," and soon all was ready.

It was a queer sort of picnic—a "smoker," Tom insisted, for something happened with the fire that caused the smoke to flare back into the cabin instead of going peaceably out of the little chimney. But the boys did not mind that—they were too interested in the meal. Even Norah's good nature could scarcely estimate on a dinner of this kind. Eating seemed to cause hunger, instead of allaying the sensation.

But when everything was really gone, and each boy knew it was not possible to get another crumb, each declared he had had plenty.

Certainly it was jolly, but when Ned glanced at his watch and discovered that the noon hour had long since passed, he hurried his companions along.

"Look here," he reminded them, "we are out for evergreens. This is not a food-grabbing affair. Let's get back to the car. I don't see a blade of green around here."

"Nary a sprig," declared Tom, looking over the woodland. "Well, I suppose we will have to leave this retreat. But I hope we find it next summer. Wouldn't it be a great place to camp?"

All agreed the spot would be ideal for a summer camp, and when they had entered the Fire Bird and swung again out upon the wagon road, some of the party rather blamed the kind of holiday that required greens, when such a fine day might have been spent in the woodchopper's cabin.

CHAPTER XII

THE SCREAM FROM THE CASTLE

Ned White thought he knew all the roads about Ferndale and the Birchlands, but on this afternoon he stumbled with his party into a perfectly strange byway. It did not seem to lead to any place in particular, but was one of those wagon roads cut through private property and public places alike, without regard to direction or terminus.

This meant that the Fire Bird was lost—couldn't tell which way to fly, and its driver did not know which way to direct the big red machine.

"Where in the world is this?" asked Tom, noting Ned looking from one side to the other in a puzzled sort of way.

"Well, if it is only in this world we are lucky," answered Ned. "I rather feared we had slipped off into another planet."

"It's cold, too," murmured Joe, for as the afternoon sun slowly set the bleak winter day hastened forward in all its penetrating bitterness.

"What time is it, anyway?" asked Roland of Ned.

"Four, and going to get dark in an hour. Jingo! I wish we had found some greens. The girls want to get the wreaths made up to-morrow."

"Why didn't we go to Tanglewood Park?" asked Roger. "There were plenty of nice evergreens there."

"Yes, why didn't we? That's the question. Let's try this road," and Ned turned into a branch of the highway he was driving on. "Perhaps we may get out there yet."

"Now, see here," interrupted Roland. "I've got a dinner date to-night. Sort of a 'return of the prodigal,' you know. I can't be late. So please don't go too far from Mother Earth. If necessary we can get the greens some other day."

"All right," agreed Ned. "If we can't make the park in half an hour we'll turn back. But I wonder some of you smart ones did not think of it before. There certainly were plenty of green bushes out there."

The turn brought our friends out on the road they had been looking for, and it took but a short time to reach the lane to Tanglewood Park.

Under the heavy trees it was almost like night, and it was not an easy task to distinguish one bush from another, especially as Roland kept hurrying everybody, in his anxiety to be on time at the dinner party.

Joe and Roger secured some fine branches of the spruces that Dorothy had wished for, Ned got quite a supply of pine branches, which he declared, "could go up just as they were," while the other boys devoted themselves to the laurel hunt. Finally a large hedge of this all-winter green shrub was discovered, and in a short time the Fire Bird was loaded up with a splendid supply of Christmas evergreens.

"I guess that will do," announced Nat, as the little boys piled in their armfuls. "We have to sit some place, you know."

"What's that?" asked Ned as something rustled along the path.

"A lady!" almost whispered Roland, as if fearful that they might be blamed for their pillaging.

At that instant a small woman hurried down the other branch of the path, and called lightly to some one on the roadway.

She evidently did not see the Fire Bird party, for she was on an opposite path, with a deep hedge between them and her.

"The ghost!" whispered Roger, all eager for some new excitement.



"SHE CALLED LIGHTLY TO SOME ONE ON THE ROADWAY."—[Page 108](#).

"Sure as you live!" answered Nat. "That's not human—it's too flimsy and—flighty."

It did seem that the person flitted about in a strange sort of way, first calling, then whistling.

But there was some one waiting.

"There's a carriage," said Joe, crawling under a bush to get a better view of the other path.

The boys held their breath. What if this might be the owner of the park, who would object to their taking the evergreens?

It was well the automobile had been left in a secluded spot. Perhaps the woman would go off without discovering them.

A light carriage entered the driveway. The woman stopped to give some directions. The driver seemed to hesitate. She was urging him to go toward the castle, and he evidently wanted to go out on the main road.

"That driver's old Abe," declared Roger, "the fellow from the station."

"It sure is," answered Ned; "but don't speak so loud."

"And he wants to go to the station, which I wish he would do promptly," observed Roland, in some suspense.

"But she wants him to drive up to the house. See, she points that way," said Nat.

The woman climbed into the carriage, and the driver turned toward the castle. The boys prepared to make their escape.

"They'll go out the back way," ventured Nat. "Now's our time!"

At that instant a shrill scream rent the air. It was the same, only much louder, that had startled the party before.

"The ghost!" gasped Roger, jumping into the car.

The others followed. The carriage had made a quick turn and was now almost upon them.

Ned put on full speed, and was soon out on the open road.

"What's the answer?" asked Tom, who could not make out what all the fuss was about.

"Did you see Abe's face?" asked Nat as they once more felt that it was safe to exchange remarks.

"Almost went white," replied Ned. "None is so frightened at ghosts as a darky."

"Ghost!" repeated Tom. "Do you mean to say there really is a ghost up there in that old rat-trap?"

"Something," replied Nat. "We have heard that same scream before, and it does not sound like anything human."

"Why in thunder didn't we go up and swat it?" asked Tom, quite disgusted that such an opportunity should have been missed.

"Because Roland has a dinner date, and because we were trespassing. You don't suppose we just want to walk into trouble like that, do you?" inquired Nat.

"Well, I'd take chances when it came to bagging a real live ghost. I hope we get another shot at it."

"There's the carriage," exclaimed Joe. "Just look at old Abe!"

"Scared stiff!" added Nat. "Well, I don't blame him. He was dangerously near that scream. Perhaps his passenger is a ventriloquist and threw her scream. The voice certainly came from the castle."

The carriage passed the Fire Bird at that moment. Ned had slackened speed after his first spurt.

"That woman doesn't look as if she could throw anything—not even her voice," remarked Roland, when the carriage had passed. "But I fancy the old colored fellow is about ready to 'throw a fit,' at any rate."

"Wait till Abe tells it," said Joe, laughing. Abe had a reputation for "telling things."

"It certainly is queer," mused Ned. "I'm not exactly a ghost fiend, but there must be something uncanny up there in that old castle."

"Tavia says there are real magazine ghosts," spoke up Roger decidedly.

"What particular variety is that?" asked Tom.

"Oh, Tavia declares that in magazines scientific fellows are materializing the immaterial," said Nat quite learnedly. "That is what we call magazine ghosts."

"But that howl was never immaterial," persisted Tom. "I should say it emanated from a well developed thorax."

The Fire Bird was spinning along at a lively rate now, for as night neared it grew colder, and the party were anxious to get within doors.

"I hope the girls like the greenstuffs," remarked Roland as the home road was reached.

"Let us out here," said Tom as Ned prepared to run into The Elms. "We can get our blood in circulation before we reach the fire. Whew! it is cold! Well, say, we've had an awfully jolly time, fellows. Hope we can make it up to you——"

"Don't mention it," interrupted Ned as the young men alighted.

"Never had a better time," added Roland. "My love to the girls——"

"Norah's got a beau!" called back Nat as the Fire Bird rolled into The Cedars and the carload of evergreens was stopped at the door. Dorothy, Tavia and Mrs. White stood in rapt surprise and admiration over the "greenstuff" that had been gathered, in spite of all the difficulties which had been encountered in the attempt.

CHAPTER XIII

COLLEGE BOYS AND GLENWOOD GIRLS

"Isn't he stunning!" gasped Tavia.

"Do you think so? I never call a pretty boy 'stunning,'" replied Dorothy. "I like Tom's looks best. He's so vigorous and athletic."

"But Roland's curly hair! And that complexion—so hyacinthy."

"Precisely my objection," argued Dorothy. "I always object to 'hyacinthy' boys."

"Well, I'm just a little glad of it, Doro, for the fact is I think I might inveigle him into taking care of me at the 'doings.' Now, I happen to know he fancies you, and my only chance is that you may turn him down."

Dorothy laughed merrily. She was no prude, and made no pretense of being one. She enjoyed most of the nonsense that girls between fifteen and eighteen years of age usually enjoy. The strange young men, Tom Jennings and Roland Scott, whom the White boys had taken to the woods on the "evergreen hunt," called that very morning—came to make their "party call," they said.

Dorothy and Tavia were busy with the Christmas wreaths when the strangers happened in. Ned and Nat had gone to town, and it devolved upon the girls to be "civil" to the new boys.

To be sure, Joe and Roger helped some, but Roger managed to say rather embarrassing things about beaus, and Roland's love, that youth having asked the little chap to take some "regards" to Norah.

Tom laughed, but Roland almost blushed. Dorothy and Tavia could scarcely appreciate the joke, but managed to guess that the boys had been talking about them.

Finally Tom came to the rescue by telling about the "ghost scream." Tavia was much interested, but Dorothy laughed at the idea. She had any amount of explanations to offer for the queer occurrence, but none of them was accepted as being plausible.

Tom and Roland both declared they would go out again some day and look the whole thing over carefully.

Then Dorothy told the visitors of the Christmas plans—at least, she attempted to tell them, but was interrupted by the coming of Ned and Nat. So the girls were excused and the boys left to their own resources.

It was after all this that Dorothy and Tavia gave their personal views of the two young men from college.

"They may help along our charity play," suggested Dorothy. "They look as if they might be able to act, especially Mr. Jennings."

"Yes, I fancy he could act some parts—a big part with a whole lot of sitting down in it," said Tavia.

"And Mr. Scott might be something on the Christmas tree," returned Dorothy. "In a pretty, striped dress he would make a dear little cornucopia, his blond head sticking out of the top like a sweet little doll."

"I'm just going to tell him that," threatened Tavia. "Then I will be more sure than ever of—his attention."

"Tavia! you wouldn't do anything like that!"

"Why not? You were only complimenting him."

"Now, really, if you do, Tavia, I shall be positively angry," and Dorothy frowned indignantly. "When we are exchanging confidences I don't think it fair to betray them."

"Oh, all right, if you feel that way about it. But I really do think these two boys quite an acquisition. They will help out wonderfully."

"But college boys are old enough to be engaged," said Dorothy, "and perhaps we will get no more of their attention than was bestowed upon us to-day," and she made a wry face to express her fears on that score.

"Engaged! All the more fun. I just simply love to make girls jealous. Now, what girl on earth would be able to hold her admirers against you?"

"Don't be silly!" snapped Dorothy. "It's all very well to joke, but when you get personal——"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! And there's Aunt Winnie. I promised to line the darning bag——"

Tavia's love for idleness was no hidden sin—she seemed to glory in it. But occasionally it betrayed her good intentions. She really did intend to put the pretty blue lining in the dainty darning bag which Mrs. White was making as a gift for old Mrs. Brown, the family mender. Now the chatter about the college boys had completely driven the task from her mind.

As Mrs. White appeared in the hall Tavia grasped the neglected little article. Dorothy had been sewing as she talked. She loved to do certain kinds of stitches, particularly those of floss silk on fine flannel, and this morning she had almost finished the shawl for John's wife's new baby.

Mrs. White had been out, and was just returning. She wore her handsome prune-colored gown, with her mink-tail furs, and both Dorothy and Tavia looked up in undisguised admiration as she entered the room.

Dorothy rose to assist her in removing her wraps.

"Well, it is finally settled," Mrs. White began. "I do think these charity affairs are growing more complicated every year. I have not told you all about it yet; in fact, I could not do so until this morning's meeting was over. Now it is all arranged, so I must tell you about it."

"Aren't you cold, auntie?" asked Dorothy. "Shall I get you a warm drink?"

"No, my dear. We had chocolate at Mrs. Davis's. There, now, I am quite comfortable," and as Dorothy laid the wraps aside her aunt settled among the blue cushions, which, as Nat said, "grew in Dorothy's room."

"Is it to be a play?" asked Tavia, always impatient where acting might be concerned.

"Well, not exactly," answered Mrs. White. "We think scenes from Mother Goose will be simpler, and just as entertaining. Mrs. Brownlie has offered her house, and I am to do most of the coaching."

This last was uttered with a note of dismay—to coach young people did not seem a very delightful task, so many difficulties being sure to come up unexpectedly.

"And we are to select the scenes," went on Mrs. White, "so you may start in to think of Mother Goose just as soon as you like. For my part, all I can remember is the old woman who lived in a shoe, and I am going to get the boys to make me a shoe big enough to hold all the small children in the Birchlands."

"And let me be the mother?" asked Tavia. "I want to whip those Mahon children, and this would be my chance. They ran a pole out in the road against my wheel last fall, and you may remember the consequences."

"Oh, yes," and Mrs. White laughed heartily, "that would be a great opportunity for you, Tavia. But I rather thought of Miss Baker for the 'old woman.' She has that compelling manner, don't you think?"

"She ought to be splendid," agreed Dorothy.

"Are there to be boys?" asked Tavia.

"Why, of course, my dear, there are to be boys. Who ever heard of a hospital benefit without them. We have to raise one hundred dollars this year. And I feel the whole responsibility, as I am the local member of the board of directors. I hope some day we will be able to have a hospital of our own. Supporting a ward in a city institution is not very satisfactory."

"But are there enough boys?" asked Tavia. "It seems to me the Birchlands are populated mostly with girls."

"Oh, that is quite natural for you to think that way," teased Mrs. White. "But haven't you taken into consideration Mr. Scott and Mr. Jennings? Why, they are capable of impersonating a number of characters. Think it all up, girls, and you will help me greatly. I have asked Ned to fetch a Mother Goose book from the village, and this evening we will devote our time to selecting the characters."

Somebody whistled outside, and going to the window the girls saw Ned with Tom Jennings in the Fire Bird.

"Come on," called Ned, "We're going for a ride and want you to come along. Don't keep us

waiting." And he turned the machine without waiting for the girls to answer.

"Run along," advised Mrs. White. "You have been in all morning, and the air is delightful."

It took but a few minutes for Dorothy and Tavia to make ready. Storm-coats and scarfs, besides their muffs, seemed sufficient for their touring costumes.

Dorothy climbed into the machine and Tavia followed.

"Wouldn't one of you young ladies prefer to sit here?" inquired Tom, with a view of making it more convenient for the boys to entertain the girls.

Tavia was out of the back seat and ready to take her place beside Ned before any one had a chance to answer. This, of course, left Tom to entertain Dorothy.

"As long as it is not Roland," whispered Tavia into Ned's ear, "you will put up with me this time, won't you?"

Tavia was too frivolous to suit Ned's serious ways. She always bored him, and she knew it, evidently.

Dorothy was glad to get acquainted with Tom. Somehow he made her think of soldiers, of fearless brave men like Major Dale, and perhaps her Uncle Winthrop White, who had died away off in a foreign country, fighting for science. Perhaps he was of this type when at college.

Nor did it take Tom long to discover what sort of conversation would interest Dorothy. He talked of his school, and asked about Glenwood. Then she introduced the Mother Goose subject, and he told of a college play his class had given wherein all the characters were taken by the students.

"And you should have seen Roland," declared Tom laughing. "If he didn't make the prettiest Yum-yum! The house went mad over him."

"I'm sure he could assume such a rôle," replied Dorothy. "And you were——"

"The Mikado, of course. I always come in for the 'Terrible Turk' proposition."

"We have to select the scenes this evening," remarked Dorothy prudently.

"Then I'm going to get Ned to let me come over," said her companion. "It will help fill in; our folks are just choked to death in Christmas stuff. Aunt Emily is interested in the hospital benefit, too, I believe."

"Yes, Aunt Winnie said so," replied Dorothy. "I guess most of the Birchland ladies help with this benefit. Mrs. Brownlie has offered her house."

"The lady with the fluffy-haired daughters?" asked Tom.

"Yes, the twins," said Dorothy. "Eva and Edith Brownlie are considered the very prettiest girls around."

"Oh, are they?" remarked Tom in seeming earnestness. "Well, to tell you the truth I have given up attempting to judge of girls' looks lately. It seems to me to be all a question of hair—how deep it can be piled up."

Dorothy laughed. To call hair deep, like so much grass!

But Tom did not notice the discrepancy. Tavia turned around and shouted so Ned covered his ear.

"Are you going to be the 'Piper's Son?'" she asked Tom.

"If there's anything to be stolen, you may put me down for the steal," replied Tom good-naturedly. "Even the proverbial porker might be pressed into service for a camp outfit, eh, Ned?"

Ned replied that there were some real attractive porkers about the Birchlands, and that they would probably not mind being stolen for a hospital benefit.

During all this time the Fire Bird had been gliding along at the even pace which Ned always selected for a real pleasure ride.

"A joy-ride, with no business end," he argued, "should be run off gently. No fun in trying to talk above an atmospheric buzz-saw."

"I suppose Nat and Roland have bowled till they're stiff," remarked Tom. "For my part, I prefer the open to those alleys on a day like this."

"Mother told me to ask you both over this evening to help fix up the play business," said Ned, "if you have nothing else on."

"Gladly," replied Tom. "I was just hinting for an invitation. You know how I love classics—Mother Goose will be just pie for me."

"Oh, I forgot," exclaimed Tavia suddenly. "I have an engagement for this afternoon. I ought to go back, Ned. It must be lunch-time." And, as she spoke, Dorothy remembered that the day was Thursday, and that Tavia was to go on that day to see Miss Estelle Brooks, the little woman in

black.

CHAPTER XIV

TAVIA'S TROUBLES

"You must contrive to help me, Nat," urged Tavia, when, an hour or so later, she managed to get a word alone with him. "I can never deliberately go off alone on an afternoon like this, when every one is so busy."

"You certainly cannot walk out to Ferndale on a day like this," answered Nat. "I'll have to take you if you must go. But why don't you wait until next week, when we might get a better chance?"

"Oh, I simply can't," sighed Tavia. "I feel so mean over the whole thing. And, honestly, I'm so nervous about it. Do you suppose that woman has anything to do with—the matter?"

"Seems to understand it, at any rate. It won't do any harm to talk with her. I'll manage to get the machine out, and then, all in a flash, you ask if I won't take you, pretending you did not plan it. I don't see any other way out of it."

"Oh, Nat, you are a dear!" exclaimed Tavia in real joy. "But I do hate so to get you into trouble."

"Oh, never mind me," replied the youth good-naturedly. "Guess I'm big enough to take care of myself. Clear off, now, and when you hear three toots you will know that is the signal. I'll get ready under pretense of going into town for something, and it won't take long to get out to Ferndale."

Tavia ran back to where Dorothy and Mrs. White were busy putting bows of bright ribbon on gifts, and sealing up parcels with the Merry Christmas stamps. Her cheeks were blazing and her eyes dancing from pent-up nervous strain. She grew more nervous each moment. Surely Dorothy would notice it, she thought. And then, too, Dorothy had told her Miss Brooks had asked to see her on Thursday. Would she remember that now?

Tavia picked up the unfinished darning bag, but her fingers trembled so she could scarcely thread her needle. Mrs. White glanced up from her work.

"You have had a lot of trouble with that bag, Tavia, dear," she said, "I guess you don't like lining things."

"Oh, I don't mind it at all," stammered Tavia, "but, you see, I have had no practice. I'll know how better next time."

She fancied she heard Nat coming along the drive. Yes, surely that was the machine. She waited for the toots. Her thimble rolled to the floor. Then her thread tangled.

Toot! toot! toot!

"Are the boys going out?" asked Dorothy suddenly.

"I didn't think so," replied Mrs. White.

"Oh, I have to go on an errand!" exclaimed Tavia, as if she had just thought of it. "Perhaps Nat will take me. I have a package I have to mail."

She was down the stairs before either Dorothy or Mrs. White had a chance to speak. They looked at each other questioningly.

"Nat! Nat!" called Tavia from the front door. "Take me! Wait a moment!"

She had her things on and was out instantly.

"Oh, I'm just scared to death!" she exclaimed as she climbed into the seat beside Nat. "Good-by!" she called up to the window. And then they were off.

"Neat little job," exclaimed Nat. "Didn't they ask you where?"

"I didn't give them a chance. I just stammered something about a package at the post-office. But, Nat, it is such mean work! I can't bear to deceive Dorothy!" and Tavia felt dangerously like crying.

"And do you fool yourself that you are deceiving her?" asked the cousin. "I'll bet she comes pretty near guessing it all, and for my part I cannot see why you do not up and tell her. It is no great crime to—"

"Oh, please, don't, Nat!" begged the girl. "It's bad enough, goodness knows, but don't let's go over it again."

"The Griswold is quite a swell place," remarked Nat. "She must either have money, or make money, to put up there."

"And I feel that she put that ring in Dorothy's bag. Oh, perhaps she is only trying to get me into some other trouble."

"Well, don't get," advised Nat. "I'll be outside within call, and if you get suspicious just raise your finger and I'll be Johnnie on the spot."

The Griswold was a large, stone building, originally intended to be used as a handsome private residence, but of late years converted into a rest-resort or sanitarium. Tavia mounted the broad steps timidly and touched the old-fashioned knocker. In a moment a butler appeared and took her card for Miss Brooks, while Tavia waited in the spacious reception-room. She noticed that this apartment was almost overcrowded with gilt-framed pictures, some paintings, others evidently family portraits.

Presently Miss Brooks entered. She wore a simple, close-fitting black gown, and Tavia felt instinctively that this little woman possessed a powerful personality. She was even inclined to fear her, although this sentiment might be a matter of nervous excitement rather than the result of well-founded antipathy.

Tavia noticed she was not poorly dressed—she looked very different now; the woman in black on the train had presented such a distressed, worn-out appearance.

"Come right up to my room," said Miss Brooks pleasantly. "I received your note, and have been expecting you."

Tavia smiled and murmured something as she followed Miss Brooks up the soft, carpeted stairs. At the first landing the woman opened a door, and motioned Tavia to step in. The room was large and well-furnished after the regulation boarding-house plan—dressing-table, desk, couch-bed, and curtained bookcase, but no article of furniture indicated any line of business that might be carried on in the room, Tavia observed.

Miss Brooks closed the door gently, but made sure it was well closed. Then she took a chair directly opposite Tavia.

"You are Miss Travers," she began in a most business-like way.

"Yes," replied Tavia simply.

"Well, I asked you to come, Miss Travers, because I felt I could help you. I make few friends—the world played me false long ago—but when I see a young girl like you in danger, I am not too bitter to warn her."

"Thank you," Tavia managed to utter.

"You no doubt think me a strange woman—every one does—but I have a motive in traveling about. I had a very dear sister whom I lost years ago. Lately I have learned that she died in this section of the country. She left a child—a baby girl—and I hope some day I may find that child." Miss Brooks paused to cover her eyes with her slim hand. Tavia noticed that her hands were white and shapely. After a moment's hesitation Miss Brooks continued in the same business-like voice she had at first assumed.

"As I have said, I think I can help you." She crossed to the dressing-table, opened a drawer and took from it a large envelope. From this envelope she unfolded a sheet of closely typewritten paper. This she showed to Tavia.

"Is that your signature?" she asked, pointing to the name signed to the letter.

"Why, yes," stammered Tavia, startled and surprised.

"You are astonished that I should have your letter," said the woman. "But so-called confidential correspondence travels many miles these days. I address letters and do penwork for business firms, and have received your letter among hundreds of others."

A flash of indignation crossed Tavia's face. She wanted to snatch that letter and tear it into a thousand pieces.

But Miss Brooks was quick to discern her indignation.

"Of course, I am responsible for every letter," she said. "In fact, I run a great risk in even showing this to you. But I felt I would have to make sure—that you were the party—involved."

Tavia felt like a culprit.

Involved!

She sighed heavily as Miss Brooks fumbled with the telltale letter.

"You lost five dollars?" asked Miss Brooks.

"Yes. Five of my own, and ten of a—friend's."

"Oh!" and the woman's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Yes, I see. Nathaniel White," and she ran her fingers through a package of coupons. "Of course, he belongs here. He is one of the gentlemen from The Cedars?"

"Yes," stammered Tavia, feeling as if her cheeks would ignite if something did not promptly relieve the tension.

"Strange, I had overlooked that. I thought you were the only party about here whose name I had received. Is he the young man outside?"

"Yes—but I would rather not bring him in," Tavia said. "He knows, of course, the money is lost, but—"

"I had not the slightest intention of speaking to him, child. In fact, it would not do for me to make known my business to the patrons of this house. You see, I came here, as I was told this was one of the oldest-established sanitariums in the State, and I hoped, in a vague way, to hear something of my poor sister Marie."

Tavia was silent. She felt instantly relieved at the idea that Nat would not hear all Miss Brooks might choose to say.

"The only way I might be of service to you," said Miss Brooks, as she folded up the letter, "would be by giving you some advice. You see, I cannot betray a firm I am employed by. But the method I would advise you to follow is being used every day by—victims. It is merely a matter of threatening to expose the scheme—they know the business is unlawful."

"Oh, I could never do that!" exclaimed Tavia. "My father is so well known; he is a squire, you know."

"All the more reason why they would pay attention to your letter," argued Miss Brooks. "But, of course, if you feel that way about it, all I can say is that you know how easily a young girl may be deceived, and, in the future, avoid such alluring promises. You could never expect any return from that sort of advertising."

Tavia was on her feet to go. She was disappointed. She felt the advice painfully unnecessary. In making mistakes she boasted of the faculty of always finding a new one—she never was known to repeat a downright error.

"I am very much obliged," she faltered, "and would do as you ask, but I am afraid to write any more letters."

Miss Brooks smiled. "I shall drop you a line," she offered, "if I find any other way of assisting you."

Tavia thanked her again, made her way down the stairs, and, with a sigh of relief, climbed up beside Nat in the car awaiting her.

"What did she say?" asked Nat impatiently.

"Oh, let me get my breath," begged Tavia. "I don't know what she did say, except she wanted me to write a letter and threaten to expose it—as if I could do that!"

"Why couldn't you?" asked Nat pointedly.

"Oh, I am just sick of it all," replied Tavia helplessly. "I want to drop it. I see no good in keeping it up now."

"Well, Tavia," said Nat not unkindly, but with more determination than it was usual for him to show, "I don't believe in letting money go as easily as all that, and if there is any possibility of us recovering it, it is 'up to us' to try. You know I am no 'knocker,' but I would rather have my 'tenner' than that slip of baby-blue paper."

Tavia did not answer. She was beginning to feel the consequences of her error. She never could stand being thus obligated to Nat—and she a guest at his house! Her humiliation was crushing. Nat had never spoken to her that way before.

The ride home was made with little conversation. Tavia was planning; Nat was evidently thinking very seriously about something—something he could not care to discuss.

All the Christmas preparations had lost interest for Tavia now, and when, that afternoon, Dorothy and Mrs. White went on with their work of love, she sat up in her own room writing and re-writing a letter. Finally it read:

"DEAR OLD MUMSEY: I hope you have received your pin, and that you have carefully hidden away Johnnie's steam engine. I know he will be delighted with it. Now, mumsey, dear, I have a great favor to ask. Could you possibly let me have five dollars more? I will send it back before my holiday is over, because I only want to lend it to some one, and I am sure to get it back. But, you see, no one has ever asked such a favor of me before, and I do wish I could accommodate them. Don't say anything to dad about it, but just send it along if you possibly can, and I will surely send it back very soon. I am having a lovely time, but feel I ought to be home with you all for my real Christmas.

"Lovingly, your daughter,

"OCTAVIA."

"There," she finished, "I guess that will do. I do hate to bother poor, darling, little hard-working mother, but what can I do? Perhaps I will be home for Christmas, too."

Then she wrote another letter—to her father. She made the same request, couched in different terms. Perhaps they would each send the money, and then she could pay Nat.

CHAPTER XV

DOROTHY AS A COMFORTER

Roland Scott and Tom Jennings were on hand that evening, when the young folks at The Cedars "put their heads together" for the selection of Mother Goose characters.

Mrs. White "presided," and in the matter of reading rhymes and impersonating the characters, it must be admitted the young gentlemen had the advantage.

It was decided that the tableaux, or charades, would be presented "without labels," and the audience would be permitted to guess what they stood for in nursery lore.

"They won't need another guess on Dorothy's 'Bo Peep,'" said Tom. "That crook is more famous in history than that of the original shepherds. 'Bo Peep' is always a winner."

"I am sure," retaliated Dorothy, "they will know yours instantly. But it is a pity we have to make them living pictures. You will hardly be able to refrain from actually putting in your thumb if we provide one of Norah's pies."

"And what a perfectly darling 'Little Jack Horner!'" added Tavia, for the characters were being selected with a view to making them as ridiculous as possible, and Tom would make a very funny "Jack Horner." Tom surveyed his thumb in anticipation.

Roland and Tavia were assigned "Jack Spratt and His Wife." Roland could be made up to look very lean, indeed, and Tavia was just stout enough to be "practical for building purposes." Her face was of the broad, good-natured type, and so her figure could readily be built up to correspond.

Nat insisted on being "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater," and wanted to have the privilege of selecting the pretty Eva Brownlie to put in the pumpkin shell, "for," argued Nat, "that is the only way any fellow will ever be able to keep the wily Eva."

The character of "Old King Cole" was assigned to Ned, with the instructions that he should get his "fiddlers three."

"Also the pipe and bowl," insisted Nat; "and see to it that you don't take my pipe or the 'bumper' I brought from the doings the other night. You wouldn't carry one home yourself."

"I'll tell you a tableau hard to guess," suggested Dorothy. "'The Beggars Coming to Town.' We could have half a dozen ragged people in that, and Nat could bark behind the scenes."

"And we could have 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,'" proposed Tavia. "Make Lily Bently take that."

"Lily is a real sweet girl," spoke Mrs. White. "I hardly think she would like such a character."

"She would make a dear 'Miss Muffet,'" said Dorothy, "and I'm sure Nat can make up a wonderful spider—all strung by electrical wire, squirming and——"

"Wiggling," added Tom. "That ought to make a hit."

And so they went on, selecting from the familiar rhymes and their illustrations. There was some discussion as to just what this part of the entertainment should be called. Living pictures seemed to the young folks rather too ordinary, and it was finally decided to call it "Mother Goose illustrated." A large frame was to be built, and Mrs. White offered to go to town to procure what costumes could be found appropriate to assist the young people's auxiliary.

In order to give a dozen illustrations the same persons had to impersonate more than one character. When the last were being decided upon, Roland took "Jack Be Nimble," and to show how well he understood the part he jumped over the piano stool for the "candlestick." It was not a difficult matter at all, but Roland landed wrong and strained his ankle painfully.

At first he pretended it was nothing, and tried to laugh it off, saying if that was the only accident they encountered during the "show" they would indeed be fortunate.

But a strained ankle has the faculty of getting more painful as the victim begins to realize that something hurts. In about an hour it becomes almost like a very bad toothache.

This was how it was with Roland, and on account of the trifling accident the party was obliged to break up before all the arrangements had been completed, and Tom had to assist Roland back to The Elms.

"How unfortunate!" sighed Mrs. White. "Do you think it will be very bad, Ned?"

"Oh, nothing at all, mother," answered Ned. "We often do that at school, and it is all gone in twenty-four hours."

"I do hope his will be," she added in concern.

"Don't let it worry you the least bit," continued Ned. "Roland will be around for rehearsal as spry and as pretty as ever to-morrow evening."

From that time on "the play was the thing" at The Cedars, and, indeed, the whole little village of North Birchland seemed deeply interested in the affair to be held for the Hillside Hospital benefit. Naturally, there was considerable rivalry when the parts were assigned, but Mrs. White, with the other ladies on the board of managers, understood and expected this, so they were ready to meet the objections of some and the requests of others.

"We have decided upon these pictures," said Mrs. White at the first rehearsal, "and if any one is unwilling to take the part assigned we must simply look for substitutes."

Roland was there, as Ned had promised, "spry and as pretty as ever." He appeared to "hang around Dorothy," but she was too busy to notice the attention. Tavia, however, did not miss observing the young man's attempts to attract Dorothy, and she also noted that the same matter seemed distasteful to Ned.

Tom had a way of helping every one. He laughed with all the girls, and had plenty of jollity left for the boys—he was considered an "all-around good fellow." Naturally, Dorothy felt at ease with him, but Edith Brownlie made no pretense of hiding her intentions—she wanted to be in a picture with Tom.

Agnes Sinclair, considered the richest girl in Ferndale, proposed "doing a picture" with Ned—"The Maiden All Forlorn!"

To this Ned readily agreed, with the result that the rehearsal of the part caused no end of merriment. Agnes was a jolly girl, and showed a decided preference for the White boys—those from Ferndale never appeared to interest the wealthy Agnes.

When the rehearsal was finally over Dorothy was very tired, for she felt a personal interest in the affair, as it was almost entirely in Mrs. White's hands. The others had all congregated about Mrs. Brownlie's tea-table, where that lady was dispensing the refreshing beverage, but Dorothy sank down for a few moments in a secluded corner of the parlor where the practice had been held.

Presently she thought she heard something stir near her, then she distinctly heard a sob. Brushing aside the heavy portière, Dorothy found little Mary Manning, her face hidden in her hands, and her whole slender form shaking convulsively.

"What is the matter, Mary dear?" asked Dorothy, her arms instantly about the little sufferer.

"Oh, I'm so unhappy!" sobbed Mary. "I wanted a part and nobody thought of me."

It then occurred to Dorothy that surely enough no one had thought of Mary, for from the time when the parts were given out until all the rehearsal was over Mary had never once either been seen or heard from. She was poor, not pretty, and not popular, but since she belonged to the auxiliary it was certainly too bad to have overlooked her.

"Why, I guess no one saw you," faltered Dorothy. "You surely would have been given a part had auntie seen you."

"Well, the girls looked—so queer at me," sobbed the miserable Mary. "I felt I had to keep back. But I do know how to play. My own mother was a real actress."

Dorothy looked down at the child in wonderment. Mary's mother an actress! No one seemed to know who the child's mother was, as she had always lived with the Mannings, an elderly couple.

"Well, we must give you a pretty part," promised Dorothy. "And I tell you, just come over to The Cedars to-morrow and Aunt Winnie—Mrs. White—will have it all made out for you. There, now, don't cry another tear. Come out to the tea-room with me and forget all your troubles. No, your eyes are not red. Come along," and she slipped her arm through that of little Mary, while she led the child out to the party of gay young folks, there to entertain her and bring to the queer little girl that sort of enjoyment which often follows acute grief—a reaction as uncontrollable as had been the bitterness which had caused the sorrow.

CHAPTER XVI

A DELICATE DISCOVERY

It was very near Christmas, and events were crowding about The Cedars. Dorothy, as usual, had assumed more than her share of responsibility, for Tavia somehow acted queerly. She spent much time running back and forth to the post-office, and it was evident to all that she and Nat were not the friends they had been previously. Besides this, Ned had spoken to Dorothy, and had actually asked her not to "flirt" with those college boys!

This was unlike Ned, and a positive shock to Dorothy. To be sure, he chose the word "flirt" indifferently, but to Dorothy it had an ugly sound, and that night, after all her worries at the rehearsal, she went to bed with a pair of very red eyes.

Perhaps it was the rush and excitement that caused every one to be so irritable and to so misunderstand things. Certainly Tavia had some worry, and Ned did not act like himself, while Nat looked miserable. It would be a queer holiday unless things mended promptly.

It was a pleasant morning, and Dorothy, feeling that a run in the open air would do her nerves good, seized upon some excuse to go to the village.

She wanted to be alone—to think about what Ned had said, to look over everything carefully, and see if he had any excuse for such a remark. Had she acted foolishly? Could her innocent freedom with Tom Jennings be misunderstood? Was it not possible for a girl to act naturally after she had passed the age of fifteen years?

Her head filled with such thoughts as these, in all the power that they may assume when first encountered by a young girl, Dorothy hurried along. She would simply tell Ned all about it, she decided. He surely would understand that she never dreamed of "flirting."

From the main highway she was obliged to turn into a branch of the road from Ferndale to reach the post-office, that little building being situated at the junction of both thoroughfares.

In her excitement she had scarcely glanced before her, but now, as she turned into the Ferndale road, she observed a woman coming along the same path. It was Miss Brooks.

Somehow Dorothy was glad to meet her. After all, it was not pleasant to think too seriously.

"Good-morning," said Dorothy with all the vivacity she could summon. "Looking for Christmas mail too?"

"Yes," replied Miss Brooks, with something of a sigh. "There are many kinds of Christmas mail, I suppose."

The reply confused Dorothy. She did not want to bring sad reflections to the "little woman in black."

"I guess we will have pleasant weather," Dorothy hurried to say vaguely. "I hope so, at any rate, for we must depend considerably upon the weather for the success of our hospital entertainment. You know, we are to have one."

"Yes, I've seen the tickets," said Miss Brooks, walking along with Dorothy. Then both paused. Both had evidently exhausted the commonplace.

Miss Brooks looked keenly at Dorothy. The latter could feel her searching gaze, and wondered secretly what it could mean. Presently Miss Brooks said:

"I believe you are a prudent girl, Miss Dale, and I wonder if I might trust you with a delicate—matter?"

"If I can help you—yes," answered Dorothy promptly.

"It is not to help me," said the other, "but to help your friend, Miss Travers."

Dorothy felt instantly that she referred to Tavia's troubles—those troubles which Tavia herself had refused to confide in her. Should she hear them from another?

In her direct way, without mincing words or risking any misunderstanding, Dorothy said decidedly:

"If you are sure I can help my friend I will be glad to do so, but I have no wish to interfere in any personal affair of hers."

Miss Brooks did not weaken. Dorothy's honesty in speaking as she did only seemed the more to convince her that Dorothy Dale could and ought to help Tavia Travers.

"I know," she went on, "that Miss Travers is greatly worried over a matter of money. I advised her how she could be relieved of that worry, but in spite of my advice I have reason to think that she has only made matters worse by writing to her folks at home and asking them for more money."

"Writing home for money!" gasped Dorothy.

"Yes; I am sorry to seem a meddler, but I feel that she will greatly complicate matters unless you are clever enough to step in and interfere. It is the old story of the tangled web; Miss Travers had no idea of doing anything—irregular. She simply did as thousands of others do, though I must say boys are usually the victims. A girl rarely takes such chances."

Dorothy was too surprised to speak. They were near the post-office, and both stood in the road to finish the conversation.

"How can I help her?" asked Dorothy simply.

"Well, I must confess it may be difficult, but I see no other way to get her out of her troubles, for she is surely multiplying them. The latest phase of her difficulty I may tell you of without any risk

of betraying professional confidence," and Miss Brooks smiled faintly. "She has lately written to her father and to her mother for money—urging some trifling excuse. Letters intended for her have fallen into her father's hands. He is a lawyer, or in some way connected with legal affairs, is he not?"

"A squire."

"Oh, yes, that's it. Well, he has put two and two together, and has sent the last letter she wrote him out to a firm in Chicago, asking them to state clearly, and at once, what their business has been with his daughter, as he has reason to believe that it is because of this business that his daughter is worried about money and is trying to get it for some secret purpose. You see, he has inferred that she is trying to get the money on account of her dealings with this firm. The letters written to her show that."

Dorothy tried to understand, but it was all very strange. What sort of business dealings could be so dishonorable?

"And how can I help her?" she repeated.

"In one of two ways. Either get ten dollars for her in some way that she may return the money to her parents if they have already sent it, or induce her to write at once to her father, telling him frankly all about the matter and stating that she does not now require the ten dollars. She evidently wants that amount to pay some one who has lost on her account."

Dorothy was amazed. She could scarcely believe that Tavia would have gotten into any complex affair. And that some one should lose money on her account!

"Could it be Nat?" was the thought flashed through her brain. She had overheard some part of a conversation between Nat and Tavia, and now Tavia showed some ill-feeling toward Nat.

"Well, I must get along," said Miss Brooks finally. "I am glad I met you, and hope I have not given you too great a task. Good-morning."

Dorothy smiled and bowed, but her anxiety had promptly written the lines of care on her fair young face, and even the aged postmaster did not fail to ask her if anything was wrong at The Cedars when he handed her the mail.

Among the many letters was one for Tavia, and it bore the Dalton postmark.

CHAPTER XVII

SPRUCE BOUGHS AND LAUREL WREATHS

Mrs. Brownlie's immense parlors were stripped of all movable furniture in preparation for the charity entertainment.

Strong linen crash covered the handsome carpets, and the camp stools to be used on the evening of the performance had already arrived.

That afternoon the Fire Bird brought the evergreens from The Cedars—those which had been gathered some few days before and had since been stored carefully in the garage—and an additional supply came from Ferndale, the result of an enterprising expedition to the woods, under the management of Miss Agnes Sinclair.

Besides a necessary rehearsal, the evening was to be spent in decorating for the play. Mrs. White had requested every one to be on hand early, and now the young folks were arriving.

Little Mary Mahon was the first to come—in accordance with Dorothy's arrangements, for Mary was to rehearse her part before the others would get there, and just what her number would be was to be kept secret.

The Brownlie girls, Eva and Edith, understood the remark Dorothy made as she entered, and so left the parlors entirely at her disposal, even locking the door from the hall and throwing open the library to accommodate any one who might come before Mary's "practice" was over.

A recitation had been selected for Mary—one that afforded ample opportunity for the child's natural talent to act—for she had talent, and both Mrs. White and Dorothy were delighted with the prospect of what the queer child would add to the program.

There was something so weird about Mary—if that word might be fitly used to denote her peculiar characteristics.

She was not deformed, but she surely was deficient physically. She was thin to emaciation, she had fiery red hair, and Roger always declared "her eyes and eyebrows were just as red as her hair."

The recitation chosen for her was "Guilty or Not Guilty?" and it seemed to suit her strangely. Of course, when a child is almost constantly in the company of aged persons, and takes no pleasure

in play, besides being over-studious, she is bound to be "queer."

And such was Mary Mahon.

When Dorothy threw open the parlor door after the rehearsal her face was radiant. She was pleased—delighted with Mary, and the girls waiting to be admitted to the "hall" exchanged knowing glances when Dorothy told them the room was ready.

Tom and Roland were there, Agnes Sinclair, Mabel Hastings, Ned, and Nat, of course; Tavia was with Eva Brownlie, chatting as if there was nothing else to be done that evening; Betty Bindley managed to get her dainty little self secure with Harold Osborne (Handsome Harold, they called him), and other members of the auxiliary and their friends were there ready to begin the work of rehearsing and decorating.

Besides the pictures there was to be music—the Brownlie girls played the violin beautifully, and Dorothy was an acknowledged pianist; then Agnes Sinclair was to entertain with monologues, and the boys were to have a vocal double quartette.

The arranging of this program involved considerable work, so to-night there was no time to be wasted.

"Let's get the wreaths first," proposed Dorothy. "We shall need such long strings to go all around the room. While some of us are at these, others can be going through their parts."

Tom grabbed a huge mass of broken laurel branches, made his way to a corner, placed two chairs before the pile of greens and deliberately sought out Dorothy.

"Come," he said very kindly, "I've got a quiet job for you. You usually get too much of the all-around business. Let us run a race making the wreath, or strings, I suppose you want. Here, Ned," he called across the room, "get your stuff and your girl, and I'll race you for a mile of green string."

Could anything be more inopportune? To select Dorothy to be his partner against Ned in a race!

But the idea of a contest was quickly taken up by the others, so that soon the party had paired off, and racing with the strings of laurel became a matter of enjoyment, and not a question of work.

Dorothy took her place with Tom; Agnes Sinclair was with Ned; Nat went to work with Eva Brownlie, and Tavia sat beside Roland.

How quickly the fingers flew! And how soon the small sprigs of green were twined into long, soft garlands!

"I'll keep tally," proffered Edith Brownlie, glad to escape the more certain duty of tying the cords about the boughs.

For an hour all worked and chatted gaily, the boys continually "betting against bets," while the girls would complain that too much conversation interfered with the progress of the race.

When the full hour had passed Edith called "Time!" Then the measuring began.

"No stretching!" warned Ned as he held his rope of green against that which Tom and Dorothy had woven.

"Ours!" called Tom, as the one string pulled out two yards longer than the other.

Then every other strand was measured against that. Not one came up to the garland made by Dorothy and Tom.

"Oh, of course," pouted Eva, "Dorothy and Tom could not possibly have been beaten. They're such a strong team!"

The others laughed, although Dorothy did not like the remark.

Ned lifted his eyebrows thoughtfully, but never once smiled at Dorothy's triumph.

"Tavia has the 'Booby,'" announced Tom, who had done all the measuring, "Now distribute the prizes, please."

Tavia protested, of course, and soon the room was in an uproar. Finally the ladies insisted the wreaths should be put up, and when the chairs and stepladders had been brought the boys began festooning the long strings of green about the room, over windows and doors, and about the finely-fluted posts that marked the arches.

Dorothy purposely took Ned's rope to hold for him.

"Won't it look pretty?" she asked, trying to show her interest in his work.

"Guess so," he answered indifferently, without looking at his cousin.

"Here, Dorothy," called Tom. "You are not to work. This sofa is especially provided for our comfort. Here, sit down," and taking her arm, he attempted to lead her away from the ladder upon which Ned stood.

"Let me have it," said Ned, jerking the rope from Dorothy's grasp. Instinctively she held to it, and looked up in some astonishment at her cousin.

A moment later Ned swayed toward her. She had released her hold of the rope, and the sudden easing of the strain which the youth put upon it caused him to lose his balance. He swayed still farther away from the ladder, and thrust out his hands to grasp the rungs. He dropped the rope, and as Dorothy gave a frightened scream he crashed to the floor, right at her feet, narrowly missing striking her.

She had barely time to jump aside when the ladder crashed down beside the prostrate form of Ned.

Instantly the room was in an uproar. Ned was hurt—he did not attempt to move, but lay there almost unconscious.

"Oh, my boy!" cried Mrs. White, bending over him.

"Ned! Ned!" implored the frightened Dorothy, with her white face very close to his. "It was all my fault!"

"No," spoke up Tom, "I should not have distracted him while he was up so high. Come, boy," to Ned, "let me lift you."

The strong arms of Tom Scott encircled the helpless one, and very tenderly Ned was lifted, then carried to a lounge in the library.

"Oh, I'm all right," he managed to say, when Tom had placed him on the couch. "I just hurt my—knee, I guess."

The expression of pain that crossed his face showed plainly some member was injured, and Mrs. Brownlie, in spite of his protests, insisted on calling a doctor.



"HE CRASHED TO THE FLOOR, RIGHT AT HER FEET."—[Page 158](#).

Dorothy wanted to cry. She felt it was somehow her fault. If only Tom had not interfered! But of course he meant no harm. Yet she knew how Ned felt.

"Oh, dear," she sighed aloud, "I did feel that something would happen!"

"I'm sorry," said Ned feebly. "I was a—goose to snap it so, Doro."

Tom had gone out to the telephone in the hall. Mrs. White and Mrs. Brownlie advised the others to leave off the decorating until the next day, as it would be best to get the house quiet.

"Every shock has a nervous reaction," explained Mrs. Brownlie in dismissing her guests thus suddenly, "and it will be best to keep him quiet until the doctor comes."

Tavia wanted to stay, but not even Dorothy was accorded that privilege. Tom remained with Mrs. White, and Nat went for the Fire Bird, in which to take his brother and mother home, there being no room for the others in it now.

"How ever did it happen?" Tavia asked of Dorothy as they walked the short distance home in Roland's company.

"I had hold of his rope," replied Dorothy, still showing her distress, "and he attempted to take it —"

"He acted so queerly all evening," commented Tavia. "I never saw him so cross."

"I did not notice it," said Roland, touching the bell at the door of The Cedars. "I thought him in the best of spirits."

"Of course, it was simply an accident," added Dorothy. "How he felt could have had nothing to do with it."

"Well, everything seems queer," declared Tavia. "I just wonder how it will all turn out."

"That must depend entirely upon ourselves," insisted the practical Dorothy. "But we will have trouble in getting some one to take Ned's place— Oh, dear, if I had only—but there's no use lamenting." And when Roland said good-night at the door Dorothy went directly to her own room—she was too much depressed to join the family's expression of anxieties.

The queer holidays were surely nearing a climax.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOROTHY'S DISTRESS

Complication upon complication!

Dorothy could scarcely think—she was stunned, bewildered.

The thought of Ned's disapproval of Tom's attention to her seemed the most bitter thought of all.

She did love Ned, her own cousin. How could any girl not appreciate the joy of being a cousin to Ned White?

And that he should misunderstand her! Think her frivolous, and even accuse her of flirting!

Dorothy felt that even The Cedars now belonged to Ned, and she, with her father and brothers, were merely his guests.

How ever could she make him understand?

Why are girls neither women nor children in all the troublesome "between" years?

Then Tavia's troubles. Dorothy had thought to do all Miss Brooks advised, but how could she do so to-night? And the letter Dorothy had given Tavia was certainly from Mr. Travers.

Thoughts of the play, of little Mary's part, then the responsibility of insuring a success, crowded through Dorothy's confused brain.

If the play was a success she had hoped to get little Bennie Baglin into the hospital. He suffered so, and surely could be helped, if not cured, by proper treatment. But the hospital would only accept patients from the Birchlands according as money was contributed from the place, and it would cost considerable to have an incurable (as Bennie was) taken in.

But Dorothy had quietly planned his Christmas. She had saved a little tree from the decorating greens, and had already gathered and bought enough trinkets to trim it.

"If only Ned is not badly hurt," she prayed as the night grew very late. "I do wish they would come."

The sound of automobile wheels on the path answered her wish. The next moment she was at the door.

"Open both doors," Mrs. White said to Major Dale, who stood beside Dorothy. "He cannot walk, and must not be jarred."

Mrs. White's voice betrayed excitement and anxiety. Dorothy was too anxious to speak—she dreaded to know the actual trouble.

Tom and Dr. Whitethorn carried the injured boy into the library.

"How's that?" asked the doctor as Ned fell back amid the cushions of a couch.

"All—right," replied the latter with evident effort.

"Now just keep quiet, and don't attempt to move unaided," said the doctor, "and we'll see how it is in the morning. I think, Mrs. White, you might make him comfortable to-night on this floor. It will be safer."

Ned was very pale. Dorothy could not bear to see his white face with the deep dark rings under his eyes. Tom did what he could, and then was ready to leave.

He took Dorothy's arm and led her out into the hall.

"See here, little girl," he began, "you are not to blame yourself in any way for this. If any one was at fault it was I. I saw how he—felt, and should not have tantalized him."

"It was simply an accident," argued Dorothy feebly.

"Certainly," answered Tom; "but Ned was out of sorts. He seemed to have a personal grudge

against me."

"Oh, you must have imagined that," answered Dorothy. "Ned is sensitive, but not—unreasonable."

Tom pressed her hand warmly in parting. The action brought warm color to her cheeks. He was trying to cheer her, of course, but Ned would not have liked it.

When the doctor had left, Mrs. White told the major that her son's hip was hurt.

"And that does take so long to mend," she lamented. "The hip is such a network of ligaments."

Acting on the doctor's advice, the injured young man was made comfortable in the library for the night. Nat wanted to stay with him—there were plenty of divans and couches that might be used in the emergency—but Mrs. White insisted upon caring for the boy herself. She noticed he was becoming feverish, and so hurried the others off to bed that the house might be quiet.

Dorothy took Ned's warm hand in hers and touched his forehead with her lips. But she knew better than to utter one word—he must be quiet, very quiet.

How strangely depressing was the house now with the gloom of sickness upon it! The awful uncertainty of an accident, what the result might be, how serious or trifling—every possibility seemed weighted with terrible consequences.

Dorothy fell upon her knees beside her bed. Her heart was very full, everything seemed dark and gloomy now. All the difficulties of yesterday were engulfed in that one sorrow—Ned's accident. Dorothy seemed unable to pray, and in her sadness came the thought of her own unwilling part in the little tragedy.

"If only I had told Tom—asked him not to! But how could I do that?" she argued against argument. "What would he think of Ned? Of me?"

A step in the hall roused her from her reverie. There was a slight tap on the door, then Tavia entered. Although it was late she was still entirely dressed, and her face showed she had been crying.

"Dorothy," she said, her voice trembling and the tears welling into her eyes, "I must—go home!"

"Why?" asked Dorothy, surprised and startled.

"Dad says so. I must go first thing in the morning."

"Your letter?"

"Yes, it was from father."

"Has anything happened?"

"Yes, and no. Father has—misunderstood some letters of mine. He found them since I came away—and he blames me— Oh, Doro!" and Tavia covered her face with her hands. "How I wish I had told you before!"

Tavia was sobbing bitterly. Instantly there came to Dorothy's mind the thought of Miss Brooks' warning, her advice to tell Tavia before it was too late, before all the harm was done. And had she delayed too long? Even that one day might have been sufficient time in which the threatened danger had become a certainty.

"Tavia, dear, don't go on so! It cannot be—so very dreadful."

"Oh, but it is! I never should have done such a thing. I knew better, and I tried to convince myself that I did not. Then I should never have taken your money. Oh, Doro, I deceived you, and I have deceived everybody!"

"You are excited and everything seems worse to you now, dear. Try to be calm and tell me how I can help you."

"You cannot—nobody can. Father is angry—he wrote such a terrible letter, and how I dread to face him!"

"Perhaps we can arrange it so you will not have to go," said Dorothy in her own way of promptly attempting to save Tavia from the consequences of her own folly. "It is all about money, I know."

"You know?"

"Yes; Miss Brooks told me that much."

"Miss Brooks told you!"

"She merely said you were in some difficulty and asked me to advise you—to tell your father all about it," Dorothy said cautiously.

"Miss Brooks has no right to interfere!" snapped Tavia, immediately taking offense. "Advice is always cheap!"

"But she surely did it out of kindness," continued Dorothy, "and she really seemed very much concerned."

"I don't want to hear or know anything more about that—person. She is evidently trying to cover up her little mistake in putting a ring in the wrong bag. She knows absolutely nothing about me—she is merely guessing."

Tavia felt she was making bad worse; it was not a time to attempt further deception. But somehow the idea of Miss Brooks speaking to Dorothy angered her—she was the one to do that. Then followed the accusing voice of conscience:

"But why did you not do so? Why do you not do so now?"

"I suppose she told you that I——"

"She told me nothing," interrupted Dorothy, "but that you had made some mistake in a money matter and then suggested that the way for you to rectify it would be to write to your father and tell him all about it."

"I wonder she did not essay to do that herself—she seems perfectly qualified to attend to it all for me."

"Now, Tavia," began Dorothy, assuming a voice at once commanding and kind, "it is utterly useless for you to take that view of the matter. If you dislike Miss Brooks' interference, pay no attention to it. Do what you think best. Look the whole question squarely in the face, and then decide."

All Tavia's contrition and her determination to do what was right, which sentiment had entirely possessed her when she entered the room, seemed to have gone with the mention of Miss Brooks' name.

"If she has told Dorothy," thought Tavia, "there is no need for me to repeat it."

So vanished the blessed power, truth, and so did the confusing and conflicting powers of deceit throng about her, and more than ever preclude the possibility of a happy solution for her difficulties.

"I must go home," she said dejectedly. "Dad said I should be home by noon to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX

BETWEEN THE LINES

When Tavia had left her, Dorothy felt utterly helpless in facing the problems that now confronted her.

"One thing is certain," Dorothy told herself. "Tavia must not go home. In her state of mind, and with her temper, there is no telling what she might do—leave home, or something else dreadful. If I could only see Squire Travers first," she argued, "I am sure I could manage it some way."

"But I cannot possibly go to Dalton now," she decided, "with Ned sick, and the play to-morrow night."

"And how can I persuade Tavia not to go? I suppose she has her bag packed already."

Dorothy seemed incapable of reasoning further. She threw herself down on her bed and gazed fixedly at the ceiling, as if expecting some inspiration to come from the dainty blue and gold papering.

How long she lay there she had no idea of computing—it was not now a question of time, although the night must be far advanced, but to the perplexed girl everything about her seemed to surge in one great sea of difficulties.

She jumped up suddenly.

"I wonder how Ned is?" she thought. "If only he is not seriously hurt. The doctor said if he slept, and no fever arose, he would do well. I wonder how I can find out. I might slip downstairs and listen."

She drew her heavy blue robe around her, put on her slippers and softly opened the door. There was no light in the upper hall, and a turn from the first flight of stairs hid the dim light below. Directly at this turn a push-button connected with an electric drop lamp, and this button Dorothy touched as she passed.

At the broad window-seat she hesitated for a moment, looked out at the clear, wintry night, and then slipped down the stairs so lightly that even the cushioned velvet carpet took no impress of her footfall.

At the last step she stopped—a terrible fear clutched her heart. The library door was open, but no sound came from the room.

She clung to the broad post and listened. Could Ned be worse? Then the chime of the hall clock

startled her. It was just midnight! Dorothy had no idea it was so very late.

She would just go to the library door——

Involuntarily she turned toward the vestibule. A strange sensation of some one watching her from without possessed her, terrified her, and at the same instant a light tap sounded upon the plate-glass door.

Some one was watching her!

For the moment Dorothy could not move or utter a sound. Then the thought of her sick cousin brought her back to a realization of the emergency. She must answer the knock and not arouse any one.

Summoning all her self-control Dorothy moved toward the front door. Only the glass and a thin lace drapery separated her from without, as the storm door had been left open. Some one stood within the small entrance hall—the shadow was clearly outlined.

She drew aside the lace curtain.

There stood Tom Scott!

"Open the door," he whispered "I—don't want to detain you."

More surprised now than frightened, Dorothy shoved back the heavy bolt and gently opened the huge door.

"I had no idea of startling you," began Tom, without waiting for her to speak, "but I have been so anxious! I've been watching the house, and when I saw the light flash upstairs I felt as if something must have happened. The doctor said by midnight——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Dorothy, now realizing the cause of Tom's unexpected visit, "I was coming downstairs to see how he was. If you just wait I'll peek in at the door and see. Won't you step inside?"

"Oh, no, indeed," Tom replied in an undertone. "I had no idea of disturbing any one. I thought just to look around the house and see if all was well. I am on my way home from the telegraph office. Aunt Margaret thought of an important message which she insisted had to go out to-night."

Dorothy turned toward the library. Scarcely had she rounded the alcove when Tom noticed some one at the top of the stairs.

It was Tavia.

She stood for a moment looking at Tom, then she nodded her head in a friendly way and disappeared as quietly as she had come.

"Awkward," thought Tom, "but any one would know I am here to hear about Ned."

Dorothy was coming back now, and she was smiling.

"Sound asleep," she whispered.

"Good," breathed Tom. "Now I won't keep you another second. Awfully good of you to let me in."

"Not at all," stammered Dorothy. "I was just a little frightened first. I will know better than to light up at midnight again."

"The midnight alarm!" quoted Tom, making his way out. "Don't stand in the draft. It's cold enough. Good-night!"

Then he was gone.

Dorothy flew back to her room, agitated, but comforted that Ned was resting. This knowledge seemed to assure her that he was not seriously injured, and now she took up the Tavia question.

"She must not go home," Dorothy repeated. "I will see if she is still up."

A glimmer of light stole under Tavia's door. Dorothy tapped lightly, but opened the door unbidden. She found her chum bent over pen and paper, but as Dorothy came in Tavia dropped the pen and looked up in surprise.

"Tavia," began Dorothy, "I came to coax you to stay—you must not go home to-morrow. I will telegraph your father. He was always so—kind to me. And when he hears all about it—about Ned and all—I am sure he will not be angry."

"I cannot," answered Tavia. "I must go."

"Oh, please, Tavia, do listen! If you go, what will you say? What will you do?"

"I don't know."

"Tavia!" pleaded Dorothy, a note of distress in her voice.

The two girls looked into each other's eyes. Dorothy's were brimful, but Tavia's were too "frozen" for tears.

"Tavia, dear," whispered Dorothy.

Tavia's arm stole about Dorothy's neck. She touched the flushed cheek with her dry lips. Then she straightened up in an attitude of defiance.

"I'll stay!" she exclaimed. "I don't care what they think of me."

CHAPTER XX

THE ENTERTAINMENT

How the following day passed Dorothy did not want to remember. From the early morning, when she sent the telegram to Mr. Travers, stating that Tavia could not possibly leave, and that a letter to follow would explain, until the hour set for the charity performance, the girl was in one continuous whirl of excitement.

Ned's accident did not prove to be as serious as had been feared, although there was no possibility of him being about for several days, at least.

In the excitement and emergency Tavia had marshaled all her individual forces, and proved herself worthy to be a friend and chum of Dorothy Dale. With her change of heart—her resolution to "stick to Dorothy"—there seemed to come to her a new power, or, at least, it was a return of the power with which she had previously been accredited.

So the final work of preparation was accomplished, and now it seemed to be merely a matter of raising and lowering the curtain.

The characters which Ned was to have impersonated were divided among the other young men, it being necessary of course, to "double up" on three or four parts. Agnes Sinclair openly deplored her loss of a partner, but the others smiled incredulously when she said she preferred to play with Ned and "hated that big bear, Tom Scott."

Tom made this his excuse for being particularly "grizzly" with the pretty Agnes, and at the afternoon rehearsal he nearly went through the big gilt picture frame, in which the illustrations were posed, when he attempted to introduce a little impromptu "business" in "The Maiden all Forlorn."

Then when Roland attempted to do "There was a Man in Our Town," another of Ned's parts, his efforts were so absurd and so utterly unlike what the tableau was expected to be, that it was decided to make it "I Had a Little Husband, no Bigger than my Thumb." Roland certainly looked diminutive enough to fit into a pint pot, and also seemed qualified to do as he might be told with the drum.

Finally all was arranged, or rearranged, and the hour for the play was almost at hand.

No more delightful weather could have been wished for. It was clear and cold, while outside a big silvery moon threw a fairy-like illumination over the scene, and filtered in through the big windows of the drawing-room of the home of Mrs. Justin Brownlie.

Dorothy laughed her light, happy laugh. After all, perhaps everything would come out right—it was such a relief to feel that Ned would soon be better. The worry about him was the very worst part of her troubles. Then, suddenly, like the recurrence of an unpleasant dream, the thought of Tom's midnight visit flashed before her mind.

"Oh, I didn't tell you, Tavia," she said quickly. "I had the awfulest scare the other night. I just stole downstairs to see how Ned was, when all at once some one rapped at the vestibule door."

Tavia gazed upon Dorothy, pride and admiration beaming in her deep, hazel eyes.

"Oh, you needn't tell me, Doro," she interrupted. "I saw the midnight marauder, as the poets say. Lucky for him he stood directly under the light."

"Wasn't it—wasn't it kind of him to be—so—so anxious?" went on Dorothy, making fast her scarf picking up her pretty party-bag.

"Perhaps," assented Tavia, smiling broadly.

"Tom's the sort of fellow who dares to do right, no matter what happens. He would as soon call at midnight as midday, if the occasion warranted it. And that's saying a good deal for Tom—from me," she concluded.

Nat was waiting at the door. He took particular pains to be nice to Tavia. In fact, most of the difficulties that had for some weeks been accumulating about The Cedars seemed to take wings with the occurrence of Ned's accident. The oft-quoted saying about an "ill wind" was once more being verified, although it was hard for Ned to be left at home.

The house was already crowded when our friends arrived at Mrs. Brownlie's.

"We will have a good attendance," commented Dorothy with a smile of satisfaction. "If we can

only make our hundred dollars, and then get little Bennie into the hospital, how lovely it will be!"

"There must be a hundred persons here now," Nat assured her, "and at a dollar per—"

"Oh, do hurry along," interrupted Eva Brownlie. "We are all waiting for you, Dorothy. We were worried to death for fear something else dreadful might have happened."

Eva surely looked like an angel. She was entirely in white, her hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, with a band of gold, in Roman style, confining it at her brow.

Roland was dancing attendance on Eva—any one could see that he was fascinated by the pretty twin. Tom came up to Dorothy as she entered the broad hall.

"How's the boy?" he inquired kindly. "Has he forgiven me yet?"

"Of course," replied Dorothy, smiling. "He's getting better. But it was hard to leave him alone with his hurt—and Norah. Not that Norah is to be classed with the injuries," she hurried to add, laughing merrily.

"They are waiting for the orchestra," Tom reminded her, taking her music and escorting her to the piano.

The girls, with their violins, were already in place. Dorothy felt some embarrassment in facing a room filled with those she considered critical spectators, for the best society of all the Birchlands, as well as cultured persons from Ferndale near by, had come to the entertainment.

The Brownlie girls played the violins. Dorothy gave them the "A" note, and they put their instruments in tune, with that weird, fascinating combination of chords which prelude the opening strains of entrancing music. Then they began.

The first number received a generous encore, and the girls played again. Then there was a suppressed murmur of expectancy—a picture was about to be presented.

Slowly the curtains were drawn aside. The lights had been "doused" as Nat, the acting stage manager, expressed it, and only a dim glow illuminated the tableau.

An immense gilt frame, containing a landscape as a background. In front of that the living pictures were posed. It was Jack Spratt and his Wife—presented by Tavia and Roland.

The audience instantly recognized the illustration, and vigorous applause greeted the tableau. Tavia was surely funny—so fat, and so comical, while Roland looked like a human toothpick. The clean platter was cleaner than even Mother Goose could have wished it, and, altogether, the first picture was an unqualified success.

Tavia was shaking with nervousness when the curtain was pulled together, and when, in response to an imperative demand from the audience, it was parted again, Tavia could scarcely keep from laughing outright. It was one of the difficult pictures, but the girl's talent for theatricals stood her in good stead, while, as for Roland, he seemed too lazy to make any blunders.

Tom, as "Jack Horner," came next. Fat! Numbers in the audience insisted that he was the original "Roly-poly," but the big paper-covered pie precluded all further argument. Tom held his thumb in that pie as faithfully as ever a real, picture Jack Horner did. He had to pose for a second view, and at that the throng was not satisfied, but Nat declared that one encore was enough.

Then Little Bo-Peep appeared—fast asleep, lying on some fresh hay from the Brownlie barn. And what a charming picture Dorothy did make!

She wore a light-blue skirt, with a dark bodice, and a big, soft straw hat, tossed back on her head, did not hide the beauty of her abundant locks. Her crook had fallen from her hand, and rested at the bottom of the little mound of hay. It was a delightful representation, and Dorothy seemed actually painted upon the canvas, so naturally did she sleep. Mrs. Brownlie nodded approvingly to Mrs. White. Dorothy's picture was not only pretty, but it artistically perfect.

The audience seemed loath to disturb the little scene by applause, and instead of answering to an encore Dorothy was obliged to keep her Bo-Peep attitude for the length of time that it would have required to present her tableau a second time.

Tom grasped Dorothy's hand as she left the frame.

"Great!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I wish Ned could have seen you!"

Dorothy was glad—pardonably glad. She had thought a "solo" difficult, and had doubted her ability to make it attractive, but now she was quite satisfied.

There was some delay in presenting the next number, but the wait was forgotten when the curtains were pulled apart.

It was a depiction of "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater," with Eva's fair head sticking out of an immense paper pumpkin shell. Nat's face, in the character of Peter, was in a most satisfactory smile, consequent, probably, upon his ability to "keep her very well," and it was surely a very funny picture. Eva assumed a distressed look, and was thankful that only her face had to act, for the quarters of the pumpkin shell were rather limited.

Other tableaux followed, each one more or less well impersonated, until Tom and Agnes went at "The Maiden all Forlorn."

As the "Man all Tattered and Tom," Tom was a veritable scarecrow, with a fringe of rags all over him, and the familiar battered hat well turned down to conceal any accidental smile that might detract from his serious pose. He was bending over Agnes in the regulation picture-lover attitude, and as the curtains were pulled together Tom did what any other young man on earth might have done—he kissed the Maiden all Forlorn.

Everybody behind the scenes saw it.

"I never want to act with him again!" declared Agnes loudly and scornfully, as she scrubbed her offended cheek with her handkerchief. "Ned White is always a gentleman."

Dorothy was sorry, but it seemed a natural joke. Every one but Agnes thought the same thing, but somehow the forlorn maiden could not be convinced that Tom was simply thoughtless in his joking.

The incident, trifling as it was, somewhat marred the good humor of the players. Roland came near falling for a second time in his "Jack be Nimble." As it was, the big candlestick did topple over just as the curtain bell sounded. Then Edith Brownlie looked decidedly miserable as "The Queen was in the Kitchen, Eating Bread and Honey." She liked Tom Scott—everybody knew that—and now Tom, in addition to having lately favored Dorothy, had kissed Agnes! Of course, the girls, and boys too, teased the sensitive Edith, and she lost interest in her picture.

Dorothy breathed a sigh of relief when Mary Mahon's number was announced. Mary was actually quivering with excitement. She wanted to act, and Dorothy was confident that she would do well.

Her recitation was entitled "Guilty or Not Guilty?" and as she stepped out and made her bow, the house was hushed in silence. In a plaintive voice she began that well-known poem:

"She stood at the bar of justice,
A creature wan and wild,
In form too young for a woman,
In feature too old for a child."

How the lines seemed to suit her! Surely the features of Mary were too old for those of a child. Her face had a drawn, pinched look, and her eyes were so deeply set.

But the pathos of her voice! When she pleaded with the judge for mercy against the charge that she was a thief she mentioned the starving children.

"I took—oh, was it stealing?—
The bread to give to them!"

The women pressed their handkerchiefs to their eyes. There was something almost too real in the child's plea. Who was she? they asked. A professional?

Dorothy was delighted at Mary's success. The girl was her "find," and it was she who had taught her how to use her voice so well in the pathetic lines. True, she found an apt pupil in Mary, and Dorothy was but too glad to accord her the entire triumph, when the recitationist bowed again in response to the hearty applause and retired.

A gentleman in the audience left his chair, and, walking over, spoke to Mrs. White. He was Dr. Baker, one of the hospital staff.

"I think I know that child," he said. "Does she not live with an aged couple named Manning?"

"I believe she does," replied Mrs. White, making a place for Dr. Baker to sit down beside her. "My niece Dorothy is much interested in the child—she seems to have a faculty for discovering genius, has Dorothy."

"Well, I have not seen little Mary for some years, but there is no mistaking her. Her mother, an actress, died in one of the charity wards of the hospital, and I am afraid the child has inherited the fatal malady from her mother. She looks now like a consumptive."

Mrs. White was startled. Certainly Mary was delicate in appearance, but she had not thought of her as having a disease.

"There's no time to spare in her case," said the physician in a low voice. "Bring her to me as soon as you can."

"Dorothy did not expect to have a real case assisted so promptly," remarked Mrs. White. "It is rather out of the ordinary—a patient playing for her own benefit."

"I suspect that your pretty niece brought this child out with the sole purpose of making her happy," said Dr. Baker, "and she evidently has no idea how much real happiness she is destined to confer on her. Perhaps a month later it would have been too late to save her. Now I think we can, though there is a flush on her cheeks that I do not like."

The curtains were separated to disclose the last number. It was a tableau of all the girls and boys, posing as the "Haymakers." It made a beautiful picture, the girls in their gaily-colored

dresses, with great, broad-brimmed hats, and the boys dressed in equally rural costumes.

Dorothy was so glad that it was all over—that this was the last picture. Agnes stood next to her. The curtains were drawn, and then separated again in response to insistent applause. There was a moment more of posing, and then it was all over.

As the curtain shut out the sight of the audience, Agnes slipped her arm around Dorothy's waist. Then she leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"I am sorry to have made all that fuss about—about him kissing me. But, Doro, dear, I do hate a flirt, and everybody knows Tom Scott is in love with you."

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE CONFESSION

Had Agnes actually struck her, Dorothy could not have been more surprised. In the excitement and confusion of the finish of the performance, there was neither the time nor the opportunity for Dorothy to resent such a remark. But after she had reached The Cedars and her quiet, little room, the words seemed to burn themselves into her mind. How dared any one to speak so to her—a mere schoolgirl, with no thoughts of love?

Pained and distressed, she put aside all the play finery and threw herself across the bed. Scarcely had she done so ere she heard her aunt's step approaching.

"I came to congratulate you, my dear," said Mrs. White warmly. "Most of the success of the entertainment was due to— Why—what—you are almost crying," and she stopped in some confusion.

"Oh, aunty!" wailed Dorothy. "I seem to be so misunderstood lately. And Agnes Sinclair made such a queer—such a strange remark to me—just as I was leaving the last tableau."

"Why, what could she say, child?"

"She said—she said," and Dorothy hesitated, while the warm blood coursed to her pale cheeks—"she said—everybody knew Tom Scott was in—in love with me!"

Mrs. White simply stared at her niece. Then she shook her head ruefully, but she hardly knew what to say, for fear of further embarrassing Dorothy.

"Why, you dear, precious baby!" she exclaimed at length, as she placed her hand caressingly on Dorothy's head. "Doesn't everybody know what Agnes thinks of Tom? She is old enough to have such thoughts, and her reason for inflicting them on you, my dear, is merely a consequence of you—of you doing the work that older girls usually do. I should not have allowed you to take so much responsibility, Dorothy. We know, however," continued Mrs. White very gently, "that the pretty Agnes admires Mr. Scott very much. So you must excuse her seeming indiscretion."

Dorothy's mind was instantly relieved. If Agnes did like Tom, of course she might have thought he was neglecting her for Dorothy. And he had only been trying to help Dorothy—there were so many things to do.

"But Agnes seemed so fond of Ned," spoke Dorothy after a pause.

"You are too tired to think about such things now," said Mrs. White firmly. "You are over-sensitive. Why should you care about so trifling a thing as that?"

Dorothy did not answer. She was tired—very tired. Perhaps she was over-sensitive. But when she reflected that Ned had said almost the same thing—

To change the subject Mrs. White told her niece about Dr. Baker, what he had said, and how interested he was in little Mary.

"Oh, I'm so glad of that," said Dorothy. "I hope—"

But at that moment Tavia poked her head in the door to see what was going on in Dorothy's room, that she had not come to her chum, or summoned her, to talk over the events of the evening.

"Ned is calling for you, Mrs. White," said Tavia.

"I'll go at once; but remember," she commanded playfully to the two girls, "no more chattering to-night. To-morrow is another day."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Tavia, when the door had closed on Mrs. White and the two girls were alone in Dorothy's room, "I'm so frightened, Doro, dear. I should have gone home. What am I going to say to my father?"

"I will do all the saying that is necessary," bravely offered Dorothy. "It was I who kept you."

"Yes, and I know why."

"Why, then?"

"Simply to fix it up for me. You never could intrust me with such an important commission."

"Well, I am sure when I have a chance to speak to your father—but, dear me, there are so many things!"

"Oh, Doro, I just want to ask you if you saw the 'Babbling Brook' in the audience? She was fairly eating up little Mary with those big optics of hers."

"Miss Brooks? I did not see her," answered Dorothy. "Did she like Mary's effort?"

"Like her? I should, say she fairly loved her, but then, you see, a sister of hers had a baby girl once," and Tavia laughed to cover up the mistake she had made in mentioning the affairs of Miss Brooks. "There, Doro, dear, I'm going now. To-morrow is another day, as your aunt says," finished Tavia, kissing Dorothy fondly and leaving her chum to think over all the matters that now confused her tired, weary brain.

It was Roger who first tapped at his sister's door the next morning.

"Doro," he called, "when are we going out to see that ghost?"

"Ghost?" repeated the girl, rubbing her eyes and trying to collect her scattered thoughts.

"Yes; you know you promised," and by this time Roger was in the room and had his arms around her neck.

"Oh," she laughed, "we'll take a ride out to the castle just as soon as—as Ned is able to go."

"He's going out riding to-day—I heard him say so," persisted the boy.

"Well, we'll see," replied Dorothy. "But you must run out now. My! it's almost nine o'clock. I didn't think it was so late."

The entertainment had been so engrossing that all the thoughts of Tanglewood Park and the mystery concerning it had entirely escaped Dorothy's memory for the time being. But Roger had determined to know all about that "scream," and only yesterday he had had a long talk with old Abe down at the station; a long, serious talk. Abe told the little fellow that there "sure was a ghost up at the castle," and when Joe, who was with Roger, asked about the lady the old liveryman had driven up there, Abe rolled up his eyes in an unpleasant fashion, and declared that the lady was a "near-ghost" herself.

Roger told all this, and more, to Dorothy, so she was obliged to make a tentative promise, at least, that she would go with him to the castle the very first moment she could spare.

The boy renewed his request after breakfast, and was quite insistent.

"I can't go to-day," said his sister. "You know I have many little things to attend to, Roger. It is almost Christmas, you remember, and——"

"Oh, here are your letters; I almost forgot!" cried the little fellow suddenly, drawing from his pocket several envelopes. "Nat went to the post-office while you were at breakfast."

The boy tossed the missives down and ran off. Dorothy glanced over her mail. There were several letters from her school friends, as she could tell by the writing, and some from acquaintances in Dalton. Then this one—who could it be from?—postmarked in a city from which she had never received any mail, and the address written in a strange hand.

She opened this one first, and this is what she read:

"MY DEAR MISS DALE—This letter will undoubtedly surprise you. It is a strange Christmas letter for me to have to write. You may have forgotten my name, but I am the woman detective whom you met in Boardman's. I hardly know how to pen the words, but—*I put that ring into your bag!*

"I am a very wretched woman, but to make this confession to you may, in a measure, at least, tend to soften the bitterness that rankles in my heart.

"It would be useless for me to try to explain why I did you such a wrong—perhaps if I could talk with you it would be different.

"Try to forgive me—try to know how wretched I am—sick, without work and without means.

"But even pity seems bitter to me now—life has all gone wrong, and only the thought of your innocent face, and the black guilt I tried to fasten on you, has given me the strength to write this letter.

"Ah, what a mockery Christmas is to the unfortunate!

"Yours, in sorrow,

"LOUISE DEARING."

CHAPTER XXII

STORMBOUND AT TANGLEWOOD

Dorothy dropped the letter in her lap. She was awed, surprised, distressed. Then, Miss Brooks did not take the ring? And why should the woman detective do such a thing?

For an instant only that thought occupied her. The next she pitied Miss Dearing.

"Poor woman!" she sighed to herself. "After all, perhaps she is really a victim of circumstances. And what a letter! If I only could help her—see her before Christmas."

A smile, unbidden, stole across Dorothy's face as she pictured all the tasks she had undertaken to accomplish "before Christmas."

"Luckily there are a few days left," she concluded "One can crowd a great many things into two real, living days."

She hurried upstairs to read the letter again in seclusion. The positive tone of sorrow in the missive touched her heart. There certainly did seem many things to do, but here was plainly an emergency case. If she could manage to go to the city, obtain Miss Dearing's address from the store, go to see her, and then stop at Dalton on her way back——"

"I ought to be able to do that," she told herself. "And it would be such a joy to take away all Tavia's worry before Christmas Day."

Then came the recollection that she really knew nothing to tell Squire Travers—she really did not know what Tavia's trouble was. All the girl's conversation on that point amounted to nothing more than inferences, vague and uncertain.

"I am positive Tavia thinks I know all about it," concluded Dorothy, "and I have just a mind to ask her outright. It would be so much easier than beating about the bush this way."

"Doro! Doro!" screamed Roger at her door. "Come on! Get ready! We're going out—for another—Christmas tree! Out to ghost park."

"I—can't!" called back his sister, but the next moment Nat was beside her.

"Come on," he ordered, "get on your togs. We've got to get a hospital tree. The ladies insist it shall be handpicked, and we've got to go to Tanglewood Park."

"But do I really have to go?" begged Dorothy. "It's cold to ride, and I wanted to——?"

"Put pink bows on red slippers! Oh, chuck it, Doro! I perfectly hate the smell of Christmas. Tom and Roland are going, and so is Tavia."

He made a queer face as he said this—one of those indescribable boy illustrations quite beyond interpretation.

"Is she?" asked Dorothy, not knowing anything better to say.

"And Tom and Roland, I repeat. We are going to duck the kiddies. Too cold for little boys."

"Oh, then I shan't go," declared Dorothy. "We've been promising Joe and Roger so long."

"But they don't want to go," insisted Nat. "Sammy Blake is launching his iceboat."

"Oh, I suppose that is a superior attraction even to ghosts," said Dorothy, laughing, "But why do we have to get a tree from the park? Couldn't we buy one?"

"Just like a girl. We couldn't possibly buy trees last week, because—they would not be hand-picked. This week why can't we buy them and—hang the handpicked," he finished. "Now, do you understand, little girl, that the tree is to be in the near-infant ward in the hospital?"

"Oh, I suppose there's no use arguing," decided Dorothy. "I may as well give in."

"May better. Hurry along, now. We're to have a buffet lunch, and get gone directly after. It's time to eat now," and he glanced at his watch.

Certainly the morning had passed—and the afternoon would no doubt be equally short. Dorothy hurried to get her warm wraps, called to Tavia, and was at the lunch-table before Nat had returned from the garage, whence he brought the Fire Bird.

"If you do not get caught in a snowstorm this time," commented Major Dale, "I will begin to lose faith in my prophetic bones. They ache for heavy snow."

"Put it off until to-morrow, Uncle Frank," advised Nat. "Then we may get the runners out."

"No, it's not that long off," insisted the major, cringing perceptibly under the aches and pains for the coming storm. "I shouldn't wonder but it reached us by sundown."

Ned was much better, able to sit near the window and wave to the departing ones.

Tavia looked almost happy. Somehow, since she determined to "stick to Dorothy," much of her apparent trouble seemed to have disappeared. She was brighter than she had been for days, and even Nat threw off the restraint he had shown toward her lately. At The Elms they picked up Tom, with Roland's regrets, and with a dangerous-looking hatchet in hand—to bag the game with.

"Roland had another dinner date," he explained. "I'm glad I'm not handsome."

"But the ax?" asked Nat

"For the little tree, you know," replied Tom. "I've tried to catch Christmas trees before."

"Well, we are pretty well loaded up," added Nat, producing from his pocket a revolver.

"Oh!" screamed Tavia; "for goodness' sake is this a murderous plot? I—want—my—mamma——"

"There, there, little girl, don't cry," simpered Tom. "A gun is a fine thing in a jungle——"

"Where ghosts scream," added Dorothy.

"And buggies ride bugs," put in Nat, shifting the lever for more speed. "Well, it's up to us to get there first, and then we may shoot up the whole woods if we like. The girls may—may sit under a shady tree."

The deep gloom of an approaching storm made this proposal sound quite ridiculous, and Dorothy declared she would prefer sitting in the Fire Bird at a safe distance from the shooting. Tavia threatened to crawl under the seat, and even vowed she would leave the car at once if the hatchet and revolver were not at once put away—"out of her sight!"

"Well, I have made up my brilliant mind," said Nat, "that if that screaming thing is in the woods I am going to get it dead or alive," and he put up the pistol for the time being.

Talk of the play, and of Ned's condition, occupied much of the remaining time consumed in the run to the woods, and when the tall chestnut trees of Tanglewood Park finally faced the strip of road the Fire Bird was covering, snowflakes were beginning to fall. And so fiercely did the winds blow, that presently Nat had all he could do to manage the machine.

"No jollying about this," he made out to say, "I guess it's to the castle for ours, whether we want to hunt ghosts or owls."

"Oh, will we really have to go in that dreadful place?" wailed Tavia. "I think I would as soon die of freezing as die——"

"Of scaring," interrupted Tom, laughing. "Well, there is no immediate cause for alarm in either direction," he went on, "but I think it will be a good idea to get out of this gale as quickly as possible."

It surely was a gale now, and the wind seemed so solidified with the biting specks of snow, that Dorothy and Tavia were quite satisfied to bury their frost-bitten faces deep in the fur of muffs and scarfs, while the young men turned up their overcoat collars and turned down the flaps of the heavy auto caps, none too heavy, however, to keep out the discomforts of the newly arrived blizzard.

Straight for the drive to the castle Nat directed the machine, and by the time the old broken-down steps of the once spacious porch were reached, even Tavia was glad to jump out of the Fire Bird and get her breath in a secluded part of the old balcony.

"Whew!" whistled Tom. "This is something worth while for Christmas! I never saw a storm develop any faster than this."

"Looks bad," commented Nat anxiously, for an automobile in a snowstorm is not to be depended upon, "Hope it quits long enough for us to dash back home."

"Well, we can't try it now, at any rate," replied Tom. "What do you say to exploring?" and he went to the great, old oak door. "Open! Well, that's luck," and as he spoke he pushed back the portal, although it seemed about to fall, rather than swing on the rusty hinges.

The door opened, but no one attempted to enter the house. Nat looked in gingerly, but the girls drew back to the shadow of a post, fearing evidently some response to the intrusion.

"Oh, come on," suggested Tom. "Nobody's in here, and it's better, a good sight, than being out in the storm."

Nat followed Tom's lead, and soon both young men had disappeared within the old mansion.

The girls waited almost breathless—there was something so uncanny about the place. But presently boyish shouts and merry calls from within assured them that no trouble had been encountered, and it was Dorothy who proposed that they follow and seek refuge from the winds, that found the girls' ears and noses, in spite of the shelter of the old porch and the protection of furs and wraps.

"Come on," suggested Dorothy. "Everything must be all right or the boys would not be so jolly. I'm just dying to get indoors—anywhere."

"But the screaming ghost," Tavia reminded her. "And the traveling lamp-post. I feel kind of scary ___"

But Dorothy had poked her head in, and now stepped within the old hallway, so that there was nothing left for Tavia to do but to follow.

"Here we are!" called Tom in that queer tone of voice peculiar to empty houses.

"And look at the gorgeousness," announced Nat. "Ever see finer wood, or better mantels? Why, I'll bet this was a regular castle, all right. Not so bad now."

The young men were racing about from room to room, but the girls were not so keen on investigating. Dorothy did walk through the great long parlors and admire the handsome Italian marble mantels, and the library with inlaid floor was also explored, but Tavia kept as near as possible to the front door—ready to run, she explained.

"Why, there's nothing to be afraid of," said Dorothy, now quite at ease. "The boys are in the very top of the house, over in the tower, and I am sure if there was anything to fear, they would have discovered it by this time."

"But the cellar," objected Tavia, who was really never as much frightened as she pretended to be, for she had a way of "looking for trouble," as Nat expressed it.

"When they come down I'll ask them to do the cellar," offered Dorothy, with a laugh. "Then will you make yourself comfortable?"

Tavia sighed. "Oh, it's so spooky," she insisted. "I feel as if things are getting ready to spring at us from every corner. And did you ever see so many corners in one place in all your life?"

"Oh, come up and see the gallery room," called Nat from the top of the stair-well. "If we don't bring the boys out here and have some doings! This is the swellest kind of a place. Come on up, girls. Nary a ghost nor a ghostie in the diggings."

Tom was singing snatches of songs, and Nat would join in when he came to a "joining," so that the old house fairly rang with the echo of young voices and merry laughter.

Ghost! What ghost could stand that? Tom Scott and Nat White singing coon songs!

"Listen!" called Dorothy. "Tavia wants you to go down cellar to make sure," she called to the boys.

"Oh, all right," agreed Tom. "We'll do the coal-bin and the wine cellar. Now, if we only could chance upon an old bottle of home-made grape juice!"

He slid down the baluster rail in spite of Dorothy's protest, for the floor below was of mosaics, and the rail might not be safe. But Tom landed without accident, and presently was looking for a passageway to the cellar.

With some difficulty the way was finally discovered, and Tom almost tumbled down the dark passage as the door, first obstinate, suddenly gave way to his pressure.

It was dark in the cellar—too dark for even Tom's comfort, but after making a series of queer calls, and also supplying the answers, he returned to the first floor, "intact," as Dorothy announced.

But Tom whispered something to Nat—when the girls were not near enough to observe him.

"Things down there!" he said. "I could even smell them, and they did not seem musty, either. Besides, look at everything. Nothing cut up or damaged, like an old, deserted place. Some one may hang out here."

"The ghost," admitted Nat. "Let's see what it looks like outdoors."

Nat put his hand on the pocket, from which his diminutive revolver could be seen to be outlined, and when the front door was opened a gust of wind and snow forced him, as well as Tom, back into shelter.

"Rough," commented Tom, "and almost dark."

"Fierce!" exclaimed Nat in pardonable disgust. "How in the world are we to get back?"

"Oh, can't we go now?" came from Dorothy. "It seems to be getting worse, and if we don't get out of here before dark—"

"Oh, let us go!" pleaded Tavia. "I am just scared to death. This sort of thing is all right for a page or two, but when it gets into a serial—"

"Not very interesting after the first glance, I'll admit," replied Tom; "but the nearest house must be half a mile away."

"Suppose we run the machine into the shed and start off to walk?" suggested Nat, now rather uncomfortable because of Tom's hint about the cellar. "It will be better for the girls, at any rate. There's a farmhouse at the turn into Glendale."

It did not take long for the party to follow out this proposal, and in spite of the wind and snow the

four young people started bravely off, Nat supporting Dorothy, while Tom put his strong arm about the uncertain Tavia—uncertain because she not only slipped continually, but threatened to do so in between the actual occurrences.

"Awful!" called back Nat, who was somewhat in advance.

"And can't see even the path," yelled Tom, "This snow must have fallen all in one piece."

"If it only would not get dark so quickly," Tavia sobbed, for, indeed, the girl was almost crying—the matter had become very serious—darkness, snowdrifts and wilderness.

"Wait!" called Tom, feeling that Tavia might not be so alarmed if all were closer together.

Nat and Dorothy stood until the others came up.

Then all four trudged on again. However, could they cover a half mile at that rate?

"We ought to have brought an auto lamp," said Nat.

No sooner had he uttered the words than he slipped, Dorothy fell with him, Tom and Tavia tumbled, full drive, after them, and all were plunged into a hole deep enough to terrify the girls and even to alarm the boys.

"Well," exclaimed Tom, as quickly as he could get speech, "that hole was covered up with a light blanket."

Tavia and Dorothy succeeded in getting to their feet almost as promptly as did the boys, but the shock and the heavy snow had now almost exhausted both.

"Oh," sighed Dorothy, "I don't see how we can ever walk a half mile in this?"

"Nor I," answered Nat "We've got to turn back. We can have shelter, at least, in the castle, and there's likely to be some food in the machine. Norah always pokes a bundle in for a trip like this."

Weary, depressed and bitterly cold, they made their way back to the old mansion. Many a slip marked the way, and many a stifled cry escaped from the girls in spite of their determination to be brave.

Nat hurried to the Fire Bird, and was not disappointed in his quest, for he brought back to the waiting ones a bundle of such food as the thoughtful Norah made a practice of slipping into the car when the young folks went for a long run.

"Well, that's lucky," commented Tom. "And let us get right at it. Nothing better to ward off cold than a good feed."

"Where?" asked Tavia, referring to the place to eat, not to the location of a possible cold.

Nat brought the machine lamps and placed one on either corner of the broad, low mantel in the dining-room. It was not difficult to know this room from the others, for frescoed mottoes, still clear enough to be made out, invited all strangers, as well as those who roamed therein, to "eat, drink and be merry," and otherwise.

"We must imagine ourselves a jolly hunting party," said Dorothy, "just brought in from a sudden storm. The young lord has invited us, of course."

"An awful stretch," remarked Nat. "I would not be particular about the lord's age if he would only make good just about now."

"And are we really here—for—the night?" gasped Tavia, swallowing a morsel of the sandwich Nat handed her.

"Oh, we may get out," answered Tom, none too hopefully. "But if we don't we must make the best of it. It's too bad for you girls, though."

"Yes," added Nat, his tone following Tom's in its unmistakable note of regret. "I was a fool not to listen to Uncle Frank's knee."

The joke brought forth a very feeble laugh, but even that was better than the groans Tavia had been indulging in. Perhaps an hour passed while our friends were trying to "make the best of it," and then, after putting by the remnants of the lunch for future use, the boys fairly exhausted themselves doing "stunts" calculated to amuse the girls and make them forget the terrors around them.

"Now, I'll just tell you," declared Nat. "There's a sort of couch under each of those posts in the parlor. Tavia take one and Dorothy the other, Tom and I will stand guard. You may as well rest, even if you cannot sleep, for even in the morning it's going to be heavy traveling."

At first the girls declared they, too, would stand guard, but when Tom added his reasoning to that of Nat's and the tired ones realised that if they had to walk through the snow in the morning they surely would have to rest their weary muscles, they finally consented to "stretch out" on the low seat that marked the archway from parlor to parlor.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GHOST THAT REALLY WALKED

It did seem absurd, in spite of the fact that they were snowbound in a "haunted house." The big automobile lamps glared brilliantly from the mantel, and Tom, with Nat, found another place to rest—on the long, low bench that formed a really artistic seat at the foot of the broad stairway.

"Many a gay fellow has rested here, between the dances, don't you think?" asked Nat. "I fancy I hear the other fellow and his girl coming down the stairs at this moment." He threw himself back in a mocking attitude, while Tom bowed to the "girl coming down the stairs."

But the boys were tired; conversation broke into uneven sentences, then words fell into syllables and finally there remained only the punctuation—a full stop.

Dorothy was dreaming that the men in the boats on the Italian marble mantel were coming to rescue her. Tavia had a weakness for brilliant nightmares, and she dreamed that the crystal chandeliers were coming—coming down, to strike her directly in the face.

She screamed, and every one started up.

"What was it?" cried Dorothy, on her feet in an instant.

Tom and Nat jumped up as quickly, Nat with revolver in hand, and Tom grasping the hatchet.

"I certainly saw a light at the end of the hall," whispered Nat to Tom. "Don't alarm the girls—just watch."

"What was it?" asked Dorothy again.

"Oh, I was dreaming," replied Tavia drowsily, "and that heavy old chandelier came right down and hit me in the face."

"Keep your dreams quiet next time," said Nat, attempting to laugh. "You gave us all a start."

"What time is it?" Dorothy inquired.

Tom glanced at his watch.

"Midnight!" he exclaimed. "Would you believe it? We must have all been asleep."

"And you promised not to shut an eye?" accused Tavia. "How do we know but that we are all kidnapped?"

Just then Nat grasped Tom's arm.

"The light!" he whispered.

"Oh!"

Dorothy and Tavia had both seen it.

Too frightened to speak, they clung to each other and stood terrified. Tom and Nat stepped farther out into the hallway.

For an instant no one uttered a sound. The next a noise—distinct and welcome—fell upon their ears—the sound of Major Dale's voice.

"It's father!" called Dorothy, breaking away from Tavia. "Oh, they've found us! Let them in! Quick!"

No need to tell the boys that, for the front door was unbolted, and Major Dale rushed in before any of them could actually realize that he had come.

"Oh, father!" gasped Dorothy, falling into his arms. "If you had not come—I should have died!"

"You poor foolish—babies!" he said. "But let the man in. He's frozen, if I am not."

Tavia had her arms around the major's neck—he was patting both girls affectionately.

"There! there!" he soothed. "Now you are all right. Dad's here, and we will be all right presently. Norah sent out the relief stuff—you be starved and perished."

"He won't come in," called Nat, referring to the man outside, "Says he's afraid."

"Oh, the foolish fellow," replied the major. "I had the greatest time to get him here, once he found out I was coming to the castle. He vowed he saw lights, and heard screams. He's the fellow who drove the woman out here—Abe, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Nat. "That's it. Well, if he won't come in he'll freeze."

"Perhaps if he sees girls— I'll go and ask him," volunteered Dorothy, now somewhat composed.

Although they had passed from the rear hall to the front, Tom kept his eye on the end of the long passageway. He had seen a light flash back there—he could have sworn to it.

"Here he is!" called Dorothy. "I knew old Abe would come in when I asked him. Right over here, Abe. See, we have plenty of light——"

As if by magic, or some uncanny power, no sooner had she uttered the word "light" than a brilliant flash was plainly seen at the rear of the hall.

The next moment a piercing scream rang out—the same they had heard once before—only so much more terrible to them now—so hideous—so fiendish!

The old colored man tried to move, but he stood as if transfixed.

Major Dale was major again, there ready to order, to command—erect, brave, bold, defiant.

Nat never seemed to move.

Tom stood waiting for his orders.

Dorothy and Tavia fell back terrified.

"That scream came from a human being," spoke the major finally. "We must investigate at once. Here, Abe, you take this lamp." Trembling as if he had the ague, the old colored man took the lamp from the mantel. "Tom, you have an ax. Nat, your gun may be handy. Now, girls, don't be alarmed. We are too many for any one here. Just sit there in that corner while we look about."

To all, save Abe and the girls, there was a fascination about this weird hunt. Something or some one screamed. This was surely a vigorous type of ghost.

"Easy, now!" whispered the major as they turned the end of the hall "There!" he exclaimed. "I saw a light flash back of that double door!"

"So did I," agreed Tom, "Let's look in the room."

"Come on, Abe," urged the major, for Abe quickly fell behind.

The heavy folding-doors were pushed aside with some effort. This opened the way into a small room like a butler's pantry.

"What was that?" asked Nat as a noise sounded.

"The shutting of a heavy door—and the light went with it," declared Major Dale. "Now to find the door."

Nat took the light from Abe, and flashed it up and down the heavily paneled walls.

"It's some secret passage, likely," said the major. "Every old house has one, I believe."

"What's—this?"

Nat had come upon a joining in the woodwork.

"That's it!" declared the major, examining the crack carefully. "But where might it open?"

All, even old Abe, felt the wall, up and down, covering every inch within reach.

"There!" exclaimed the major finally. "I've covered a square. It opens from the other side. Tom, here with your ax!"

Dorothy and Tavia had heard every word. Now they stopped their ears. It was too dreadful.

Blow after blow fell on the heavy woodwork.

Chop! Chop! Chop!

But not a word was spoken.

Then the sound of splintered wood.

The panel was falling in.

"Careful!" cautioned Major Dale.

"There she goes!"

Another scream!

"Here, now!" cried the major, seizing the lamp and dashing through the opening with the agility of a schoolboy. "Just surrender, and stop that!"

But he almost fell back—Tom's arm saved him.

"I never!" he exclaimed. "It's old Captain Mayberry!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RESCUE

The sight that had so suddenly shocked Major Dale and his helpers was indeed appalling.

Within the secret room they had found a man, not a ghost nor a demon, but a sick, almost helpless old man—the once popular Captain Mayberry.

At a glance it was plain he was in hiding in the wretched place, and the surroundings showed he had food and some of life's necessities within reach, although the very rats, whose presence were painfully evident, must have enjoyed a keener advantage in the mansion, once proud of the name "Mayberry."

Frightened almost into convulsions, the decrepit old man fell back into a corner, his eyes glaring with the unmistakable gleam of insanity, and his teeth chattering terribly.

A stove, barely alive with heat, served to shelter him from the intruders, for he managed to get behind the old piece of iron, and there crouched and shuddered.

"Come, come!" said Major Dale as quickly as he could command his voice. "Don't you know me? Look! I'm Dale—of the Guards—come to save you, Cap. We have no wish to frighten you!"

"Save me!" hissed the old man. "Go away! I'm crazy—crazy!"

"Not a bit of it," answered the major, stepping nearer to the stove. "Come along. We are snowbound, and had to come in uninvited."

Assured that the specter was a man and nothing more nor less, Tom had hurried back to reassure the girls. Nat turned his attention to old Abe, and, between scolding and explaining, finally succeeded in quieting the colored man's fears. But the major kept close to the lunatic—for such he took Captain Mayberry to be.

"And don't you remember me?" he kept asking, satisfied that a gleam of recognition did pass over the wrinkled face that now peered out into the glare of the lamp from the Fire Bird. "Come! We are hungry, and you are too, I'll wager. Let's have mess. Rations are plenty to-night."

Crawling like some animal, the old man was finally persuaded to come out from behind the stove.

Major Dale laid his hand on the arm of Captain Mayberry.



"GO AWAY—I'M CRAZY, CRAZY!"—[Page 220](#).

"Just out here," directed the major, leading the trembling one. "You see, we have taken possession of your house. Tell me how you feel? How you are?"

Major Dale wanted him to talk, both to quiet the girls' fears and to determine his actual state of mind. But Captain Mayberry's speech was very slow, and decidedly confused.

"I—guess—I'm all right—now," he managed to utter. "Where's—Jane?"

"Jane? Oh, yes, Jane," repeated the major. "That's your sister, Miss Pumfret?"

"Was—not now. She locks me up—leaves me to die!"

"Oh, now, come. Isn't it Jane who brings you things to eat?" asked the major, venturing a guess. "Why, didn't she send—the coal—and the bread?"

"Yes, yes," answered the old man, "but she will not let me go. She drove me crazy. Yes, and I'm crazy now."

"Not a bit of it. Here, sit down on this seat," and Major Dale motioned to Tom. "This young man

will stay by you to keep you company while we prepare the mess. Perhaps you will show us how to get water? And have you any way of lighting up?"

A look of intelligence crossed Captain Mayberry's face. He shuffled over to a corner, and actually pressed a button.

The chandeliers poured out a flood of electric light.

"Jane did that," he muttered. "She likes light."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Tom.

"And I'll be jiggered!" added Nat.

"The poor old man!" whispered Dorothy, venturing to take a step toward him. "And to think we were afraid of him!"

"Were!" remarked Tavia significantly. "I'm just scared to death this very minute. Suppose he screams again?"

"What if he does?" Dorothy whispered back. "Surely he has more cause to fear us than we have to fear him. I'm going to—help—with things."

Abe stood with wide-open mouth surveying "the ghost."

Tom and Nat had brought the relief supplies from the wagon—old Abe's strongest carry-all—which had successfully weathered the snowdrifts between Tanglewood Park and The Cedars.

"It's stopped snowing," announced Nat cheerfully. "Guess we will be able to make it all right by daylight."

"Fall in! fall in!" called the major, making a place for Captain Mayberry on the end of the seat that served as table and chairs collectively.

It was a queer meal—but a delightful one.

The relief that Major Dale brought was not in food alone.

"And there's the coffee!" he announced. "Will one of you boys just let that stand on the stove in the captain's private room?"

Tom jumped to comply. He readily found the means of lighting the secret room, and soon found other conveniences, such as water and cooking utensils.

Captain Mayberry had not forgotten how to eat. He was "almost human," as Nat whispered to Dorothy.

"Here, guard!" called the major. "Fetch that coffee. Help yourself." This to the captain. "We eat according to rank this time."

Captain Mayberry seemed to smile. He took the cup of coffee—then the others raised their cups to drink a toast.

"To the Guards!" proposed the major. "Long life and happiness to the last of them!"

It was a strange sight—the cracked and broken cups that Tom had secured in the captain's quarters raised to drink the honored toast!

"And a merry Christmas to Captain Mayberry!" called out Dorothy.

Old Abe dropped his cup—spilled his coffee. He looked down ruefully at the puddle on the floor.

"Any mo'?" he asked. It was the first word he had spoken since he entered the house.

Tom refilled the cup.

"Take care of that," he cautioned Abe. "It's about all."

"What time?" asked the major, addressing Nat.

"Four! Would you believe it? It will be daylight soon."

"Glad of it," replied the major. "We can't leave here any too quickly. It has cleared, you say?"

"Beautifully," answered Nat; "and the sun to-morrow will be a 'ringer' for the moon to-night. I'll bet it will be one of those dazzling days—"

"Likely," agreed the major. "We must take Mayberry back with us," he said in a low voice. "Poor old chap! To think that I should find him—and in such a pitiable condition!"

CHAPTER XXV

YOUTH AND OLD AGE

When the first streak of dawn threw its shadow upon the fleecy blanket that surrounded the old Mayberry Castle, there stood before the door the Fire Bird and the wagon old Abe called his "carry-all."

Into the latter vehicle Captain Mayberry was almost lifted, wrapped in every conceivable sort of warm covering that could be found in his strange quarters. A heavy, and formerly handsome fur coat, besides thick, woolly scarfs and great old army boots had been dug out from queer hiding places, and these were heaped and piled upon the captain until scarcely the outline of his pinched face was left to the danger of the winter morning.

On either side of Captain Mayberry sat Major Dale and Tom Scott, while old Abe was directed to drive this party to the railroad station, as it had been decided that the sick or insane man should at once be taken to the hospital for treatment.

"To think," whispered Dorothy to Tavia as they started off, "that our hospital play should have enabled us to send the poor old man directly to the Institution. We never dreamed who would be our first patient."

"Lucky it's not me or you," commented Tavia, still taking a morbid view of the night's experience.

"And father says he will send for the captain's sister, and try to have them reconciled. That seems to be what worries the old man so much—Jane is angry with him, he declares.

"And I wouldn't do a thing to Jane," declared Tavia. "In my opinion jail would be too good for her. The idea of keeping that old scarecrow cooped up there!"

"But perhaps she did it to keep him out of the institutions. You know, some people have queer ideas about asylums."

"Did it to save cash, likely. Look out, there, Nat! Don't dump us in that snowdrift!"

"No danger," called back Nat from the front seat. "This is all right—road good and hard, and not so slippery."

"Suppose the old fellow should get hilarious," ventured Tavia. "Do you suppose Tom and the major could hold him in that trap?"

"Oh, indeed he is too weak to be violent," responded Dorothy. "And I rather think he will enjoy the ride. He said he made it a habit to go out every day, just about nightfall. He had sense enough to know he must have fresh air or die."

Tired from the night's vigil, the occupants of the Fire Bird soon wearied of conversation, and the drive behind the stage coach was made in silence, save for the creaking of the snow on the frosty roads, and the occasional sounds of an early morning team bound for the town along the old turnpike.

At the Four Corners the Fire Bird cut ahead of the coach, and with a merry call to the captain, the major, Tom and even to old Abe, the occupants of the car soon left behind them the carry-all, as well as the road to Tanglewood Park.

Arriving at The Cedars, in spite of all protests, Dorothy and Tavia were "put to bed," while Norah brought from the kitchen great bowls of beef tea, declaring each young lady should drink at least a quart, "to save them from nemonie," and that the hot foot baths they had would be repeated unless the girls were soon sound asleep.

So it was that now, two days before Christmas, The Cedars was suddenly plunged into a state of subdued excitement. What might happen next not even little Roger dared speculate about.

But that afternoon, when Major Dale was expected to return from his trip to the hospital, and Dorothy and Tavia were sufficiently rested to be down at the station waiting to meet them, the appearance of Miss Brooks brought Tavia suddenly back to the realization of her own predicament.

The little woman ran into the station just in time to obtain her ticket for a late city train, and had not a moment to spare, so that there was no opportunity of either Dorothy or Tavia exchanging a word with her.

"Whew!" exclaimed Tavia, glancing after the woman. "What do you suppose it all means? Did you observe the togs?"

"Didn't she look pretty?" commented Dorothy, "I never saw a person change so with—a new outfit."

"Wonder if she found it—in somebody's bag?"

"Tavia!" exclaimed Dorothy, her voice ringing with indignation. "You must never again speak that way of Miss Brooks. We did wrong to suspect her for a moment. She had absolutely nothing to do with the ring."

"Oh, you know all about it, do you? Of course, she says she had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"No, she has said nothing of the kind. The person who really took it—that is, the one who put it in my bag—has admitted doing it."

"Who?"

"Well, you really must not ask, because, Tavia, dear, I know the person was terribly pressed, somehow, and it does not seem right for me to spread the story of her misfortune. I haven't even told Aunt Winnie."

"Oh, of course, you can keep it to yourself if you have a mind to," replied Tavia in injured tones, "but it strikes me that is rather too interesting a story to be so selfish about."

Dorothy made no reply to this charge—she had not the slightest idea of betraying the confidence Miss Dearing had given in her miserable confession.

Further than this, to-morrow Dorothy was determined to go to the city and search for Miss Dearing, even though it would be the day before Christmas.

The arrival of the city express, from which Major Dale alighted, stopped further comment.

"I was so afraid you would miss this train," exclaimed Dorothy, embracing him, "and I was so worried about you—things seem to be happening so queerly these days."

"Yes, daughter," replied the major, "things are certainly happening. You should have seen Captain Mayberry in his new quarters."

"Did they give him the new bed? The one our play paid for?"

"Indeed, they did. And, what's better, they say he is not by any means incurable. In fact, I am very hopeful, with the proper treatment——"

"Well, I hope they won't forget the proper treatment for that sister," interrupted Tavia.

"Even that we hope to make right," replied the major. "I have sent for Miss Pumfret, and expect she may arrive at The Cedars to-night."

"Good!" exclaimed Tavia, with what might be termed "unholy glee." "Just let me introduce myself!" and she made a pretense of showing her muscle.

"There's the surrey," announced Dorothy, as Nat drove up. "We walked down, it was so delightful in the snow. But Aunt Winnie insisted we should not take out the big sleigh. She says the horses are always so skittish when first put to the cutter, and she was afraid of some other accident."

Major Dale exchanged some words with old Abe before stepping into the vehicle that served in place of the Fire Bird.

"The eight o'clock train," Dorothy overheard her father say. "And be sure to have the light buggy."

"She's coming on the eight," whispered Tavia to Nat. "What do you say if we waylay them and give her a snow bath to cool her off? I'd just like to sail into that lady."

Nat did not reply—the major was now in the surrey, and the little horse started off at a lively trot.

Numbers of cutters and sleighs passed them—every one seemed anxious to make sure of the first sleigh-ride.

One particularly handsome rig was just approaching.

"Whew!" exclaimed Nat. "Look at Agnes Sinclair—and that's Tom Scott with her."

It was indeed Agnes and Tom, in a new cutter with waving plumes at the dashboard, and as the rig passed along, Dorothy noticed that the plumes just matched Agnes' cheeks.

And it may as well be told now that when Agnes Sinclair and Tom Scott stopped at the post-office that very evening Tom posted a number of little notes for Agnes—an informal tea was to be given at Ferndale.

Every single person who got one of these notes knew exactly what it meant—the announcement of the engagement of Miss Agnes Sinclair to Thomas Dudley Scott.

Of course, Dorothy and Tavia were invited, and the card of Agnes' mother came with that of the daughter. Mrs. Sinclair and Mrs. White were close friends.

"I have been wondering why Mrs. Sinclair had not called to see Ned," commented Mrs. White when Dorothy handed her the cards. "This explains it, of course. Dorothy, what did I tell you? See how well trained my eyes are."

"But when Agnes showed plainly she wanted to pose with Ned," argued Dorothy, "that was——"

"Just to throw you off the scent, of course," finished Mrs. White. "Well, I am glad we are going to have an engagement for the holidays. It will make a little round of gaieties for the young folks. Dorothy, you may give Agnes her first shower."

"And make it something good to eat," suggested Nat. "No fun in giving a girl a lot of drygoods—make it ice-cream."

Ned was recovering rapidly, and he too joined in suggesting plans for the "handing around of

Agnes." He insisted it was up to him and Nat to give Tom a sendoff, and finally did obtain Mrs. White's permission to give a bachelor dinner in the coach house. They wanted the affair given where there would be no objection to either noise or "muss," as Nat put it, so the coach house was decided upon.

"Plans, plans, nothing but plans," sang Tavia. "I wish some one would make plans for me. I would like to elope this very evening. I am not particular about having a partner in the going away; a railroad ticket would answer."

Dorothy glanced up quickly at Tavia. She knew the latter almost meant what she said—that is, she would really like to run away before Christmas morning.

"And shake me?" asked Nat in mock concern. "Now, Tavia, you and I have been friends for a long, long time——"

But this was too much for Tavia. Suddenly she jumped up, put her hand to her eyes and dashed from the room.

"She's crying!" whispered Ned.

Then Dorothy, too, left the room. She went to comfort Tavia.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS

"Well, I never expected to forgive him—he was so mean and obstinate——"

The unpleasant, treble voice of Miss Jane Pumfret was interrupted by the lower tones of Major Dale.

"But, my dear woman," he said, "Captain Mayberry is not responsible—he is sick, mentally and physically."

"Well, I'll see," and she arose to go, "I am not much of a hand at making up, anyway."

"But if you could have seen how he begged me to send for you. He seemed to fear you would be angry with him for leaving the old place."

"Angry? More likely to be scared to death. I could not believe the old stage driver that you had really brought him to a hospital. Well, I must be going." She was almost at the door. "Don't mention my name to him, if you please."

Major Dale was at his wits' end. He feared the old captain would be beyond consolation if he did not do as he had promised—send Miss Pumfret to him at once.

Dorothy was just on the stairs. At a glance she understood that her father had failed to bring about a reconciliation between Captain Mayberry and his sister. She approached them.

"You are Miss Pumfret, I know," she began, without waiting for her father's introduction. "Isn't it perfectly splendid?—the news from Captain Mayberry, I mean. He seemed as pleased as a child when I promised him a merry Christmas, and to-morrow morning I am going into the hospital to make sure he gets it. Won't you come with me? He will be delighted to see you, I am sure."

Miss Pumfret looked at the impetuous girl who was going to make sure her brother had a merry Christmas.

"You see," hurried on Dorothy, taking advantage of the moment to further press her request, "we just had the place ready for him. We gave a play, and had a new bed at our disposal."

"My brother a charity patient!" exclaimed the woman. "Why, there's plenty of money in the property, but I won't touch pen to paper to sign——"

"Of course, we can take care of him," interrupted Dorothy; "but I thought maybe you would like to make him a little Christmas present—it is visiting day to-morrow and the day before Christmas."

Little Miss Pumfret glared at Dorothy. Then she stepped back and sank down on the hall seat. "Well," she exclaimed finally, "I'm an old-fashioned woman. Never was used to youngsters' interference, but I like your cheek (this was said with evident sincerity and no idea of being frivolous). I've just a good mind——"

"Oh, do, do, Miss Pumfret! Come with me to-morrow and tell him you will sell Tanglewood Park and—fix it all up——"

"How you do race on! But it's getting late. Perhaps——"

"I'll meet you at the ten o'clock train," went on Dorothy, while even Major Dale was forced to smile at her impetuosity. "I have so many places to go, but I am going to the hospital first."

Miss Pumfret put out her hand—it shook visibly.

"Little girl," she said, "you are right. You have said it all for me. Come to-morrow and say it all over again to—Nick."

Tears fell down the old pinched cheeks, but Dorothy kissed them away. She had found the path to Jane Pumfret's affection—it was cheek, just plain cheek, sometimes called courage.

Yes, it was late, but Dorothy still had Tavia to console—if only she could insist upon Tavia spending Christmas at The Cedars—Dorothy had unlimited faith in the magic of the day before Christmas. Nat called to her as she started up to Tavia's room.

"I say, Doro, maybe I—could help. I'd like to tell her it's all right. I was mean about it. You know, Tavia and I went—in it—together."

"Oh," replied Dorothy vaguely, "I really don't know what you mean."

Nat saw that he was about to betray a secret. He thought, naturally, that Tavia had confided fully in Dorothy.

"Oh, I just meant," he stammered, "that if I can say anything to make Tavia feel—more at home, you know—don't hesitate to ask me."

Tavia was at the head of the stairs looking straight at him.

"Thanks!" she spoke up, all the tears evidently gone. "But if it's all the same to both of you, I would prefer that you keep your pretty saying for Christmas. I'm just dead tired, and fully expect to be asleep in exactly ten minutes."

Dorothy saw that the sudden burst of gloom had been overcome, and knew that Tavia would actually be as good as her word and asleep in ten minutes.

"Good-night, then," called Nat, "and don't forget that to-morrow is the day before Christmas."

"Good-night," added Dorothy, "and don't forget you are to attend to everything to-morrow while I am in the city. See what it is to be on a charity committee! I'll have to have a substitute help with all the most important things—there's heaps to be done yet."

"Good—nig-h-t!" drawled Tavia with a forced yawn. "I am not sure that I will wake up until the day after Christmas."

"To bed! To bed, every one!" called Mrs. White, and then both troubles and pleasant anticipations for a happy ending to the queer holiday became hopelessly tangled in the dreams of the young folks at The Cedars.

Dorothy's last clear thought was: "To-morrow something must happen to make it all right, for to-morrow is the day before Christmas."

The sun was streaming in her window when she opened her eyes. She jumped up with a start, for she was to get an early train, go first to the hospital, then search out the wretched Miss Dearing.

"I could never be happy on Christmas, and think perhaps she might be starving. When I find her I will— But how can I tell what I may have to do?"

Hurriedly she partook of breakfast and jumped into the depot cart that Nat had driven up to the door.

"Take care that Tavia does not worry," Dorothy cautioned the young man. "I know she has a trouble, and I am sure somehow it will be all adjusted by to-night. I depend upon the witches of Christmas Eve."

Nat laughed and assured her he "would keep track of Tavia." Then the train steamed in, and Dorothy was gone.

"Suppose she fails to meet me," mused the girl, whose very red cheeks were the source of some remarks from a lady in the opposite seat.

Dorothy always looked pretty, but she looked charming when the clear red blood rose to her cheeks and made her deep blue eyes flash like stars, actually ignited with the torch of anticipation.

"But I am sure she will be there. Miss Pumfret is the sort of woman I should think would never break her word."

Nor was she disappointed in her estimate; Jane Pumfret waited—even had a cab ready to drive with Dorothy to the hospital, there to see the new patient, Captain Nick Mayberry.

"Perhaps I had better go first and prepare him," suggested Dorothy as they reached the door of the private room and saw the one spotless bed—the gift of the young ladies' auxiliary.

"No need, dear," objected Miss Pumfret. "Now that I've made up my mind to it I actually can't wait."

The next moment Dorothy drew back to allow brother and sister their own happy moment—Jane Pumfret had the old white-haired man in her arms, was embracing him like a child, and the nurse

smiled in complete satisfaction as she, too, stepped aside with Dorothy.

"That is all he wants," she said, "He has worried constantly, and I was so afraid she would not come—I know Miss Pumfret."

Just then the telephone rang. The nurse picked up the receiver. She listened to the call from the office. Then she answered:

"I'm awfully sorry, but I cannot see how we can take her. We haven't a single public bed unoccupied."

She waited a moment, then resumed: "Poor thing. I hate to have you turn her away, but what can we do?"

"A bed," thought Dorothy. "Why, of course, Miss Pumfret will provide a private one for her brother, and perhaps——"

But she did not wait to think further.

"Nurse," she interrupted, her voice carrying through the 'phone, "perhaps that patient could have our bed. Captain Mayberry is to go to the private wing."

In a few words the nurse gathered Dorothy's meaning.

Then she told the matron, speaking through the transmitter, to hold the applicant.

"Would you like to come with me?" she asked Dorothy, as she prepared to interview the prospective patient. "Miss Pumfret will be here for some time yet."

Down the broad marble steps, that seemed to exude everything antiseptic and sterilized, Dorothy hurried along after the head nurse. Into a large hall, then across this into a small waiting-room they passed.

"The patient is only ill from neglect and nervous exhaustion," explained the nurse, "or I would not invite you down."

A second white-capped and white-robed attendant opened the door. Dorothy stepped in first. A woman sat on a leather chair in the far corner of the room.

"She is very weak," explained the second nurse to the first, "and I really was afraid to let her go."

The woman raised her head.

"Miss Dearing!" exclaimed Dorothy, too surprised to suppress her astonishment, "Why, I am so—glad I have found you!"

The woman tried to open her lips, but a sudden movement of her head showed that she had fainted.

"And you know her?" asked the nurses, quickly restoring the woman to consciousness with simple restoratives.

"Slightly," replied Dorothy. "I will wait to see how she gets along."

From the scene in the waiting-room Dorothy hurried back to the side of Captain Mayberry. She wanted to ask Miss Pumfret about the bed.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed the little woman pleasantly. "I was just telling Nick what a girl you are. Perhaps you can tell us how to go about getting him into the private ward. He liked it first-rate here," she hurried to explain, "but there's no sense in keeping this bed from some one who may need it."

Dorothy touched the button at the door to call an attendant. It was the head nurse who answered.

"We can have this bed," stammered Dorothy, scarcely able to speak through her excitement. "Miss Pumfret wishes Captain Mayberry removed to the private wing."

"That will do nicely," answered the nurse, smiling. "Your friend has been taken into the observation ward. She will remain there until her case is diagnosed. It was providential that you spoke when you did, or she might have fainted in the street if we had turned her away, and we are not allowed to take patients who apply as she did, unless they are vouched for. You see, it was well you happened to know her."

"Could I speak with her?" asked Dorothy timidly.

"That is precisely what I came up for. She wants very much to speak with you."

CHAPTER XXVII

ALL IS WELL

"No, I'm not a bit excited," pleaded Miss Dearing when the nurse cautioned her to keep quiet. "I'm only happy. I was dying long before I came here, and now I can rest in a bed, and perhaps I will have the courage to get well again."

"Of course you will," insisted Dorothy, delighted that she had been instrumental in actually saving a life. "And perhaps Christmas will bring you peace and courage."

"No, but you have brought it. When I look at your fair face— Don't you know, that was why I put the ring in your bag?" she asked suddenly. "I knew your face would clear you before any accuser in the world."

Dorothy put her finger to her lips. She did not want Miss Dearing to discuss the painful subject. But the sick woman was persistent.

"And from that moment some evil genius followed me. I did it because other detectives had been praised for making arrests, and I had made none. I could not afford to lose my place, for my mother—was dying. She died, thank God, before she knew her daughter had lied for her, had herself actually been accused of stealing—stealing to earn a dollar!"

"Now, please," begged Dorothy, "do not talk any more about it. When you get well I will come in and see you. My aunt will want a great deal of sewing done. Perhaps you may be able to come to her."

It was actually noon-time, and Dorothy had to hurry back to The Cedars. Miss Pumfret and the captain were still talking about old family affairs, and seemed supremely happy as she left them. The captain, explained the nurse, was suffering more from neglect than any specific ailment, and he had already responded remarkably to treatment.

"Isn't it a queer holiday?" Dorothy asked herself once more in the train, getting back to The Cedars. "And now for Tavia's troubles."

Nat met her at the station, all smiles, but otherwise provokingly uncommunicative.

He simply would not tell her a word of what might have occurred in her absence, and she finally gave up asking him to do so.

"All right," she assured him. "If Tavia's gone I'll blame you, that's all."

Roger met her at the door.

"Some one's waiting for you in the parlor, Doro," he said, without waiting to "digest" his sister's greeting.

Dorothy opened the parlor door. There sat Miss Brooks and little Mary Mahon.

"We came in to wish you a merry Christmas," said Miss Brooks, with her arm about Mary. "This is my niece, my sister's only child. And I found her through your hospital play."

In a few words Miss Brooks made it all clear to Dorothy, and repeated the story told Tavia some time before.

"She is not very strong, and I am going to take her south at once," went on Miss Brooks, while Mary fairly beamed with delight. She was so splendid in her new fur coat; and to think she really had a relative!

"Aunt Stella," she ventured, "you never would have found me if Dorothy had not given me that piece. It was because I acted—like mamma."

"And there is something else," said Miss Brooks, "The matter—about Miss Travers. I received a letter this morning from the firm, refunding her money. Of course, I had urged them to do so. I would not even address envelopes for a house that would deliberately rob young girls."

Miss Brooks offered the slip of paper to Dorothy.

"Wouldn't you rather give it to Miss Travers?" asked Dorothy.

"Oh, yes," replied the other, remembering that Dorothy had refused to listen to the explanation of Tavia's difficulties.

Tavia was in the hall, and Dorothy called her. Her eyes showed she had been weeping. At the sight of Miss Brooks she turned as if to leave the room. Dorothy put a detaining hand on her arm.

"She has good news for you. I am going to leave you alone to hear it."

"No," insisted Tavia, now conscious that there was good news in the air. "Stay and listen, Doro. I did not tell you—because I was a—"

"Now stop!" insisted Dorothy. "No calling of names."

"You take too serious a view of it," interrupted Miss Brooks. "She simply did what hundreds do every day—risked five dollars to make ten—"

"It is nothing in the world but gambling!" declared Tavia almost fiercely.

"I agree with you," answered Miss Brooks, "but you did not go into it with that understanding."

Neither did I offer to address their envelopes with a thorough understanding of their methods. I simply was trying to find an address, and I made use of every means I considered legitimate. Here is your money—and your friend's. The address I was looking for came in person," and once more she folded her arms about Mary.

"The money!" exclaimed Tavia, looking at the check in a dazed sort of way, "This is your money, Dorothy," she said, reading the check—"yours and Nat's. I gambled mother's, and spent yours, then I bought Christmas presents."

The check called for fifteen dollars and was made out to bearer. Tavia offered it to Dorothy, who did not take it.

Miss Brooks insisted upon going. She felt she had finished her business at The Cedars.

Tavia drew Dorothy into the library as the door closed upon the visitors. Her eyes were blazing, although her hands seemed cold as they touched Dorothy's arm.

"You know I gambled," she stammered. "I deliberately bought a ticket in a lottery."

"I know you made a mistake," insisted Dorothy. "I could never call that gambling."

"Then take the check, if you are not afraid of it," went on Tavia. "Part of it belongs to Nat—the other five is what I borrowed from you."

"Borrowed from me? Why, I gave you that—outright. It was my Christmas in advance. Just jump into your things, and come down to send a telegram home. Send them five dollars by wire—they will get it in the morning. There is no present like the one that comes on Christmas morning, you know."

"Dorothy!" exclaimed Tavia, "I can't oppose you this time. I know that five dollars will make my father and my mother know that I—but it would be deceiving them," she broke off. "I am not fit to even send the gift."

"Hurry! hurry!" begged Dorothy. "I want to send some Christmas greetings by wire, and they will be too busy to take our messages if you wait later."

Tavia threw her arms about Dorothy.

"You dear old nuisance!" she exclaimed. "I wonder you could not leave some little thing for the angels to do to-morrow."

"Oh, I expect them to give me their undivided attention," declared Dorothy. "I have had such a queer holiday up to this time that I have simply asked for a great big lump of 'peace' in my stocking."

"You deserve it, Doro, dear," and Tavia, to hide the tears that would come into her eyes, placed her arms about Dorothy and hid her face on her shoulder.

Dorothy did get peace, and great happiness, too. Yet there were many happenings still in store for her, and what some of them were will be told in another book, to be called "Dorothy Dale's Camping Days." It was a never-to-be-forgotten outing and one that produced some astonishing results.

"And to-morrow is Christmas," said Dorothy softly. "I feel just like the carol singers, when they used to chant: 'God rest you, merry gentlemen——'"

"Only you're not a——" began Tavia, looking up.

"No, I'm not a gentleman, but I'm merry—quite happy now, and I certainly need a rest. I guess you do, too."

"I certainly do," agreed Tavia. "Come on, let's hurry to the telegraph office."

And here we will say good-by to Dorothy Dale for a while, leaving her and her friends at The Cedars to enjoy their Christmas in their own delightful way. For, after all, and in spite of the many queer happenings connected with them, the holidays were most happy ones.

THE END

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