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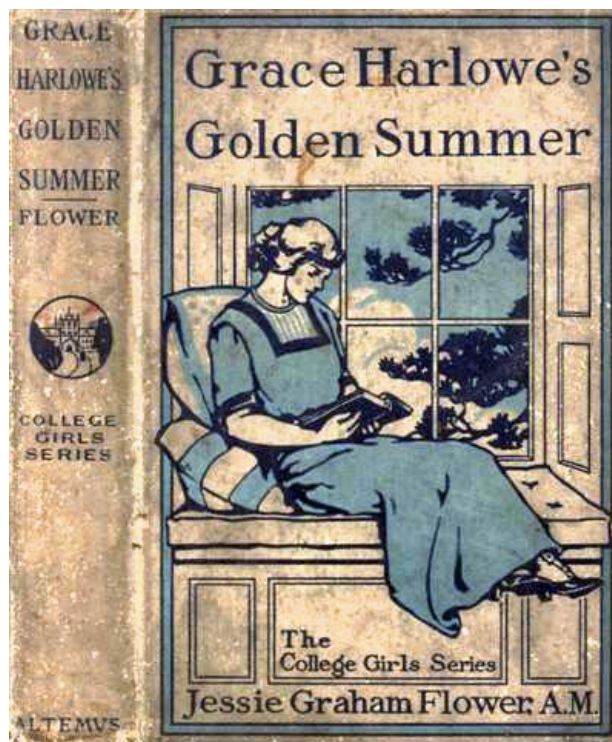
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Grace Harlowe's Golden Summer

By JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER, A. M.

Author of The Grace Harlowe High School Girls Series, The Grace Harlowe College Girls Series, etc.

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Grace's Embroidery Dropped From Her Hands.

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Grace Harlowe's Golden Summer

CHAPTER I

A SONG OF GOLDEN SUMMER

"Now, David, you know that I know that you don't know what I know. Therefore, if I know that you don't know what I *know* you don't know, it's very plain to be seen that either you or I know very little. Now, which of us is a know-nothing? Don't be afraid to confess. Remember, we are your friends." Hippy Wingate beamed benevolently upon his victim, bland expectation written on his plump face.

"No real friend of mine would ever take such cowardly advantage of the English language," was David Nesbit's scathing retort. "I'll leave it to Grace if I'm not right."

"There, Grace. At last you have an opportunity to strike for the right. I believe in striking a valiant blow for the right——"

"So do I," cut in Reddy Brooks decisively. "There is no time like the present. There couldn't be a better place. Away out here in this sequestered spot no one will hear your frenzied yells for help." Reddy rose determinedly from the steps of the old Omnibus House and made a nimble spring toward the loquacious prattler.

"Never touched me," was wafted defiantly back, as Hippy Wingate skilfully eluded Reddy's avenging hand and disappeared around the protecting corner of the one-time hostelry. The old Omnibus House had ever been his refuge when put to flight by his long-suffering companions.

"You might have known it," shrugged Nora Wingate with an indifference which marked long association with the verbose refugee. "In about three minutes you'll hear a frantic voice calling on me for protection. Don't say a word, any of you, but just listen."

A sudden silence, broken only by a soft chuckle from the abused David, descended on the seven young people occupying the worn stone steps.

"No-ra!" From the rear of the old house a plaintive voice sent up this anguished plea for succor.

"What did I tell you?" Nora's elaborate air of indifference vanished in a dimpling smile that was reflected on the faces of the group. No one said a word; neither did Nora rise to the noble duty of rescuer.

"All alone, all alone!
By the wayside she has left me,
And no other's love I'll be;
For to-night I am deserted;
Nora has forgotten me!"

intoned a mournful voice, flagrantly off the key.

"For to-night you are a nuisance, you mean," was Reddy Brooks' shouted correction. "I'll rescue you."

"Oh, my!" came Hippy's horrified accents, as Reddy Brooks leaped to his feet and dived toward the sheltering shadow that concealed the self-made outcast.

"Isn't it a lovely evening, David? Have you noticed it?" A fat, beaming face was cautiously thrust forth round a corner opposite to that from which the call for help had so recently emanated. A plump body still more cautiously followed the face. It was evident that Hippy considered David the lesser of two evils. "May I sit by you, Anne? I have always had a great deal of faith in you." Hippy became ingratiating. "I'm sorry I can't say as much for certain other persons whose names I courteously refrain from bringing into the discussion." Without waiting for the requested permission, Hippy crowded himself onto the small space which Anne, seated at one end of the top step, obligingly made for him, and calmly awaited the return of his pursuer.

"Oh, what's the use!" jibed the disgruntled avenger, when, strolling back to the steps, he beheld the nimble object of his pursuit waiting for him with a wide grin.

"Thus one is always brought to recognize the futility of revenge," murmured Hippy with sad gentleness. "Let us agree to forget the bitter past, Reddy, and turn our faces toward the glorious future. I might also add that it doesn't pay to take up another's grievances. After all I didn't actually accuse David of being a know-nothing. I merely asked him about it. However, I take it all back. David may know a great deal more than appears on the surface."

"I decline to rise to the bait," laughed David. "I came out here to enjoy myself; not to squabble. It's our last evening together until we all gather home again to see Grace and Tom take the highway of matrimony. Let's make the most of it."

Those who have faithfully followed Grace Harlowe through the eventful phases of her high school

and college life are equally well acquainted with the other seven members of the Eight Originals. In "GRACE HARLOWE'S PLEBE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," "GRACE HARLOWE'S SOPHOMORE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," and "GRACE HARLOWE'S SENIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," were recorded the countless interesting sayings and doings of these eight highly congenial friends. Later, when Grace had been graduated from Oakdale High School to continue her education at Overton College, accompanied by her friends, Anne Pierson and Miriam Nesbit, the devoted little band had remained unswerving in their allegiance to one another.

Once she had become a freshman at Overton College, Grace's equable disposition and love of fair play had attracted equally loyal allegiance to her standard. In "GRACE HARLOWE'S FIRST YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S SECOND YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S THIRD YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S FOURTH YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S RETURN TO OVERTON CAMPUS" and "GRACE HARLOWE'S PROBLEM," will be found a minute record of the principal happenings which made her college years memorable.

Absorbed in what she had firmly believed to be her destined work, Grace had long and obstinately shut love from her life, only to find at last that even her beloved work could not forever crowd it out. Seeing clearly, after months of doubt, she had cheerfully resigned her position as manager of Harlowe House to prepare for the more important position in life which early September was to bring her.

"It doesn't seem possible that we've had the blessed chance to be together for two whole weeks." Grace's eyes had grown dreamy. "I can't really believe that I've been back in Oakdale that long. It seems not more than two evenings ago that we held a reunion at our Fairy Godmother's and—" She paused, a little flush rising to her cheeks.

"And you and Tom told us the good news," supplemented Nora mischievously.

"I hadn't intended to say *that*, but never mind," laughed Grace. "It ceased to be a secret on that night. While I am on the subject I might as well add that until yesterday we couldn't make up our minds regarding our wedding day. But it's all settled now. Every one of you must be sure to be with us on the evening of September tenth."

"'Must' is the word," broke in Tom Gray, his eyes resting fondly on the slender, radiant-faced girl beside him. "We can't start on the great adventure without the blessing of this happy band."

"Rest assured, Thomas, we'll be there," averred Hippy. "Having comported myself with dignity at my own and several other weddings, I shall hail yours with the greatest of joy."

"Which means that I shall be obliged to keep a watchful eye on you every moment," translated Nora, her blue eyes twinkling.

"I'll help you, Nora," volunteered Reddy. "I haven't yet forgiven your wayward husband for the unkind remarks he made about my hair on *my* wedding day."

"I don't remember them," retorted Hippy, unabashed. "I've made so many remarks at so many different times about those same flaming, crimson locks that it would take a long while to sort out the dates. But there's nothing like trying. Let me see. The first occasion on which I chanced to note——"

"Now see what you've done." David Nesbit fixed the unfortunate Reddy with a severe eye.

"I see," was Reddy's grim comment. Picking up the idle mandolin that he had hastily deposited on Jessica's lap when he made his vengeful dash upon Hippy, he strummed it lightly. "Why lug a mandolin along if no one intends to sing?" he asked pointedly, ignoring Hippy's disrespectful reminiscences.

"Oh, very well." Promptly foregoing the will to gather data concerning Reddy's too-oft maligned Titian locks, Hippy began a lively warbling which had nothing in common with the tinkling melody of the mandolin. As a result the patient instrument immediately ceased its complaining tinkle. Hippy, however, lilted on, undisturbed, for a matter of five seconds, when a chorus of threatening protests warned him to cease.

"Do be good," admonished Nora, laughing in spite of herself. "Either sing prettily or don't try to sing at all."

"Madam, it is not necessary for me to *try* to sing. Song and I are one. Let me give you an illustration. Name a ditty best suited to my voice and I will prove myself."

"I can't recall one," discouraged Nora.

"Silent singing would suit *you* best," grumbled Reddy. "You could make your lips do the deed without damaging any one else's ear drums."

"I'll try it," amiably agreed the noisy soloist. "Just watch me." He proceeded to indulge in a series of labial contortions that a dumb man would have envied, and which had a most hilarious effect upon those whom he had lately persecuted with raucous sound. Rudely requested to desist from even this newly discovered pastime, he subsided with a frantic signalling to the effect that he had actually been stricken dumb.

"It's too good to be true," exclaimed the relieved Reddy, laying fresh hold on the mandolin. "While we have peace, sing for us, Nora. We ought to make the most of this unexpected

opportunity."

"Give us that song you used to sing about Golden Summer," begged Jessica. "Don't you remember, that was one of the first pieces Reddy learned to play on the mandolin? I haven't heard it in ages. I'd love to hear Nora sing it again."

"Yes, sing it, Nora." Grace added her plea. "I don't believe I've ever heard it. It will be very appropriate to the occasion."

"Wait a minute until I think how it goes." Reddy began a reflective strumming, bringing back, bit by bit, a plaintive little air that carried a subdued heart throb. "I've got it," he nodded. "Go ahead, Nora."

Her hands loosely clasped, Nora's clear, high voice, which Grace always declared "had tears in it," took up the song of Jessica's fancy to the subdued accompaniment of the mandolin.

"Golden Summer's in the land!
Hark! Her call soars high and sweet.
Hedge-rows flow'r at her command;
Roses spring beneath her feet.
Skies grow azure; life beats strong;
Nature listens to adore;
Thrilling at the siren's song,
Yields her wond'rous treasured store.
Precious fabrics of her loom
Clothe her darling of the year;
Wealth of sunshine; breath of bloom;
Cloudless days, so fair, so dear.

"Golden Summer's voice is stilled—
Autumn chants a requiem low.
Gone the days with rapture filled.
Life's a-throbbing, sad and slow.
Skies grow hazy; sunshine wanes,
Vivid green fast turns to brown;
Here and there along the lanes,
Flames the sumac's lonely crown.
Sings the voice of Mem'ry now,
'Cleave to Love—lest it depart;
Bind remembrance on thy brow,
Cherish Summer in thy heart."

"I don't like that song at all." As the last haunting cadence died away, the dumb man came into energetic speech.

"Why not, Hippy? I think it is beautiful." Grace turned surprised eyes on the stout protestant.

"It gives me the creeps," he declared shortly and with unmistakable earnestness. "The first verse is all very nice. Summer is a golden time, etc. But why remind us that fall is coming?" He had now resumed his old, bantering tone. "I prefer to have summer three hundred and sixty-five days in the year. I don't like murky skies, worn-out grass, skeleton hedge-rows, muddy lanes, lonesome sumacs and cold winds. As for winter, lead me away from it. I absolutely refuse to carry summer about in so useful an organ as my heart, when it's ten below zero and the water pipes are all frozen up."

"That is because you have no sentiment," challenged Reddy. Whereupon the divine power of song was at once swallowed up in a fresh burst of argument as futile as it was laughable. It was ended by tactful Anne, who was always supremely useful when called upon to arbitrate such important matters. The relative merits of "Golden Summer" having been successfully decided and laid to rest, Nora again lifted up her voice in a selection infinitely more to her liege lord's liking. Then followed an old-fashioned song in which every one took part, filling the quiet moonlit night with sweetest harmony.

"It's half-past ten, children," reminded David, as striking a match he consulted his watch. "Anne, Jessica, Reddy, and I are due to catch early trains to-morrow morning. Anne and I mustn't miss ours. We promised Miriam we'd surely be with her to-morrow night."

"Anne, don't forget to tell Miriam not to dare do any shopping until Mother and I arrive in New York," reminded Grace. "She promised to wait for me, so that we could do our shopping together. I've written her about it, but I wish you'd emphasize the fact for me."

"I will," promised Anne. "I know she will wait for you, though. She told me she intended to."

With knowledge of the coming parting so near, the little company grew a trifle less merry as they strolled home across the familiar fields in the moonlight. Though Hippy had been the only one to confess it, the plaintive melody of Nora's song of Golden Summer haunted them. With summer at high tide in each heart, it was, as Hippy had remarked, not quite pleasant to be reminded even tunefully that life holds the inevitable autumn.

"I really believe Hippy meant what he said about that song," Tom remarked meditatively to Grace.

"Were you thinking of that, too?" A faint, almost melancholy smile flickered about Grace's lips as she asked the question. "It seemed to me he was in earnest."

"I almost wish Nora hadn't sung it," returned Tom with unexpected bluntness. "I went through such a long, dreary winter before *my* Golden Summer came. Now I wish it to stay with me forever. I'd like our lives from this moment on always to be one long, continued Golden Summer like the last two weeks. I can't bear to think that it might ever be otherwise."

"Perfect love casteth out fear," quoted Grace softly. "It's the only true safeguard against the ills of life. After all, there's a note of triumph in the ending of that song. With love to light us on our way, it can't help but be always Golden Summer in our hearts."

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE BEHIND THE WORLD

"How many letters for me, Bridget?" trilled Grace Harlowe as she raced across the lawn to the front steps with the reckless enthusiasm of a small boy. A glimpse of the postman's retreating back had brought her scurrying from the garden to collect her own.

"Sure and it's a deal of mail ye be always gettin', Miss Grace," commented Bridget proudly, as she handed the eager-faced questioner a small stack of letters that brought a sparkle of pleasant anticipation to Grace's gray eyes.

"More than I deserve, I am sorry to say. I'm by no means a perfect correspondent. Thank you, Bridget." With a bright little nod, Grace skipped joyfully up the steps and made harbor in the big porch swing. "I'll read them as they come," she decided, "then each one will be a fresh surprise. Hello! Here's Miriam first of all. That means Anne delivered my message." Hastily tearing open the envelope, Grace drew forth a single sheet of thick white paper and read:

"DEAR GRACE:

"How I wish I could suddenly drop in on you this morning for a long talk. There is so much I should like to tell you which I haven't time to write. Anne, the faithful, delivered your message. Don't worry about my not waiting for you. I won't buy even a paper of pins without your august sanction and approval. I am anxiously looking forward to seeing you. So are Kathleen, Anne, Arline and Mabel Ashe.

"Elfreda is with me. She is a never-failing joy, and to quote her pet phrase, 'I can see' that there will be a vast amount of celebrating done when you arrive. Please forgive me for not writing much this time. I am expecting Everett and his sister at any moment. We are going to motor down to their home on Long Island for the day. I have decided to put in the time usefully until they have arrived. Hence this fragmentary epistle. Kindly note my laudable promptness as a correspondent and fall in line. With much love,

"As always,

"MIRIAM."

"I'll reply this very morning," nobly resolved Grace. "Oh!" She gave a gleeful chuckle as she recognized a dear, familiar script. "It's from Emma, good old friend." The chuckle continued as she perused the flowery salutation:

"MOST GRACIOUS AND ESTIMABLE GRACE:

"Having made a triumphal return to the humble habitation of the Deans, of whom I am which, I now derive a most excruciating pleasure in taking up my sadly neglected pen to inform you that I am well and hope you are the same. By this time you are no doubt mourning me as hopelessly lost in the wilds of darkest Deanery. Such is not the case. Though I have wandered disconsolately about my childhood haunts and camped out despondently under the fruitful pear-tree in our back yard, which, so far as I can remember, has never boasted of a single solitary pear, I am by no means lost. In fact, I am really beginning to feel quite at home. But how I miss you! Living in a 'Graceless' world is a cross even to a person of my excellent and amiable qualities.

"There's a grain of comfort in store, thank goodness. Before many weeks the Sempers will congregate together somewhere for a glorious reunion. Elfreda has written me that you are soon to be in New York City. I suppose the momentous question of 'Where shall we reunite?' will be decided then."

Grace read on through page after page of the long letter, written in Emma's most humorous vein. Finishing it at last, she gathered the closely written sheets together with a happy little sigh.

Good-natured, fun-loving Emma Dean occupied a foremost place in her affections. Grace wondered sometimes if the bond between them did not stretch as tightly even as that between herself and Anne. Emma had been and always would be the perfect comrade.

"You're next, Mabel," she murmured as she scanned the third envelope on the scarcely depleted pile. "I suppose you are going to tell me that——"

The loud purr of an automobile stopping before the house left Mabel's message still unread. Depositing her wealth of correspondence on the seat of the swing, Grace tripped down the steps and on down the walk.

"Good morning, dear Fairy Godmother," she greeted hospitably. "Good morning, Tom. Something nice is going to happen. I can read it in your faces."

"That depends on whatever your conception of 'nice' may be," returned Tom mysteriously. Slipping from the driver's seat, he caught her outstretched hand in both his own, his gray eyes alive with the light of a joyful anticipation which Grace had been quick to catch.

"Good morning, my dear," called Mrs. Gray from the car. "Run in the house and get your hat. We are bound on a most mysterious mission. You are the third person needed to carry it out."

"I'll be with you in a moment." Turning, Grace hastened up the walk to the house, wondering mightily what lay in store for her. "Mrs. Gray and Tom are waiting outside for me in the automobile, Mother," she announced, appearing suddenly on the shady back porch, where her mother sat quietly hemstitching a table cloth for Grace's Hope Chest. "Come out and see them."

Smiling to herself, Mrs. Harlowe laid aside her labor of love and followed her daughter's impetuous lead. Catching up her broad-brimmed Panama hat from the hall rack, Grace placed it on her head without stopping to consult the hall mirror. Linking her arm in her mother's, she towed her gently along toward the automobile to meet the unexpected arrivals.

"Won't you come with us, Mrs. Harlowe?" invited Mrs. Gray. The two women exchanged not only greetings but significant smiles as well.

"Thank you; not this morning. I prefer to leave Grace to you and Tom." Again her eyes met those of the older woman with the same enigmatic smile.

"There is mystery in the very air," declared Grace gayly. "I can tell by the way you two are exchanging eye-signals. Whatever the great secret is, Mother knows it. Now don't you?" she challenged, her affectionate gaze resting on Mrs. Harlowe.

"I'll answer that question when you come back," parried her mother.

"I'll hold you to your word," came the retort. Dropping a soft kiss on her mother's pink cheek, Grace accepted Tom's hand and stepped into the tonneau of the waiting automobile.

"Whither away, good prince?" she called mischievously to Tom as the machine glided down the street.

"That's a secret, curious princess. Wait and you will see," flung back Tom teasingly.

"Of course I'm curious," calmly admitted Grace, as she settled back in her seat. "Who wouldn't be? I wouldn't have let you tell me, though, if you had tried. I am quite ready to wait and see what happens."

Nevertheless, as they spun along the smooth road in the summer sunshine, Grace cast more than one speculative glance about her, trying to glean some faint hint of their destination. Although conversation went on briskly between herself and her Fairy Godmother, her keen eyes lost no detail that might possibly furnish her with a clue.

"We'll have to leave the car here and walk a little way," announced Tom, when half an hour later, after traveling the highway that skirted Upton Wood, he slowed down in a shady spot on the other side of the short stretch of forest.

"Very well," came Mrs. Gray's placid voice from the tonneau. "I shall not leave the car, Tom. You may do the honors."

"Come on, Grace." Leaving the driver's seat, Tom opened the door of the tonneau and stretched forth an inviting hand.

"I know where we are going," she cried triumphantly, as she accepted the proffered assistance. "We are going to take a look at Upton Heights. How nice! I haven't seen the quaint old place since I came home from college. You know I've always loved it and wished I owned it. It's such a wonderful forest retreat. When I was a little girl, I used to love to play that the world ended there. I always called it the House Behind the World."

Further mysterious and affectionate eye-signals were flashed between Mrs. Gray and Tom as Grace made this fervent speech. "Come and look at it again," said Tom briefly. There was a touch of exultation in his even tones.

Hand in hand, like two children, the youthful pair swung gayly along the narrow path that led from the highway to picturesque Upton Heights. Nearing it, they became suddenly silent in the face of its undeniable claim to beauty. Dazzlingly white against the magnificent trees which

surrounded it, it stood in the middle of a grassy plateau that rolled gently down to the woodland path in long sloping green terraces.

"How beautiful it looks!" Grace gazed almost reverently at the rambling old house with its wide, high-pillared verandas. It was like some gracious, stately person whose very watchword was hospitality, she thought. Built more than a century before, by a long-since departed Upton, it had not been used as a residence by his descendants. Due to a clause of command in the original owner's will, it had ever afterward been sedulously kept in repair. To her beauty-loving soul, it now seemed to have taken on a new lease of life. The house itself rejoiced in a fresh white luster and the grounds showed recent care.

"It was nice in you to bring me here, Tom," she again said. "You knew I loved this old place, didn't you?"

"Yes. Suppose we go closer to it," suggested Tom, drawing her gently forward.

Her hand still in his, Grace allowed him to conduct her to the flight of white stone steps set in the terrace. They led upward to the wide flagstone walk which in turn stretched levelly up to meet the spacious veranda.

"Shut your eyes," directed Tom, when they had mounted the steps to the veranda floor. His terse direction contained a touch of repressed excitement which informed Grace that the surprise was at hand. But what it might be she had not the remotest suspicion.

Obediently her long lashes swept her cheeks in compliance with love's command.

Dropping her hand, Tom approached the massive front door. There was a curious clicking sound, like the turn of a key in a lock, then Tom was back at her side. His hand again caught one of her own. Again he drew her forward. There was a slight tremor in his voice as he said:

"Open your eyes, Princess, and enter your castle."

Her veiling eye-lids lifting, Grace found herself on the threshold of Upton Heights, peering wonderingly into the dim reception hall with its huge fireplace, beam ceiling and curving Colonial staircase.

"It's a splendid surprise, Tom!" she exclaimed warmly. "I've always wished to see the inside of this wonderful place. How in the world did you ever manage to get the key to it?"

Tom smiled very tenderly into the eager face so near his own. "You've missed the biggest part of the surprise, Grace," he answered. "Don't you understand yet why we came out here? Do you think I would invite a royal princess to enter her castle if it weren't really her very own?"

"You don't mean—you can't mean—Oh, Tom!" Grace drew a quick, ecstatic breath that was half sob. A vagrant breeze set the leaves of the sentinel trees to sighing their approval as they looked down on the little tableau of human happiness.

"It is your very own House Behind the World, dear," Tom assured her. "Our future home. It is the gift of our Fairy Godmother to both of us. She purchased it of Robert Upton the day after we came from Overton. She had spoken of it to Mr. Upton long ago and was only waiting for the good news of our engagement. She knew how much you had always cared about it."

"We must go straight down to the automobile and make her come back with us," was Grace's happy cry. "I am so anxious to explore our marvelous new possession. But we must have our Fairy Godmother with us. I can't really believe yet that anything so glorious has happened to ordinary me. It's more than a surprise. It's a positive miracle. My own beautiful House Behind the World! But I know an even better name for it. It's not one I thought of myself. That glory belongs to Kathleen West. You know, Tom, she once wrote an allegorical play. We produced it when I was in my senior year at Overton. I played the part of Loyalheart who leaves Haven Home to go into the Land of College. When first it began to dawn upon me that you meant this wonder to be my very own, it came to me like a flash that it was more than the House Behind the World. Don't you see, Tom? It's really and truly, Haven Home!"

CHAPTER III

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

"And so, having ended her pilgrimage through the Land of College, Loyalheart is going back to Haven Home," said Kathleen West softly.

"You're a very lucky Loyalheart," was J. Elfreda Briggs' brisk comment. "Not every one who goes adventuring into strange lands finds the home of her chee-ildhood an interesting place to settle down in. Now take Fairview, for instance. I wouldn't go trotting back there on a cut-rate excursion, let alone making a pilgrimage to the sacred, I mean scared, spot. That's the way it looks, you know; as though it had once tried to grow and then been frightened out of it. I never was so glad in all my life as when Pa said we'd kiss that town good-bye. I could see that I'd never make my everlasting fortune there as a lawyer."

"You mean lawyeress, according to the Dean vocabulary," reminded Arline Thayer with a giggle.

"What is life without Emma Dean?" smiled Anne Nesbit. "I wish she were here to-night."

"I wrote her, asking her to pay me a visit while you girls were here," stated Arline, "but she wrote back voluminous and ridiculous thanks and said the reunion was about as much as she could manage."

"That reminds me," broke in Elfreda, in business-like tones, "where are we going to hold the reunion this year and at what time? Not much of July is left us. August will scud by like a flash and then—Well, Grace can tell you why September won't be a strictly popular time for a reunion. Sara and Julia Emerson want us to have it at their camp in the Adirondacks. That's rather a long distance for Emma to come. You know she lives farther away than the rest of us. Why can't you come down to Wildwood again? I am nothing if not hospitable."

"But it's my turn, now, J. Elfreda," protested Arline. "Why can't you come here?"

"What's the use in taking turns?" propounded Elfreda sturdily. "I am an extremely selfish person who never bothers about such little things as mere 'taking turns.' Now that four of you girls have your faces set toward wedding rings, it's high time something was done to console me. There! Resist that argument if you can. Am I a credit to my profession, or am I not?"

"You are," chorused five laughing voices.

Several days had elapsed since Grace Harlowe had accompanied Tom Gray and his aunt on the mysterious mission that had brought her Haven Home. Following that memorable morning, the delightful events of which had offered such signal proof of the adoration of her dear ones, Grace had moved about as one lost in a maze of quiet happiness. Every now and then her mind would halt suddenly in the perusal of the blessings that were hers to wonder almost wistfully if it were not all too beautiful, too dear, to last.

Sometimes she marveled that, after so long and persistently keeping love out of her busy life, she should have at length come into its purest realization. Once the very thought of it had irked and distressed her. Now she experienced a sense of deep surprise that she had been so blind. Her Golden Summer had indeed descended upon her in all its radiant glory. She rejoiced in the long peaceful mornings spent with her mother on the vine-clad veranda, or in the clematis-wreathed summer house at the end of the garden. They were busy mornings, too, filled with the joy of preparing the countless dainty odds and ends, so necessary to her trousseau. Their hands never idle, they talked long and earnestly of the things which lay nearest their hearts, and a strange peace, which Grace's naturally restless temperament had never before known, enveloped her like a mantle.

Though anxious to meet her friends again in New York City, Grace had sighed with genuine regret at leaving this new-found peace and departing from Oakdale on the most momentous shopping tour she had ever before set out to make. She and her mother had gone directly to the home of the Nesbits, where a most cordial welcome awaited them. Two days had passed since their arrival. It was now the evening of the second day and the five girls whose fortunes had been so firmly linked together at Overton College, by a series of happenings grave and gay, were paying a brief, overnight visit to Arline Thayer at her home in East Orange.

"Thank you." Elfreda bowed at the unanimous response. "As an esteemed representative of the law and a forlorn bachelor girl, I really think my plea deserves some small consideration. I might also add that I could see you were all anxious to come to Wildwood. I appreciate your delicate opposition." Elfreda grinned boyishly. "Now that we've decided where, we'd better decide when the reunion is to be."

"We didn't decide where, did we?" tantalized Miriam. "We only decided that you were a distinguished lawyeress."

"Having once admired me, can you refuse my humble request?" retorted Elfreda, with a sentimental rolling of her round blue eyes.

"Let's put her out of her misery," proposed Miriam. "Wildwood for me, Elfreda, provided the rest are pleased. How about you, Arline? As an almost-wed are you willing to sacrifice your reunion claim to Elfreda?"

"Of course." Arline made genial response. A peculiar look shot into her pretty eyes, however, as she nervously began to turn the jeweled pledge of engagement that decked her ring finger. She seemed about to break into further speech, then set her red lips with decision and remained silent.

Seated beside her on a willow settee, which they had occupied together since repairing to the veranda after dinner, Grace alone noticed Arline's sharply drawn brows and the sudden ominous tightening of her baby mouth. She wondered vaguely what it might mean. Surely Arline was not angry because Elfreda had begged for the privilege of holding the reunion at Wildwood. She was of too sunny a disposition to become thus disturbed by such trifles. She had always been far more ready to give than take. Grace now recalled that even in the midst of Arline's joy at seeing her, there had been a hauntingly wistful look in the dainty little girl's blue eyes.

Under cover of Kathleen West's lively account of a big story which she had run to earth after a

week's assiduous pursuit, Grace's kindly hand found Arline's.

"What is the matter, Daffydowndilly?" she asked just above a whisper. "You don't appear to be quite your usual cheerful self."

"You noticed, then?" counter-questioned Arline in an equally guarded tone. "I'm glad you did. Still, I was going to tell you, anyway. Wait until later. I have arranged for you to room with me tonight. Then I'll tell you all. But not now. No one else must know."

With a soft pressure that betokened loyal sympathy, Grace released Arline's little hand and turned her attention to Kathleen, who was holding her small audience spellbound by a recital of the very audacity of her deeds as a star reporter.

"Won't you miss all that when winter comes and you cease to be Kathleen West?" questioned Anne, a trifle anxiously. She too had had to decide between publicity and love. "You've lived in a whirl of exciting happenings so long that settling down for good will seem rather tame."

"I shall love it." Kathleen's sharp black eyes glowed with intensity. "Trailing news is all right for a few years, but I'd hate to go on with it forever. There are so many things I'd like to do that I've never had the time to dream of doing. I'm going to keep on writing, just the same as ever. Neither Gerald nor I care to begin making a home just yet. We shall board and write in the evenings together. You see he is the literary editor of *Crawford's Magazine* now. That means that we can spend our evenings together. We are going to collaborate on a play and, oh, we have planned to do lots of things. I imagine we shall carry out some of our plans in time. We have already collaborated on several magazine stories and worked them out beautifully. You see, neither of us is jealous of the other's work. If we were, then I'd prefer to stay Kathleen West."

"You are fortunate," remarked Arline almost bitterly. Again a shadow crossed her face which Grace alone noted.

"I decline to share my successes with any mere man," asserted Elfreda grandly. "Not that I have been what you might call entirely slighted. Wait until I tell you the sad story of my one love affair."

"*This* is vastly interesting," mused Miriam.

"Tell us about it this minute." Arline brightened visibly. Elfreda's promised tale of tragedy was sure to turn out comedy.

"Let me see," began Elfreda with a fine air of reminiscence. "We met last year in a corridor of the law school, I was making a wild rush down and he was making an equally wild rush up. Result, we collided. Just like that," Elfreda brought her hands smartly together to illustrate the force of that momentous collision. "I wasn't overcome with joy at this slam-bang introduction. I had seen him often from afar and never admired him. He was at least three inches shorter than yours truly, had a snub nose and freckles. All of which was not romantic.

"That was the beginning; but not the ending. The next time I met him, he claimed beaming acquaintance. After that he pursued me madly. He was always bobbing up in the most unexpected places. It gave me a feeling of being haunted. At first I bore it like a martyr. I hated to hurt his feelings. After a while it began to get on my nerves. About that time he began to make sentimental remarks. I carefully explained that I did not believe in love. That only made matters worse. He rolled his eyes and vowed that he would convince me. Then he began sending me letters and love lyrics. The lyrics were so original they were positively weird.

"But in my darkest hour of oppression I stumbled upon a remedy. I happened to remember a girl who was an art student. I also remembered that she was terribly sentimental. So I dragged my pursuer along with me to a water-color exhibition that I knew she expected to attend. They met. I perpetrated the introduction. It turned out even better than I had dared to hope. The funny part of it was that both of them were afraid I'd be angry. The deeper they fell in love, the harder they tried to keep it from me. After a while Charles, that was my perfidious idol's name, came to me with a long face and confessed. I suppose his conscience troubled him. He told me that he had made a terrible mistake in thinking himself in love with me. I humbly agreed with him that he had. He assured me that he now knew that he could never have been happy with me. Before he got through explaining, it struck me as being so funny that I laughed in his face. Now he doesn't speak to me. Neither does the girl. She evidently believes that she snatched away my last chance."

The cheerful smile Elfreda turned on her amused listeners as she ended her recital was hardly an indication of deep sorrow for her double loss.

"That reminds me of Emma Dean's one romance," smiled Grace. "I shan't tell you about it. Wait until we have the reunion and I'll ask her to dig up her sentimental past for your benefit."

"I hope I can arrange my vacation so that I can attend the reunion, too," sighed Kathleen. "As Patience Eliot and I have been invited to be the Sempers' guests of honor, naturally I don't care to miss it."

"Can you get away from the paper at any time during August?" asked Anne thoughtfully.

"Yes; but only for a week," Kathleen spoke regretfully.

"Then let us decide upon the time now," proposed Miriam. "I am sorry to be a kill-joy, but one week will have to be my limit this year. I wish I could spare two, but it's impossible."

"I intended to speak of that," nodded Elfreda. "I'd love to have you girls with me longer but I know that most of you are cramped for time. So I'll be magnanimous and say, 'thank you for small favors.'"

The subject of the reunion thus renewed, it was decided to hold it during the second week in August, and the six friends began an avid planning for it. From that the conversation drifted back to Overton College, always a fruitful topic for discussion. It was truly a heart-to-heart talk. Because of the perfect fellowship that existed among them, they could look back and speak frankly not only of their lighter hours, but also of the graver moments when the struggle to reach their aims had seemed well-nigh impossible.

Half-past eleven o'clock found them still lingering on the veranda, the incessant murmur of their busy voices proclaiming their mutual satisfaction in being together once more. When at last a voluble procession wended its way upstairs to bed, the usual amount of visiting between rooms was carried on with the old-time fervor of college days.

"It's exactly like old times," declared Elfreda to Miriam. "Here we are, you and I, rooming together again just as we did at Overton. Sometimes when I stop to think that those days are gone for good and all, it gives me the blues. I can't realize that you, Miriam Nesbit, and Grace Harlowe, too, are actually grown-up and getting ready to be married. Why it seems only yesterday since I was the verdant freshman who invited herself to room with you and kept you in hot water for a whole year because she didn't know enough to behave like a human being."

"What about the Elfreda Briggs who proved herself the most loyal friend and roommate one could ever hope to have?" demanded Miriam, laying a friendly hand on Elfreda's shoulder.

"Oh, I had to get in line," returned Elfreda with a flashing affectionate glance that belied her brusque words. "I could see that the way I had started out wouldn't take me far. You and Grace made me over."

"Yet, if it hadn't been for Grace I would have stayed a hateful, conceited snob all my days," returned Miriam soberly. "There isn't one of us who doesn't owe her a debt of gratitude that we can never hope to repay. If happiness is the certain reward of good works, then Grace Harlowe ought never to know an unhappy moment."

Miriam spoke with a certainty born of her deep regard for Grace. To her it seemed that naught save the brightest of futures could come to her friend. Yet happiness is at best a fragile, evanescent thing.

CHAPTER IV

"TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE"

"Well, Daffydowndilly, what is on your mind?" began Grace when the last gay good-night had sounded and Arline had closed the door of her dainty blue and white room.

"Let's get comfy first. I can talk a great deal better." Arline began a listless unfastening of her fluffy lingerie frock, her eyes fixed moodily on Grace.

"All right." Grace had already divested herself of her gown of soft white China silk and was now seated before the dressing table energetically brushing her wealth of golden brown hair.

Nothing more was said until, with a little fluttering sigh, Arline had curled up like a kitten at Grace's feet, her golden head resting against her friend's knee. Smiling tenderly down on her, Grace could not help noting how utterly like a tired child she looked in her baby-blue negligee. "Now is the time for all good Sempers and true to come to the aid of their comrades," she encouraged with a smile.

"Grace," Arline lifted solemn blue eyes, "have you ever for one minute been sorry that you gave up your work for—for—the sake of—love?"

"No." Grace shook a decided head. Inwardly she wondered a little at the question. "It took me a long time to come to a decision, though," she added frankly.

"Would you mind telling me about it?" Arline flushed as she made the request. "Please don't think me prying, but—" She hesitated. "Well, I have a strong reason for asking. It would help me, I think, if you cared to give me your confidence."

For a moment Grace made no response. Aside from her most intimate Oakdale friends and Emma Dean she had never divulged to any one else the story of that last year of struggle against love which had ended in her unconditional surrender to it. To her it was as something bitter-sweet, to be locked in her memory for all time. Yet the wistfulness of Arline's appeal touched her deeply.

"I am willing to tell you about it," she said slowly. "You know, of course, that Tom Gray and I had

known each other almost from childhood. We grew up together as good comrades. We were always together during vacations with our six other friends. His aunt, Mrs. Gray, whom you know, was fond of having us with her. It never entered my head that Tom cared for me in more than a friendly way, until I came home from Overton at the end of my junior year. When I began to understand that he really loved me, I didn't like it at all. As I grew older I liked the idea still less. I wanted to work; not marry Tom. He asked me to marry him the next winter, but I said 'no,' After that I kept on saying 'no,' and last winter we threshed the matter out soon after Anne's wedding.

"I felt very well pleased with myself for a while. Then things went wrong at Overton and Tom joined a naturalist on an expedition to South America. Right then it came to me that I had suddenly met with a dreadful loss. I tried to make myself believe that I didn't care. While I was at home during the Easter vacation I woke up. But it was too late. I went back to Overton, but I wasn't happy. He had often told me that there would come a time when not even my work could crowd out love. I knew that the time had come. I had had some trouble with Miss Wharton, the dean, and expecting to be asked to resign my position at Harlowe House. I resigned of my own accord. It was Kathleen West who straightened out that tangle for me. She sent for Miss Wilder, who happened to be coming home just at that time. My resignation wasn't accepted, and I would perhaps have gone on for another year at Overton, but—" Grace paused, her fine face grew tender. "Tom came back," she continued, a faint tremor in her even tones, "and so I gladly gave up my work for love. That's the whole story. I never expected to tell it to any one. Somehow it has always been sacred to me. I couldn't bear to talk of it, even to Mother."

"It's a wonderful story. When I asked you about giving up work for love, I never dreamed that you had gone through with any such struggle. I feel as though I've intruded on very private property. But just knowing about it *has* comforted me." Arline raised her head from Grace's knee with sudden energy. "It's this way, Grace. I have almost decided to break my engagement."

"Why, Arline Thayer!" Amazement was written on Grace's features. "I am sorry to hear that. Until to-night I had thought of you as being absolutely happy."

"I'm not. I'm dreadfully unhappy." Arline drew a quick, almost sobbing breath. "You've never met Stanley Forde, my fiancé, so you don't know how handsome he is and how nice he can be—if he chooses. But he's turning out a—a—well, a kind of tyrant. He doesn't like me to do settlement work. I've always thought he wasn't very highly pleased over it, but he never said a word until the other night. Even then he didn't say much. But, as Elfreda says, 'I can see' that if I marry him he's going to say more about it afterward. Then we'll quarrel and that would be dreadful. I could never endure it. You know how I hate quarrels. At college I never had anything to say to or do with the girls who were trouble-makers. What am I to do, Grace? Break my engagement while there is still time or—or—" Arline subsided with a little sob.

"Poor Daffydowndilly." Bending, Grace wound her arms about the dainty, child-like figure. "It's a hard problem—hard because I suppose you must care a great deal for him."

"I think I must love him, or I wouldn't wish to marry him," came the muffled reply. "Still I won't give up my work. Those poor settlement children need me. He can't understand that. He knows nothing of what it means to be terribly poor. He doesn't like the idea of my coming into such close contact with them. It doesn't hurt me and it helps them," ended Arline piteously.

"One who knows you well should understand that you are doing worthy work," returned Grace gravely. "Still if I were you I would not act too hastily. It seems to me that you ought to come to a frank understanding of the matter with your fiancé at once."

"And if he refuses to allow me—" broke in Arline quickly.

"Then you must decide within yourself whether he is worth the sacrifice," Grace answered with deep positiveness. Privately she did not consider that a young man, who took it upon himself to interfere with an enterprise which benefited many and harmed none, was quite worthy of her generous little comrade. "It's like this, Arline. You must be true to yourself, no matter what it may cost you. Even your fiancé's love won't make up for having failed some one else in order to keep it. What does your father think of it?"

"Oh, he doesn't know," came the quick response. "He is very fond of Stanley. He is pleased with our engagement. Still he has always been interested in my work. But I'd rather fight it out alone. If I were some day to go to him and say, 'I have broken my engagement,' he would be dreadfully disappointed, but not angry. That's just the trouble. I've always done exactly as I pleased. It's hard now to think of doing what some one else dictates. Sometimes I feel that I love Stanley a great deal; then again I feel differently about it. I'm really in a terrible muddle. I wish I were just Daffydowndilly back at good old Overton again."

"I wouldn't stay in a muddle then," advised practical Grace. "I'd settle matters once and for all, and whichever way I might decide, I'd make myself believe that it was for the best. But first of all I'd be very sure that love was love." She had reached the wise conclusion that true love and Arline were as yet strangers.

"I can't say anything to Stanley just now. He's in Oregon and won't be back until the last of August. I don't care to write him. I must wait until I see him. But I shall think over all you've said and try very hard to be true to myself." Arline rose and standing beside Grace slid a loving arm about her neck. "I knew you could help me," she said. "I feel ever so much better. Now I mustn't

keep you any longer. Thank you, Loyalheart. You've been very sweet to poor, muddled Daffydowndilly."

"You are a dear child and deserve the best that life can give you." Grace returned the gentle embrace with a tenderness that bespoke unutterable regard. It hurt her to know that gay, light-hearted Arline Thayer who had always appeared to slip through life so smoothly, should have run against an ugly snag.

Long after they had said good-night, Grace lay looking out at the calm moonlight and pondering over the great changes that less than a year had brought her. Her own happiness so complete, she longed for the whole world to be happy with her. Her ever-ready sympathy went out to all those in it whose difficult love-problems tended toward renunciation. She wished whole-heartedly that she might waken to the sunlight of a day when she could say joyfully and with supreme truth: "All's right with the world."

CHAPTER V

FLYING IN THE FACE OF SUPERSTITION

"Oh, mother, isn't it nice to be home again?" Grace Harlowe dropped into her favorite chair and surveyed the familiar living-room with the same glad appreciation she would have bestowed upon a long-lost friend. "I've loved being with the girls; but, after all, home is best. I'm fortunate in that I am going to live so near to you. If Tom goes back to the Forestry Department this winter, I'm afraid I shall leave Haven Home more than once to take care of itself and come trotting back to you. It will be dreadfully lonely there with Tom away. Not that it isn't the most beautiful place in the world, but then, you are you, and I can't do without you."

"I have been obliged to give you up the greater part of the last six years. I suppose I ought to feel resigned to it by this time." Mrs. Harlowe's smile hinted at wistfulness. "I am glad to be home again, too. I hope we haven't forgotten to buy every single thing you need. I imagine your wedding gown will come to-day. Let me see. It was to have been finished the day we left New York. We've been home two days. Yes, I think we may expect it to-day, or not later than to-morrow. There's the doorbell ringing now. Perhaps it's the expressman."

Springing to her feet, Grace hurried to the door. "Here's your expressman," she laughed, as she reappeared, her arm linked in that of Nora Wingate.

"Good morning, Nora," greeted Mrs. Harlowe. Rising, she advanced to Nora, kissing her with evident affection. "We were wondering what had become of you. We haven't seen you since we came home."

"Hippy and I went away for the week end. We returned only this morning. I was anxious to see you both, also Grace's wedding finery, so I came over bright and early."

"We brought it all back with us, except my wedding gown, Nora. I'm expecting that at almost any moment. I'm anxious to try on the whole outfit. Then I'll know how I'm going to look as a bride."

"Oh, you mustn't do that!" exclaimed Nora in horrified tones. "It's dreadfully unlucky. Didn't you know it?"

"I am not superstitious," laughed Grace. "I fail to see why trying on one's wedding gown beforehand should bring bad luck. I am surely going to do it when it comes, just to prove the fallacy of the superstition."

"I wish you wouldn't." Nora's dark brows met in a troubled frown. "Perhaps it *is* foolish in me to feel like that about it. But I do. I suppose it's because I'm Irish. The daughters of Erin have always been a superstitious lot. Don't ever tell Hippy that I admitted even that much. He would tease me for a week about it."

"It shall remain a dark secret," gayly assured Grace. "As it is, I may continue to consider myself as lucky till the gown puts in an appearance. After that, look out for trouble. You'd better stay to luncheon to-day, Nora, so as to be here when the great trying-on moment dawns."

"Thank you. I will." Nora's lately-clouded face brightened. "I'll leave Hippy to lunch in solitary state. I'll telephone him to that effect. It will teach him to appreciate his blessings." Nora dimpled roguishly as she tripped to the hall to acquaint Hippy with the fell prospect in store for him. She returned to the living-room with the mirthful information: "He says he resigns himself to his fate, but that he will prepare for my triumphal home-coming this evening. That means he will do something ridiculous. The last time I left him to his own folly, he decorated the dining-room with all sorts of absurd signs—'What is home without the Irish?' 'In memory of my late lamented guardian,' and 'Not gone for good, but merely gadding.'" Nora giggled as she recounted these pleasant tokens of welcome.

"You and Hippy will never grow up," Mrs. Harlowe declared indulgently. "You play at keeping house like two children."

"I think it's lovely," nodded Grace. "When I start on my pilgrimage I'm not going to think that I shall ever grow into a staid, stately married person. I'm going to keep the spirit of youth alive until I'm old and gray-headed. Did I dream it, Nora, or did I see you lay your work bag on the hall settee? I hope it's a reality. These are busy times, you know. I'm a hard-working individual. So is Mother. If I see someone else blissfully idle it has a bad effect upon me."

"Don't worry, I brought my work. I am still in the throes of that lunch cloth I'm embroidering for Miriam. I've a lot to do to it yet before it's finished, so I can't afford to be idle, either."

Repairing to the summer house, the three women fell to work with commendable energy on their self-imposed tasks. It was a glorious midsummer morning and the picturesque pagoda at the foot of the garden proved an ideal retreat. Despite her sturdy declaration that she could not afford to be idle, more than once Grace's embroidery dropped from her hands as her gray eyes dreamily drank in the beauty of the riotously-blooming garden of old-fashioned flowers, the close-clipped, tree-decked lawn and the thousand and one details that made her childhood's home seem daily dearer now that she was so soon to leave it.

"Wake up, Grace," playfully admonished her mother, her eyes chancing to rest on her daughter's rapt face. "If my ears do not deceive me, I think I heard the doorbell. Perhaps it is the expressman."

"I hope it is." Hastily dropping her embroidery to the rustic bench on which she was seated, Grace rose and set off in a hurry toward the not-far-distant house. It was several minutes before she returned, her radiant face registered the news that the long-looked-for express package had materialized.

"At last!" was her jubilant cry when half way across the lawn. "No more work for me until after luncheon. Come up to the house, both of you. The grand try-on is about to begin. We'll just have time for it before luncheon. Kindly go to the living-room and obtain front seats for the performance." Having delivered this merry injunction, Grace turned and went back to the house.

Laying aside their work in obedience to the prospective bride's command, Mrs. Harlowe and Nora proceeded in leisurely fashion to the house, there to await Grace's pleasure.

"Go on into the living-room, Nora," said Mrs. Harlowe as they stepped into the hall. "I must see Bridget about luncheon. I'll return directly."

Left to herself, Nora went over to the piano. Her fingers wandering lightly over the keys, almost unconsciously she dropped into the plaintive prelude of Tosti's "Good-bye." Why that particularly pathetic farewell to summer and love should have occurred to her at such a time she did not know. Whether it had been superinduced by her rooted superstition against Grace's determination to try on her wedding gown beforehand, or whether her emotional temperament had sensed the stirring of far-off things, Nora could not explain.

Very softly she sang the mournful words of the first verse. She was about to go on with the second when, Mrs. Harlowe appearing in the living-room, Nora swung about on the piano stool.

"Finish your song, Nora," begged Mrs. Harlowe. "I am very fond of the 'Good-bye.' It is distinctly melancholy, but beautiful. To me, all Tosti's songs are wonderful. The 'Venetian Song' and the 'Serenata' are both exquisite. It seems a pity that the more modern composers have given us so little that is really worth while."

"I know it. Still we have Chaminade and Nevin and De Bussy. Some of De Bussy's tone poems are marvels. I love '*La Lettre*' and '*La Muette*.'"

"I don't think I have ever heard either of them," returned Mrs. Harlowe. "I know very little of the modern music of the French school."

"I'll sing '*La Lettre*' for you." Nora faced the piano to render the exquisite inspiration of the noted French composer. "Before I sing it," she added, turning her head toward Mrs. Harlowe, "I had better try to tell you something about it. It is about a letter somebody writes to a loved one, late in the night when everything is absolutely silent in the house. Roughly translated it begins, 'I write to you, and the lamp listens.' Both the words and the music make one feel as though the bond between the two persons was so strong that they could almost communicate one with the other by thought. That is really the idea De Bussy has tried to convey in his music and one can't help but understand it. He brings it out strongly in the last part of the song where the writer of the letter says: 'Half dreaming, I wonder: Is it I who write to thee, or thou to me?' Then it ends with a distant clock striking the hour. Listen and you'll hear it."

Listener and singer both intent on the song, neither heard the bride-to-be descending the stairs. Not wishing to interrupt them, Grace paused behind the portieres that draped the wide doorway into the living-room until Nora should finish. With her, "*La Lettre*" had always been a favorite song. Long afterward, when the shadow of the unexpected hung darkly over her, she recalled that significant moment of waiting.

"It is undeniably perfect," was Mrs. Harlowe's appreciative comment when the last note, representing the striking of the distant clock, had died away. "I had no idea——"

"Oh, Grace!" Nora's glance had suddenly strayed to the slender, white-robed figure that was making a sedate advance into the living-room. Whirling mischievously she played a few bars of

"Mendelsohn's Wedding March," then sprang from the piano stool and ran forward with outstretched hands. "You are truly magnificent!" she breathed impulsively.

Mrs. Harlowe had also risen. Was this radiant young woman in lustrous white satin, whose changeful face looked out so sweetly from the softly flowing bridal veil, the same little Grace Harlowe who had not so very long ago romped her tom-boyish way through childhood? A mist rose to her eyes, soft with brooding mother love, as she walked forward and took Grace gently in her arms.

For an instant the three women remained wrapped in a kind of triangular embrace. Then Mrs. Harlowe released her daughter with a fond, "Walk across the room, Grace, so that we can get the full effect of your grandeur."

"It's a darling gown," praised Nora. "I like it ever so much better than Jessica's, Anne's or mine. I can't blame you for wanting to dress up in it beforehand. I take back all my croaking. Here's hoping good luck will roost permanently on your doorstep."

"It ought to," was Grace's fervent response, "with everyone so perfectly sweet to me and with all the trouble that Mother is taking to give me pleasure. I feel as though—"

The reverberating peal of the door bell cut Grace's words short. "Don't answer it until I am out of sight!" she exclaimed, scurrying nimbly toward the hall. A flash of white on the stairs and she was gone.

"Good morning, Mother mine. Is Grace here?" Tom Gray's impetuous inquiry betokened strong excitement.

"Good morning, Tom. Come in. Grace has just vanished up the stairs. I'll let her tell you why she left us in such a hurry." Mrs. Harlowe smilingly ushered Tom into the living-room. "Nora, you can play hostess. I will go and tell Grace that Tom is here."

"Thank you." Tom cast a grateful look after Mrs. Harlowe's retreating back. Following Nora into the living-room he seated himself nervously on the davenport, his eyes fixed on the doorway.

Nora eyed him in sober speculation. She would have liked to inquire into the nature of his excitement. Courtesy forbidding her to do so, she indulged only in commonplaces to which Tom replied almost absently. It was evident that something remarkable must have happened to thus upset Tom's equanimity. The sound of Grace's light feet on the stairs was a matter of relief to her. Excusing herself to the impatient lover, she left the room, wondering if, after all, there could be a remote possibility that her prediction of ill luck was about to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHADOW

"But why must *you* go, Tom?" Grace's tones rang with nervous dread. "Can't some one else adjust matters satisfactorily?"

"No." Tom's reply was freighted with gloom. "I understand those men up there and can get along better with them than a new superintendent could. It wouldn't be worth while hiring one. Mr. Mackenzie isn't dangerously ill. He'll be about again in two or three weeks. But it needs some one who understands Aunt Rose's affairs to look after them properly, even for that short period of time. If it weren't almost tragic, it would be funny. Here I am bound heart and soul to the work of preserving forests. Now duty calls me to handle a crowd of men whose business it is to cut down forests. It isn't very pleasant to contemplate. To me trees are almost as much alive as human beings. Worse still, I hate to leave you, Grace. It's not so very long until the tenth of September, either, and we've so many plans to carry out yet at Haven Home."

"I know it." Grace's admission contained resignation. With duty thus obstinately confronting Tom, she felt that she had no right to discourage the performance of it. "I don't wish you to go," she faltered, "but I can't help knowing that you are right. You owe it to your aunt. She comes first. She's been both father and mother to you, and I'm glad you are the one to help her now."

"Aunt Rose doesn't want me to go," returned Tom quickly. "She's afraid something dreadful may happen to me. I don't anticipate any such thing. I'm too good a woodsman to feel concerned about myself. After that strenuous expedition to South America, this will be child's play. It's leaving you that I don't like."

Grace did not reply for a moment. Secretly she, too, was echoing Mrs. Gray's fears. With the day of their marriage so near, she could not bear even to dwell on the dire possibility of any occurrence which might wreck her Golden Summer. Bravely thrusting aside such a contingency she said with grave sweetness: "I should be a pretty poor sort of comrade if I were to fly in the face of your duty. It's hard, of course, Tom, but I can say truthfully that I wish you to go. I shall try not to be sad over it, or worry. After all, it's only for two or three weeks. One week of that time I shall be at Elfreda's attending the Semper's reunion. As for Haven Home, you attended to the really important things to be done there while I was in New York City. Most of the furniture is

there now. Ever so many of the smaller things yet to be done, I can do or have done. My trousseau is attended to, so I'll have time to make daily pilgrimages to our forest retreat."

"I've thought of all that, too. I knew you'd wish to finish the work at Haven Home. The touring car or my roadster are always at your service to take you there. You know you love to drive the roadster. It's already as much yours as mine. You can always take one of your girl friends with you. It's bully in you to be so brave about it. It helps me more than I can say." Tom caught Grace's hands in a loving, steadfast clasp.

For an hour or more they sat side by side on the davenport, each sturdily trying to conceal the blow which the unlooked-for swing in Mrs. Gray's business affairs had dealt them. Tom's chief cause for sorrow was in the fact that he must leave the girl he adored, even for so brief an interval of time. Grace's sadness, which she sternly concealed from him, lay far deeper. Though Tom was scarcely concerned for his own welfare, she was filled with a thousand vague alarms as to the disasters which might perhaps overtake him. Not so long since, in speaking of the vast lumber region in a northern state where his aunt possessed important holdings, he had told her of the troubles that frequently ensued by reason of lawless timber thieves. Then, too, the camp for which he was bound was large and comprised a rough element of men. From Tom himself she had learned that the Scotch superintendent, Alec Mackenzie, was obliged to rule them with an iron hand. During his enforced absence from them, discipline was sure to grow lax. She wondered whether even resolute Tom Gray could ably contend with the difficult situation.

Yet she kept all this to herself. It was her place to encourage, not discourage. If unbounded faith in Tom could help work the wonder of carrying him safely through his mission and home again to her, then she would bestow that faith ungrudgingly. Hers was too fine and steadfast a nature to quail at the first obstacle that rose to impede her highway of happiness. "Loyalheart" she had been christened and "Loyalheart" she would remain to the end of her days.

"When must you go, Tom?" she questioned at last. Both had thus far been sedulously side-stepping direct reference to their moment of parting.

"I ought to go this afternoon." Tom's voice registered his hearty regret as he made this response. "I can wait until to-morrow if *you* say so, Grace. I'd rather you'd decide it. Of course, you know I'd prefer to put over going until to-morrow. It's only——"

"I understand," came faintly from Grace. "You'd better go to-day. Tom. It will be even harder for both of us to wait another day before saying good-bye. Besides," she added, making a valiant effort to be cheerful, "the sooner you go, the sooner you will return. You may find that you won't have to stay there as long as you imagine."

"You're a true comrade, Loyalheart." Since the day when Grace had named their future residence Haven Home, at the same time telling Tom of the college play in which she had taken part, he had fallen into the habit of calling her Loyalheart. "That Miss West had the right idea about you," had been his tender criticism. "There isn't another name in the whole world that could possibly suit you so well."

"I hope always to be a good comrade," returned Grace, a faint color stealing into her lately-paling cheeks. "It's a pretty hard contract always to live up to, though. While everything is lovely, it's not hard. When things go wrong, it is. It reminds me of a poem I once read that began, 'It's easy enough to be pleasant when life flows by like a song.' I can't remember any more of it, except that it conveyed the thought that the only persons who are really worth while are the ones who can keep on being pleasant even when everything in their lives goes wrong. So we ought to try to smile over this little hardship and look at it as being just one of the vicissitudes that life is bound to bring us."

"But I don't like to see hardship and vicissitudes creeping into our Golden Summer," protested Tom, not quite satisfied to adjust himself to Grace's more optimistic view of the situation. "I'm selfish about it, I'm afraid. When, after a long dark winter, a man is suddenly turned loose in the sunshine, he is naturally anxious to stay there. Just because I'm saying that, I don't mean that I would dream of failing Aunt Rose. I'd go even if it meant we'd have to put off our marriage a few weeks longer."

"And I would wish you to go," agreed Grace earnestly. "I am glad you said that. If, when you get to the camp, you find that you will have to stay quite a while, we can put off our wedding until the last of September. Only a few of our closest friends know that we have set the date for the tenth of September, so we needn't feel in the least embarrassed if we find it necessary to change it."

"Oh, I'll be back before the last of August," was Tom's confident prediction. "That will give us plenty of time to make all our arrangements. And now I must go, Grace. I have a good deal to do before train time. I'll leave Oakdale on that 4.30 express. I'll drive over here for you in the roadster. I'd like just you to see me off on my journey. Aunt Rose will understand when I tell her. Then if you will, you can drive the roadster back to our garage."



Devoted Love Shone in Her Clear Gray Eyes.

"I will," acquiesced Grace briefly. A swift rush of unbidden emotion brought her very near to tears. Accompanying Tom to the door, she watched him wistfully down the walk. She was forcibly reminded of a day, belonging to the past, when she had seen him go down that same walk, and, as she then believed, out of her life. On that dark rainy afternoon of the long ago she had felt only pity as she gazed after his retreating form. She had gone into the house and cried bitterly, out of sheer sorrow of the hurt which she had inflicted upon her childhood's friend. Now all was changed. Devoted love shone through the windows of the clear gray eyes that followed Tom Gray's tall, broad-shouldered figure, as he swung through the gate and down the street. And, as she stood there in the doorway, the triumphant knowledge that she loved and was loved in return swept away her inclination to tears. Even the shadow of separation could not dim the glory of the summer that lived in her heart.

CHAPTER VII

THE VEILED PROPHETESS OF DESTINY

"But is Emma really coming, Elfreda?" questioned Sara Emerson anxiously. "She wrote us that she would surely be here."

Seven eager faces reflected the anxiety in Sara's tones as she made this inquiry. The first day of the Semper Fidelis week of reunion was well on its way toward sunset. Of the original members, six had descended upon the Briggs' spacious cottage to keep Elfreda company. With them had come Kathleen West and Patience Eliot, the guests of honor. Five members were still among the missing. Marian Cummings, Gertrude Wells, Elsie Wilton and Ruth Denton had been unable to grace the occasion with their presence. Ruth's inability to attend lay in the fact that she was with her father in Nevada. This had been a great cross to her chum, Arline Thayer. The others had also mourned the distance that separated her from them. But even the absence of these four paled almost into insignificance beside the disappointing knowledge that the fifth missing member, jovial Emma Dean, had not yet appeared.

"She will be here," announced Elfreda positively. "I know she will. Don't worry about it. She will no doubt come to the surface when you least expect it. She wouldn't miss the reunion for a good deal."

"But she'll miss having dinner on the lawn this evening and seeing that wonderful gypsy fortune teller you have hunted up for the occasion," was Julia Emerson's regretful cry. "Where did you find her, Elfreda? Can she really tell fortunes?"

"She can," Elfreda asserted with solemn positiveness. "Wait and see. Where I found her is a secret for to-night. Perhaps if you are good, I'll tell you all about her to-morrow."

"But to-morrow never comes," reminded Patience Eliot. "You'd better tell us now."

"Can't do it." Elfreda beamed mysteriously on the Emerson twins. "Curb your curiosity, twins. Wait patiently and the future shall unfold itself to you as an open book. I wouldn't make a bad fortune teller myself," she added humorously. "That's the way they usually talk."

"I am so disappointed at not seeing Emma here, too," sighed Grace Harlowe. "It seems ages since we said good-bye to each other at Overton. You don't suppose anything has happened to her, do you, Elfreda?"

"Of course not. Take my word for it, she'll be here before we are a day older. There, that finishes the decorations." Elfreda triumphantly fastened into place the last of a quantity of Chinese lanterns that she and her friends had been stringing about the grounds, viewing the work with a sigh of satisfaction. "These won't give much light, but they'll look pretty. The electric light will have to do the real illuminating act. The table looks sweet, doesn't it?"

Several voices sent up laudatory affirmations. Though the Sempers had arrived only that morning they had entered heart and soul into Elfreda's plan for a dinner on the lawn that evening, with the added treat of communing with a real fortune-teller afterward. In order to give the mysterious sooth-sayer a proper setting, a veritable grotto had been arranged for her inside a small summer house at one end of the lawn, on which the light would shine only faintly, thereby according her the eerie environment so necessary to one whose business it is to foretell the future.

Luncheon over, the Sempers had wandered in and out of one another's rooms, exchanging confidences and reminiscences, while a wholesale unpacking of their effects went on. Later Elfreda had marshalled them to the lawn, where their tongues continued to wag busily as they strung the many-colored lanterns on every available bush, or between such trees as could be easily put into use.

"We'd better be thinking about getting dressed for the evening," reminded Miriam Nesbit, consulting her wrist watch. "It is after six o'clock."

"I hope it gets dark early," commented Elfreda, with a reflective squint at the sky. "It will be more fun to have dinner then. Still I don't care to let the august Sempers starve while we are waiting for night to come."

"Oh, have dinner late," chorused several voices. "It will be ever so much more fun."

"I think so, too," nodded Grace. "We'll be good and hungry then and enjoy it even better for the waiting."

"You hear the counsel of honorable Semper Harlowe," stated Elfreda automatically. "Those in favor please respond in the usual manner by saying 'aye.' Contrary 'no.' I am delighted to find you of one mind," she added, with a beaming smile, as no dissenting voice arose. "You shall be amply rewarded for such noble self-sacrifice."

"Elfreda has something special on her mind," remarked Miriam Nesbit to Anne, as they strolled toward the house to don evening gowns. "She's planning some sort of ridiculous surprise. I can see it in her eye. I wonder—" Miriam stopped short and laughed.

"What?" asked Anne quickly. "I hadn't noticed anything specially mysterious in her manner. She always did love to be mystifying."

"I won't say what I think is going to happen. If it happens, though, I'll tell you if I guessed right." Miriam continued to smile to herself. Encountering Elfreda on the veranda, her black eyes flashed the stout girl a mischievous message which the latter immediately caught.

"I can see that you know a few things," challenged Elfreda, drawing her aside. "On your honor as my benefactor and roommate, keep them to yourself," she charged, just above a whisper.

"I am a safe receptacle for dark secrets," Miriam laughingly assured her in equally guarded fashion.

"I'm afraid I made a serious mistake in rooming with you so long. You know altogether too much about me," retorted Elfreda waggishly. "I might have known you'd guess. Never mind. Some others won't."

Owing to the fact that the sun had obligingly finished his daily pilgrimage behind a flock of gray clouds that banked themselves in the west, a fairly early twilight descended. A timid new moon, that was scheduled in the almanac to rise early, also covered itself with glory by not appearing at all, thereby signally helping along Elfreda's cause. When at eight o'clock the nine representatives of Semper Fidelis seated themselves at the tastefully decorated festal board, which occupied a position of central importance on the grassy lawn, they had no reason to complain of too much natural light. Through the dense summer darkness that had now closed in about them, softly-glowing lanterns winked their many-colored eyes. The main illumination, however, was due to two good-sized electric lights, each suspended from its own particular post at opposite sides of the grounds. These Elfreda had thoughtfully swathed in thin flowered silk, which modifying their glare, gave them the same Oriental effect as that of the lanterns.

The nine young women made a pretty picture as they gathered about the table, the delicate hues of their evening frocks lending additional beauty to the scene. From out each young face shone the joy of reunion. Whatever the future might ordain for them in the way of trials, for one week at

least they had laid strong hold on happiness.

Having nobly postponed dinner for purely artistic reasons, they were now decidedly hungry. They, therefore, devoted themselves whole-heartedly to the substantial meal, comprising several delectable courses which were deftly served to them by two maids who had long been fixtures in the Briggs' household, and whose smiling faces indicated their pleasure in ministering to Elfreda's guests. It was a signally merry repast, eaten to an accompaniment of gay badinage and rippling laughter. Their college days now but a memory, it partook of the nature of a rollicking spread, rather than of that of a formal dinner party, and they reveled in thus being able to call forth once more a fleeting repetition of their former jollifications.

"You are a truly hospitable lawyeress, J. Elfreda," lauded Kathleen West, as, dessert removed, they lingered at the table over their coffee, served in quaint Japanese cups that were the pride of J. Elfreda's heart. "I can see that you haven't lost the will to garner things Japanese. These cups are exquisite."

"I am inordinately proud of them," returned Elfreda, looking gratified. "Laura Atkins' father presented me with a real Japanese tea-set that he bought especially for me the last time he was in Japan. They are old enough to have a history, too. I couldn't resist parading them to-night in honor of the Sempers."

"Tell us about them, Elfreda," begged Patience Eliot. "I love to hear——"

Patience never finished stating what she loved to hear. A sharp little exclamation of "Look!" from Arline Thayer set all eyes gazing in the direction of her indexing finger. Out of the darkness and into the swaying gleam of the lanterns a black-robed figure, bent double with the weight of years, hobbled its weird way toward the diners. From a voluminous sable sleeve, a long thin hand projected itself, the wiry fingers clutching a tall staff. The shifting glow of the lanterns played fantastically upon the apparition's veiled head as, step by step, it drew slowly nearer. An audible sigh of amazement, mingled with dread of the unknown, swept the little company. Added to the unexpected materialization of the seeress was the surprise of her costume. Fancy had pictured her to them as the usual gypsy, garbed in a rainbow of lively colors. This sinister vision, the cast of whose features a long black veil entirely concealed, seemed to be a creation of the very darkness itself. If pure uncanniness indicated occult power, then this veiled prophetess of destiny must surely be an adept in her art.

CHAPTER VIII

UNVEILING THE PROPHETESS

"'Tis the Veiled Prophetess of Destiny," declaimed Elfreda with dramatic intensity. "Excuse me, girls. I must conduct her to her grotto. If she is not received with respectful ceremony, she is likely to hobble off to other fields and leave us in the lurch. After all the pains I've taken to insure her presence, I should hate to disappoint you at the last minute."

"Where on earth did J. Elfreda manage to find her?" questioned Julia Emerson. Distinct awe pervaded her tones.

Their gaze fixed upon the distinguished seeress, whom Elfreda was solicitously piloting across the lawn to the grotto, no one answered Julia's question. In fact, only one of their number was prepared to reply to the query. Having taken the vow of silence, Miriam Nesbit's tranquilly-composed features offered no sign of the significant knowledge that lay behind them.

"Who will be the first to consult Amarna, the Seeress of the Seven Veils?" intoned the now-returning Elfreda in solemn, sing-song accents. Very practically she added: "I just now took the trouble to find out her name."

"Can she tell the past?" quizzed Sara Emerson skeptically.

"She can. To Amarna the past is a freshly written page. From her occult vision nothing lies hidden. Let me lead you to her." Elfreda crooked an inviting arm.

With a joyful giggle Sara rose. Accepting the proffered guidance to the seat of the all-wise Amarna, she proceeded to hustle her amiable conductor over the grass toward the grotto at a most indecorous rate of speed, born of her ardent determination to test the mettle of the Seeress of the Seven Veils.

"Go ahead." Releasing Sara's arm, Elfreda gave her a gentle shove toward the grotto and retired into a discreet patch of darkness to chuckle unobserved.

"Stand where you are. I am Amarna," piped a thin, reedy voice. Sara obediently came to a halt in the opening to the grotto and faced a black-draped dais on which the illustrious prophetess reposed. In the chastened yellow glow, cast by an enormous lantern hung directly over where she now paused, Sara was plainly visible to the uncanny figure on its perch. On the contrary, as Amarna sat well in the shadow, her face still hidden behind her veil, she greatly resembled a huge black blot. "You are not the only child in your father's house," continued the high voice.

"You have a sister who is your very counterpart. Both saw the light on the same day, March the seventh."

The seeress went on with a detailed narration of various past events in Sara's life which caused her eyes to grow round with wonder. The subsequent prediction of a most remarkable future, in which fate had apparently decreed that she should never marry but end her days as a successful conductor of an art needle-work emporium, sent her scurrying back to her friends divided between wonder of the mysterious being's power to depict the past and disgust at the prospect of such a hum-drum future.

"Do let me interview her next," pleaded Julia Emerson. "But first I shall run up to my room and get my scarf. If Amarna can swathe her distinguished features, so can I. Then she won't know I'm a twin. I must say she seems better at reading the past than predicting the future. I don't see how she could tell a single thing about you, Sara, when you just stood still there. Fortune-tellers generally ask to look at one's palm." Having delivered herself of this wise opinion, Julia flitted off to the house to secure the disguising scarf.

"I defy you to pick me out as a twin," was her merry challenge, when returning to the group on the lawn she wound her long chiffon scarf twice about her head. "Thank goodness, Sarah and I never dress alike. You'll have to lead me, J. Elfreda Briggs. I can see, of course; but rather dimly."

Elfreda again performed the kindly office of conductor, leaving Julia in precisely the same spot where Sara had lately stood.

"The eyes of Amarna cannot be deceived," calmly reproved the black shape on the dais. "They see behind the flimsy veil and deep into your thoughts. Your face is as the face of her who so lately sought me. The bond of sisterhood stretches between you. That which is invisible to the naked eye is visible to me. The road of the past winds clear and white before me. Now I perceive that you——"

The result of Amarna's mystic meanderings down the road of the past were never revealed. Tardily gifted with a most remarkable power of second sight, Julia suddenly swooped down upon the weird Seeress of the Seven Veils, emitting a gleeful shout. "You villain!" she chuckled, as she caught the unfortunate sooth-sayer by the shoulders and administered a playful shaking. Still firmly clutching her victim, she raised her voice in a clear call of, "Girls, come here this instant!"

Having heard Julia's first wild shout, an investigating committee of curious girls was already bearing down upon the grotto.

"Here's your Seeress!" laughed Julia. With a triumphant sweep of the arm, she pulled aside the swathing black veil, to disclose the mirthful features of Emma Dean, minus her glasses.

"Emma Dean!" went up the lusty cry from at least six surprised Sempers. Elfreda and Miriam, however, had guessed the import of Julia's shrill summons before running to the scene with the others.

"You ridiculous fraud!" exclaimed Sara Emerson, hugging Emma with bearish enthusiasm. "No wonder you knew so much about my past and so little of my future. And I never even suspected you."

"I'm next," declared Grace as she wrapped fond arms about the recently age-bent figure which had miraculously recovered youth within a space of three minutes. Emma was lovingly embraced by each girl in turn amid much voluble greeting and accompanying laughter.

"The way of the seeress is hard," she commented humorously as she finished the removal of her veil, which the astute Julia had begun. "No more gloomy, ghostly grottos for Emily Elizabeth. Let the past and the future take care care of itself. Hurrah for the glorious present! I hope you giddy, gorgeous creatures can appreciate my noble, self-sacrificing spirit. While you have been engaged in wearing your costliest raiment and eating up a delectable dinner, I've been obliged to lurk like a criminal in J. Elfreda's room, attired in somber, sable weeds."

"But when did you arrive, Emma?" asked Arline. "Of course we know now that you and Elfreda perpetrated this dark but delightful plot. How you managed to slip into the cottage without any of us seeing you is a greater mystery than the Seeress of the Seven Veils could ever hope to be."

"Oh, it was all planned beforehand," explained Emma cheerfully. "While you loyal Sempers were out on the lawn this afternoon, stringing lanterns, I was shut up in a third-story room peering owlshly down at you through the shutters. I arrived here this morning, about an hour before the rest of you. Kind and hospitable hostess that she seems to be, I grieve to relate that I had hardly paid my respects to Mrs. Briggs when J. Elfreda shut me up in that same third-story chamber with my breakfast and left me to pine while she went gayly gallivanting down to the train to meet you. When I have a little time I shall write a book and entitle it, 'Locked Up for the Day; or All in the Name of Friendship.'"

Emma beamed languishingly upon her listeners in order better to impress them with her unflinching loyalty to their interests. "In order to clear my jailer of any unjust aspersions which unkind persons may cast upon her, I might also add that she brought me some luncheon. As for my dinner, I had finished it before you began yours. So you see, she at least kept me in a well-nourished condition."

"Now we can be perfectly happy!" exulted Grace. "You are the last touch needed to complete the reunion."

"I am always a blessing," returned Emma modestly. "To-night I happened to be one in disguise. But I yearn to cast aside my sable robes of prophesy and emerge from my room in gala garments. Lead me to my trunk, J. Elfreda. The night is yet young and I'm anxious to make the most of it."

"I never once thought of Emma Dean in connection with Elfreda's fortune-teller," confessed Kathleen West ruefully. "I am afraid I'm losing my nose for news."

"Neither did I," admitted Anne. "But you guessed it, didn't you, Miriam?" Recalling the latter's inspiration of that afternoon, Anne turned to her sister-in-law.

"Yes. It flashed across me all of a sudden. You know Elfreda said Emma might descend upon us when we least expected her. That's what set me to thinking."

"I ought to have guessed," mourned Sara Emerson. "All the glory of the discovery goes to my twin sister. How did you find her out, Julia?"

"It was what she said. You know how funny Emma is. When we were at Overton she was forever saying 'Now I perceive.' The minute I heard it to-night I began to perceive, too."

When presently Emma joined her friends on the lawn, all traces of the fabled Seeress of the Seven Veils had vanished. In a simple white evening frock, eye-glasses firmly astride her nose, she was her usual jolly self. Although Grace Harlowe was undoubtedly the best-loved member of *Semper Fidelis*, Emma held an individual place in their hearts. Wherever she walked, fun and laughter followed at her heels. Grace was their inspiration to noble deeds; Emma their spirit of good cheer. One and all they gathered about her and marshalled her to the veranda where a hilarious hour ensued, followed by a concerted invasion on the living-room, where they proceeded to entertain Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, who had tactfully declined to intrude upon the dinner party, with an evening of the old, familiar stunts with which they had so often lightened their student days at Overton College.

It was well after midnight when, by common consent, the will to retire for the night claimed them. Knowing the deep regard that existed between Grace and Emma, Elfreda had arranged matters so that they might room together. Although Anne was Grace's oldest friend, she had cheerfully resigned her claim on Grace to Emma for the week.

"Well, Gracious, how is everything?" were Emma's first words when at last they had shut themselves in their room for the night. "I can't begin to tell you how dreadfully I've missed you. It gives me the blues every time I think of Overton next year without you. But I know you are happy, and that's at least one consolation."

"It's a mutual miss, Emma," assured Grace. "I have thought of you a great deal and wished you were with me at home. Aside from not being able to have my dearest friends with me all the time, my happiness has been so complete this summer that I feel as though I ought to walk very softly, for fear of losing some part of it."

"I understand. It's always so. One wonders if it's even wise to mention it for fear of breaking the spell," mused Emma. "I suppose the best way to do is to plod steadily along and not think much about anything but the day's events. By the way, are you very sleepy?"

Grace shook her head. "Not a bit. On the contrary, I'm wide awake."

"Then let's doff our festival garb, clothe our magnificent selves in kimonos and have a talking-bee," proposed Emma joyfully. "I'll give you a faithful account of affairs in darkest Deanery, if you will agree to furnish me with an equally detailed account of Harloweville doings. Is it a go?"

"It is," acceded Grace with equal heartiness.

A little later, seated Turk fashion on Grace's bed, the two tried comrades indulged in one of the protracted talks that had invariably ended their day's work when together at Harlowe House. It was an extremely confidential session, yet there was one bit of information which Grace could not find it in her heart to divulge. Though it had been over a week since she had said good-bye to Tom Gray, aside from a brief letter written to her on the train just before his arrival at a little town some miles from the lumber camp, she had received no further communication from him. Within herself she argued that she had really no cause for alarm. No doubt Tom had been too busy to write. Perhaps he had written her, but, due to the isolation of the camp, had encountered difficulty in mailing a letter to her. She would have liked to put the situation before Emma, yet loyalty to love forbade her to speak of it even to this trusted friend.

CHAPTER IX

THE MEANING OF SEMPER FIDELIS

Father Time has an unfortunate habit of scudding along at a tremendously rapid pace over the delightful roads of life. It is only when the ways are rough and stony that he is prone to lag and

linger. To the reunionists the prospect of a week spent together had offered limitless possibilities. Once that coveted period of time had become theirs, it proceeded to vanish in an alarming fashion. On Monday they had congratulated themselves and one another that six glorious days were still theirs. By Wednesday they had begun to mourn that only four were left them.

Life at the Briggs' cottage offered a ceaseless succession of wholesome pleasures. Early morning invariably found the reunionists strengthening their acquaintance with the ocean. Breakfast over, a bathing suit procession to the nearby beach became the usual order of things. They spent long sunny hours playing about in the surf, or stretched at ease on the white sand, exchanging an apparently exhaustless flow of light-hearted conversation relating to almost everything under the sun. Imbued with tireless energy, their afternoons brought them fresh entertainment in the way of long automobile rides to various points of interest, followed by jolly little teas or dinners along the way. The annual excursion to Picnic Hollow, which claimed the greater part of a whole day, was also a memorable occasion. Evening, however, usually overtook them at the cottage. By common consent they tabooed the more formal social entertainment which the various hostelries at Wildwood offered. Only on one occasion did they diverge from their clannish programme in order to attend an informal hop given by Elfreda's friend, Madge Morton, at her father's cottage.

During their stay at the Briggs' cottage the previous summer, they had been given the opportunity of meeting this charming young girl. Shortly after their arrival she had come over from the Morton cottage to pay them a friendly call. Greatly attracted to her, on first meeting they had greeted her warmly and invited her to share their good times.

Madge and Grace had a bond in common in that while Grace was preparing to be married to Tom Gray, Madge was trying to decide whether or not she should pledge herself to marry Tom Curtis. Before the week ended she had confided her problem to Grace and the two girls discussed the subject long and earnestly. Yet despite such friendly counsel as Grace felt privileged to give, Madge could come to no definite decision.

Though five days of smiling sunshine had added immeasurably to the welfare of the devoted company, Saturday morning dawned gray and threatening. Before breakfast was over the ominous prediction of storm was fulfilled. Amid reverberating peals of thunder, heavy raindrops began to fall. They were merely the prelude to a furious downpour which descended in silvery sheets, and fairly overflowed the discouraged landscape. A strong wind rose, lashing the leaden expanse of sea into a white-capped fury quite foreign to its hitherto deceitfully dimpled aspect.

"It's a horrible day," conceded Elfreda Briggs gloomily. "We can't do any of the things we've planned. No bathing, no motor trip, either, unless this deluge stops, which doesn't seem likely."

"Oh, it may clear up," comforted Emma Dean. "I've seen worse days than this suddenly brace up and smile. Let's possess our souls in patience. Incidental to the process we might restore the shattered faith of some of our deluded correspondents. During the past six days it has pained me to observe the postman arrive, full-handed, to turn away, alas, empty-handed. I ask you as man to man—why this thushness? Now that we are about to depart, it might be well to apprise our neglected families of the fact."

"Emma, you are a noble woman," declared Miriam with deep conviction. "I may not have noticed it before, but better late than never. I move that we organize a writing school in the living-room for the purpose of squaring ourselves with our too-trusting families and friends."

"What's the use in writing home now?" demanded Julia Emerson. "Sara and I would get there almost as soon as our letters. We have to go to-morrow, you know."

"I know." Emma held her handkerchief ostentatiously to her eyes. "Never mind. You may write to *me*. You know I have always admired your nice vertical handwriting. It takes me back to my first-reader days."

"Sorry I can't oblige you," giggled Julia, "but I'm not in the mood for letter writing. I'm going to pack my trunk and send it to the station before Sara has a chance to stuff half of her belongings into it."

"Such sisterly devotion," murmured Emma.

"Oh, I don't mind," was Sara's cheerful comment. "I've already packed my sweater and two dresses in Julia's trunk. You'd better leave them there, Julia, I haven't an inch of room left in my trunk to squeeze them into. It is already jammed so full that you'll have to sit on the lid when I get ready to lock it."

"Stung!" was Julia's inelegant comment. "This is what comes of being a twin. I think I'd better hurry and gobble up the small trunk space that is left me; otherwise I may have to carry a large part of my wardrobe home in a bundle." Dread of such a contingency sent her fleeing up the stairs in hot pursuit of her own welfare, oblivious to the pleasantries which Emma and Sara called after her as she ran.

Seated around the long library table in the living-room, the correspondence party made an attractive picture as, with earnest faces, they bent themselves to the arduous task of letter-writing. With the exception of Grace, all present were soon hard at work. One hand resting lightly on a sheet of the monogrammed paper which Elfreda had provided in profusion, with her other hand Grace nervously gripped her fountain pen. Should she or should she not write to Tom? Although she owed the usual amount of letters to various correspondents, she now thought only

of writing to the man for whose strange silence she could not account. It was Tom's place to write her. She had answered his first letter. Yet she could not believe that carelessness was responsible for his silence. Something must have happened to him. But what? She knitted her brows in an agony of indecision, then giving her pen an energetic shake that betokened definite purpose, she began:

"DEAR TOM:

"It is now over a week since last I heard from you. What——"

The loud ring of the doorbell caused her to break off abruptly the sentence she had begun. With that curious intuition which sometimes manifests itself unbidden, she was seized with the startled conviction that the bell had conveyed the news of an arrival important to herself. Listening with an anxiety she could not yet understand, she heard a man's deep tones raised in inquiry. Then came the lighter voice of the maid who had answered the door. Then——

"Miss Harlowe," the maid had entered the living-room and addressed her, "there's a special delivery letter come for you. Will you please sign for it?"

"Thank you, Alice." Grace sprang to her feet and hurried into the hall. The messenger handed her a letter and shoved his book toward her, indicating the place for her signature. Hastily signing and returning the book, Grace dismissed the man, and sank to the oak settee in the hall, her heart thumping wildly. She had already recognized the handwriting on the envelope, not as Tom's familiar flowing hand, but as the spidery, wavering script of Mrs. Gray. With trembling fingers she tore open the envelope and read:

"DEAR GRACE:

"Have you heard from Tom? I am dreadfully worried. I have only received the one letter from him of which you already know. It is not in the least like him to thus put off writing me. He knew before he went that I should be uneasy about him, and promised faithfully to write me every other day. For the sake of your anxious and bewildered Fairy Godmother, will you come to me as soon as possible, if you have not heard from him? If so, then telegraph me to that effect and I shall rest easier. I have put off writing you from day to day, in the hope that I might receive news of my boy, and also because I could not bear to spoil your pleasure. But as it is now Friday and you will receive this on Saturday, I know that if you have received no word from him, you will not mind coming home a day earlier than you had planned. Once we are together again, we can decide on some method of action. Thus far I have done nothing. Believe me, my dear, only my great anxiety compels me to ask you to make this sacrifice.

"Yours lovingly,

"ROSE GRAY."

The letter sliding from her nerveless fingers, Grace saw her surroundings through a swirling mist. For a moment or two she yielded to the terror that clutched at her heart. Her sturdy nature reasserting itself, she rose, recovered the letter and walked slowly into the living-room.

"Girls," she said, her voice a trifle unsteady, "I must leave you at once. I—Mrs. Gray needs me and has sent for me. I am sorry I can't tell you the reason. I am sure you will understand that I am giving you as much of my confidence as I can." She paused, her gray eyes looking utter affection on the startled group about the table. "I want you to promise to finish the reunion just as happily as though I were with you. Later, perhaps I can tell you what I mayn't tell you now. It is not yet eleven o'clock, so I am sure I can catch the noon express."

Grace's remarkable announcement drove the business of letter-writing to the winds. A bevy of sympathetic girls gathered about her, sending up a concerted lament. Yet none ventured to inquire into the cause of her departure, or to ask her to reconsider her decision to depart at once. Loyal to the core, her wish was their law. Each eagerly offered her services in behalf of the love they bore her. Torn though she was by the shock of this new sorrow, Grace could not help thinking as she stood there, how gloriously worthy were these staunch comrades to bear the name *Semper Fidelis*.

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW DEEPENS

"Oh, Fairy Godmother, what does it mean?" The tall, slender girl, who had been obsequiously ushered into Mrs. Gray's stately, old-fashioned house on Chapel Hill, darted down the hall and straight into a pair of arms outstretched to receive her.

"I—don't—know—my dear. I wish I—" Mrs. Gray's broken utterance ended in a sob, as she laid her silvery head on Grace's breast. Until that moment she had remained calm. The sight of one who was equally enveloped in the shadow that had dropped down upon her, proved too much for

her. Clinging to Grace, she sobbed heart-brokenly.

"There, there, dear Fairy Godmother. You mustn't cry so!" Grace's own voice was husky with emotion. "You have me with you now to comfort you. Cheer up. I am sure that everything will turn out all right. It's—dreadful—of course—not—to hear from Tom," Grace faltered briefly, "but I—we must keep thinking he is safe and well and that we may receive a letter from him at any minute. I didn't wait to go home. I knew you needed me, so I came straight from the train here. Mother doesn't even know yet that I am in town. Come into the library and sit down in your own favorite chair." Bravely stifling her own heavy anxiety, Grace wrapped an affectionate arm about the dainty little old lady and drew her into the long room which had been the scene of so many of their confidential talks.

"There you are!" she nodded, striving to smile. "Just a moment until I get rid of my hat and coat and I'll curl up on the floor at your feet. Then we can talk things over and find out what's to be done."

"You are a dear good child," quavered Mrs. Gray. Under the white glow of the electric lamp, her Dresden-shepherdess face looked pinched and wan. Fear and uncertainty had robbed her small features of that look of perennial youth which so individualized her. "It was thoughtful in you to telegraph me that you were coming. I knew then that you hadn't heard from Tom, but I knew, too, that you would soon be here."

"I hated to telegraph you, knowing you'd worry even more. Still it seemed best." Now ensconced at Mrs. Gray's feet, Grace possessed herself of the older woman's hand. "Please feel that whatever you may ask of me, I will cheerfully try to perform it."

"I don't know which way to turn," was the distracted answer. "I had so hoped that you would be able to tell me that Tom was safe in camp. It's a rather delicate matter, my child. Coming as it does so near your wedding day, it is very necessary that Tom should be located at once. I've already written Mr. Mackenzie about Tom, but as yet he has not answered my letter. Something dreadful has happened to my poor boy. I feel it."

Grace privately agreed with her, yet she would not say so. She knew as well as did Mrs. Gray that only actual mishap would have caused Tom to fail in his duty to his aunt and to herself. "I think we had better telegraph Mr. Mackenzie," she suggested, her voice ringing with new-born purpose. "Then—if he knows nothing of Tom's whereabouts we had better organize a search. First of all we must know if he reached the camp. If not—" Grace stopped, overmastered for an instant by a silent spasm of dread that cut lines of pain in her fine face.

"I don't like to send a telegram from Oakdale," demurred Mrs. Gray. "These small town operators are not always to be trusted. If the story were to creep about that Tom Gray had disappeared, so shortly before his wedding day, it would be very painful for both you and me. I could, of course, consult a private investigator in New York, yet I shrink from doing so until I know definitely that Tom has disappeared. It is such an intimate, personal matter. I don't fancy turning it over even to my lawyer. You can understand that."

"Yes." Grace had grown very pale at the possibility of the tender romance of her Golden Summer being held up even to the little world of Oakdale as a subject for gossip and possibly harsh criticism. Seized with a blessed thought she said: "There is one person at least whom I think we ought to take into our confidence. That person is David Nesbit. He and Tom have always been like brothers. He will help us. I'll write him now, before I go home, and ask *him* to telegraph Mr. Mackenzie. A telegram sent from New York will never give cause for gossip here."

Rising to seek her traveling bag which she had deposited in the hall, she hastily rummaged in it for her fountain pen. The sight of Mrs. Gray's pitiful face had completely aroused her to the need for prompt action. Re-entering the library she approached the massive writing table with the quick assured step, so characteristic of the brave spirit with which she had always faced adversity. From a drawer of the table she selected note paper and an envelope to match and seating herself, prepared to plunge intrepidly into the writing of the most difficult letter she had ever been called upon to pen.

"Dear David:" she wrote, then groped about in her mind for the words which would best convey to Tom's chum the sorry message she was fated to deliver. It was not a long letter, yet she knew that the recipient would read between the lines and fully comprehend the serious situation which confronted herself and Mrs. Gray. When she had finished writing it and signed her name, she next devoted her attention to the wording of a telegram to Mr. Mackenzie, setting it down on a separate sheet of paper.

"Please read them, Fairy Godmother," she requested, tendering the fruits of her painful effort to Mrs. Gray.

"You are right in believing David to be the best possible confidant," sighed the old lady as she returned the letter and telegraphic message to Grace. "We can rely on him absolutely."

"I must go now. It is after nine o'clock. I will hurry to the nearest drug store for a special delivery stamp and mail the letter at once. I wish I might stay with you longer, but I feel as though I ought to go home. You don't mind if I tell Mother and Father? It is within their right to know."

"Of course it is," readily agreed Mrs. Gray. "I only deferred telling them until I had talked with you, Grace. I can't begin to tell you how much having you here has comforted me. I feel a trifle

more cheerful already. Perhaps, after all, we have been running out to meet calamity. To-morrow may bring us word that Tom is safe and well." Rising from her chair, Mrs. Gray embraced Grace tenderly.

"I hope so." Forcing herself to smile encouragingly down at the wan little figure beside her, Grace bent and kissed the old lady's cheek. For a moment the two clung together, their mutual devotion deepened by their common sorrow. Gently disengaging herself from Mrs. Gray's arms, Grace donned her hat and coat and, with a last fond word of cheer, soberly sought the door and stepped out into the starlit night.

Alone with her sorrow, her late attempt at cheerfulness fell away from her like a cloak. Deep dejection settled down upon her as she walked down Chapel Hill toward home. The very beauty of the fragrant, starry night hurt her. She wondered if those some far-off stars, twinkling so remotely aloft, held the knowledge of Tom Gray for which she mournfully yearned. Why had this dreadful uncertainty intruded itself into the very heart of her Golden Summer? Had she boasted of her happiness only to see it snatched rudely from her life? Suppose Tom were never to return? Suppose even the knowledge of his fate were to be denied her? Over and over again she had read in the newspapers of the strange disappearances of persons, the mystery of which defied solution. The horror of her gloomy apprehensions sent a chill to her heart that caused it for an instant to stand still, or so it seemed to her.

"I mustn't think of such frightful things," she breathed. "Tom is all right. I must make myself believe it. Now is the time to be brave; to go on steadily without faltering. Tom will come back to me. Wherever he is or whatever has happened to him, he will come back. I know it."

CHAPTER XI

POSTPONING HAPPINESS

But Tom Gray did not come back. Neither by word nor sign did those who feverishly awaited news of him receive even the faintest intimation of his whereabouts. Added to the heavy strain that Mrs. Gray and Grace were laboring under, they were destined to grapple with the question: Why had David Nesbit not responded to their plea for assistance? After three weary days of waiting, Grace wrote to Miriam Nesbit asking if David were in New York City. Miriam's prompt reply stated that business had called David to Chicago. She expected that he would return to New York that very day. The information brought the comforting assurance that once the letter had come into his possession David would not fail them.

On the evening following the receipt of Miriam's letter, an anxious-eyed young man swung off the eight o'clock train into Oakdale, and hailing a taxicab was whirled away from the station toward the Harlowe's home.

"David!" was all Grace could find words for, when, entering the living-room, her girlhood friend sprang forward to meet her with outstretched hand of sympathy.

"I'm more sorry than I can say, Grace," David burst forth, as, motioning him to a chair, Grace sat down opposite him. "I was delayed in Chicago and didn't reach New York until this morning. My mail wasn't forwarded to me, so I didn't get your letter until then. I sent your telegram to Mr. Mackenzie, then caught the first train for Oakdale. Did you get my wire?"

"Yes. I've been anxiously watching for you. It's dreadful—David." Grace's voice trailed away into a stifled sob. Brave as she had tried to be, David's belated presence was almost too much for her composure.

"I should say it was." David looked utter concern over the sad errand that had brought him to Grace. "Tell me everything, Grace. I must know the facts if I am to be of real service to you."

Fighting for self-control, Grace narrated briefly the little she knew concerning Tom's strange disappearance. "Mrs. Gray had written Mr. Mackenzie about Tom before I wrote you. I explained to you in my letter that he was ill. That was Tom's reason for going away up there to that dreadful camp. Mr. Mackenzie writes that Tom never arrived. He was very much upset over it as he had been depending upon Tom to look after things until he was well again. Poor Aunt Rose is nearly distracted. She has put the matter in the hands of a private investigator. He hasn't had time to reach the camp yet so, of course, we haven't heard from him. Fairy Godmother has forbidden him to telegraph her at Oakdale. She is afraid some one may find out about Tom and gossip." The sickness of hope deferred lay in Grace's eyes as she finished speaking.

"I'm going up to that camp, Grace," announced David with strong determination. "I'll catch the next train for New York and arrange my business to-morrow morning. By afternoon I'll be on the way to Tom. If he is to be found, I shall find him. Who is the man Mrs. Gray has engaged to clear up the mystery?"

Grace named a man whose professional standing in his particular field ranked high.

"A very clever man," commented David. "He ought to do something toward straightening out this snarl."

"We can only hope that he will," was Grace's sad response. "Excuse me, David, until I call Mother. She is so anxious to see you. Then we had better go to Aunt Rose. You will find her greatly changed. This trouble has aged her. She looks 'years old,' rather than 'years young.' That wonderful spirit of youth has deserted her. It could hardly be otherwise."

"Poor little Fairy Godmother!" sympathized David. "It's a shame that trouble like this had to come when all three of you were so happy. I can't make myself believe that it is good old Tom who's among the missing. A sturdy, fearless fellow like him can usually be trusted to take care of himself anywhere. Why, he's tramped all over this country and never met with any accident that I can remember. You and I know that something serious has happened this time, though. Tom would never neglect those he cares for, even in the most trifling matters."

"I am sure of that. Still it's good to hear you say what I know to be true. Nothing could shake my faith in Tom. It is absolute." Grace spoke with the frank simplicity of perfect love and trust.

During the short walk that lay between the Harlowe's residence and that of Mrs. Gray, David cast more than one covert but admiring glance at the tall, slender girl at his side who bore her difficulties with such signal sweetness and courage. "What a splendid girl Grace is," was his thought. Looking back on their earlier days of comradeship, he recalled gratefully what a power for good she had always been. She had valiantly steered Anne through the breakers that more than once had threatened engulfment. Through Grace, his own sister, Miriam had been shown the way to sincerity and well-doing. Mabel Allison, Ruth Denton, Eleanor Savelli and countless other girls owed the greatest joys that had come to them to this high-principled, impulsive, kindly girl who had lavishly scattered the flowers of generosity and good-will along the pathway of life. Now, at last, there was something which he could do for Grace. David vowed within himself to leave no stone unturned which might be the means of restoring to her the happiness which she so richly merited.

The visit to Mrs. Gray proved a severe trial to both young people. Her usual optimistic viewpoint had long since deserted her, leaving her a wan little ghost of the vivacious Fairy Godmother who had once entered so merrily into the doings of her Christmas children. A fixed air of melancholy had dropped down on her which even David's hearty assurances that Tom would soon be found failed to lift.

"If any one can find Tom it will be you, David," was the nearest approach toward hopefulness which she could muster.

"I'll find him, never fear," predicted David with an air of cheerful certainty that brought faint smiles to both women's somber faces. "I must leave you soon, though, in order to make that late train for New York. Before I go, I'll devise a secret code so that I can telegraph you here at Oakdale if anything good comes to pass."

Grace supplying him with pencil and paper, David jotted down several sentences which he was most likely to need in sending messages, then substituted different words to be used in place of the originals. This bit of thoughtfulness on his part was eminently cheering, and when soon afterward he took hasty leave of Grace and Mrs. Gray the latter appeared to be in a less lugubrious frame of mind.

After he had gone, Grace followed Mrs. Gray into the library, the old lady's favorite room in the big house, and, drawing a chair opposite to that of her near-aunt, began rather hesitatingly, "Now that David has left us, there are several things, dear Fairy Godmother, that I must say to you. They are mainly about—our wedding day. Only the Eight Originals and a few of the 'Sempers' know that the time was actually set for the tenth of September. They are all intimate friends, tried and true. I think it is only right that I should explain matters to them. Not one of them would break a confidence.

"If I am not married to Tom on the tenth, naturally they will wonder. It would be dreadful for me to have to say to any one of them, 'I can't explain why the wedding must be postponed.' They love me and I love them. We've always shared our joys and sorrows. It doesn't seem fair to leave them in the dark. Naturally it will hurt me a great deal to explain, but it will hurt me far more not to. I have talked with Mother and Father about it. They both feel that the decision must rest with you. It's too bad to bother you with this new perplexity, but I must know one way or the other. I can't endure the suspense."

At the beginning of Grace's earnest plea that her closest friends be put into possession of the knowledge that Tom Gray was among the missing, his aunt's delicate face showed unmistakable signs of disapproval. Swept along by the girl's fervent earnest words, Mrs. Gray felt her brief abhorrence of the idea vanish in an overwhelming flood of admiration for the dauntless spirit in which Grace bore the torturing dread that had been thrust upon her.

"You make me feel ashamed of myself, Grace," she faltered. "While I've been nursing my own selfish grief you have been putting aside your sorrow to think of others. After all, you have more at stake than I. My life has been practically lived, while yours is only at its dawn. I have known the bitterness of losing those I loved. It should have taught me to face the future more courageously. When you spoke just now of letting others know of our trouble, it seemed for a moment as though I could never consent to it. But I have changed my mind. It would not be fair either to you or my poor boy, wherever he may be, to place you in a false position. I have only one stipulation. Wait a little longer before telling your friends of this dreadful disruption of our plans. If within the next three days we have not heard from Mr. Blaisdell, the investigator, then write to

your friends and let them know the exact circumstances."

"It breaks my heart to hear you say such things of yourself," was Grace's passionate cry. Springing to her feet she knelt before the older woman and wrapped two shielding arms about her. "You've always thought of others. I won't let you say that you are selfish, or that your life has been almost lived. You've been as brave as a lion ever since this terrible trouble came to us. You have just as much at stake as I. We must stand together, even more firmly than before, waiting and hoping that all will be well. Before Tom went away he often said that he hoped our life together would always be one long Golden Summer. I'm not going to let winter overtake me now when my Golden Summer's hardly begun. This is just a brief cloud that hides the sun. It will pass and we'll all be happy together again. Just because our plans have all gone awry is no sign that they always will. Postponing our wedding day doesn't mean saying good-bye to happiness. It's only a brief postponement of happiness, too."

CHAPTER XII

THE BETTER PART

Although Grace had so sturdily asserted her claim on happiness, nevertheless she quailed secretly before the ordeal of writing to her friends regarding the change in her plans. Long she pondered before committing the gloomy information to paper. More than one anguished tear fell from her eyes as she relentlessly pursued her difficult task. Not so very long ago she had fondly dreamed of the time when she should happily send to those she loved the summons to come to her on her wedding day. But the pile of envelopes which eventually found their way to the nearest mail-box contained news of a vastly different character.

True to her promise she had conscientiously waited for the word from Mr. Blaisdell which Mrs. Gray had anticipated. At the end of three days of suspense she had sought her Fairy Godmother only to meet with a letter from the investigator which sent hope to the winds. In it he stated that aside from the station master at the lonely little railway station, he had encountered no one who recalled seeing a young man of the description of Tom Gray. He had learned from the former that Tom had halted him to inquire the way to the camp and to ascertain if he could obtain any means of conveyance on that day. As it was then four o'clock in the afternoon and no one from the camp had met the train, the station master had warned him that a storm was coming and advised him to wait over until the following morning, offering Tom the hospitality of his own home. The young man had politely declined his offer, saying that he must reach the camp that night and would walk. He had said good-bye and swung off toward the dense growth of forest that rose behind the straggling hamlet, and nothing further had been seen or heard of him.

Further inquiry at the camp, which Mr. Blaisdell had experienced considerable difficulty in reaching, had developed the alarming news that no such person as Tom Gray had been seen in that vicinity. He had gleaned, however, that the station master's prediction of bad weather had been verified and that a particularly heavy windstorm had swept that region early in the evening of the day on which he had talked with the young man. Torrents of rain had fallen and trees had been broken down and uprooted. It was possible that Tom had lost his way and been killed by a falling tree. Blaisdell did not believe this, however, as neither a dead nor injured man had been found by the various search parties of lumber men who had been sent out to cover the surrounding territory. So far as possible the search had been conducted with the utmost secrecy. He had not divulged Tom's name. As the camp was in an out of the way place, peopled by a taciturn set of men who asked few questions, it was not likely that any news would travel farther than its limits.

The day following the receipt of this letter brought a telegraphic notification from David Nesbit to the effect that he had reached the lumber camp and was about to start on his search for his chum. With this small consolation, the patient, tortured souls who awaited news of their lost one were forced to be content.

Hard as it had been to write to her trusty comrades, it was infinitely harder for Grace to receive the messages of sympathy and love which poured in upon her. Yet on the heels of her distress came one letter which, despite the gravity of her present situation, moved Grace to half-hearted laughter. On opening an envelope addressed to herself in Arline Thayer's unmistakable script, Grace was mildly astonished to read:

"DEAR STANLEY:

"After our talk last evening I am quite certain that I could never be happy as your wife. It has shown me clearly that our aims and viewpoints are so entirely different that it would be useless even to dream of spending the remainder of our lives together. It is hard to write this, but I feel that no matter what it may cost me I must be true to myself. I am therefore returning your ring and letters by express. You may do as you think best in regard to returning the letters I have written you.

"With a sincere wish for your future happiness,

"Yours sincerely,

Tardily realizing that she had unwittingly perused a communication not intended for her eyes, Grace lost no time in writing an apologetic letter to Arline in which she enclosed the fateful missive of rejection. How Arline had come to mail it to her was a matter for speculation.

But she had only set eyes on the beginning of a drama as she was soon destined to learn. Late the next afternoon, while seated on the front veranda with her mother, she viewed with mingled emotions a taxicab which had come to a full stop before the house. Out of it stepped a small, golden-haired young woman whose smart pongee traveling coat and bulging leather bag proclaimed that she had come from afar.

"Arline Thayer!" cried Grace, running down the steps to meet the newcomer as she passed through the gateway. "Why, Daffydowndilly! This *is* a surprise! You are the last person I had dreamed of seeing." Grace caught the dainty little girl in a warm embrace.

"I know I should have telegraphed you," apologized Arline, "but—well—I didn't. I made up my mind all in an instant to come to you, and here I am. Ever since I received your letter you've been constantly in my thoughts. I replied at once. Of course you received it?"

"Let me take your luggage, Daffydowndilly." Grace evaded Arline's implied interrogation for the moment. "Come and pay your respects to Mother, then we'll go upstairs to your room and you can rest a little before dinner. You must be very tired after your long ride. Then, too, we can exchange confidences. I have something to say to you about the letter you just mentioned." Grace could not refrain from smiling a little. She suspected that Arline had made a mistake, the precise result of which was yet to be revealed.

"What is the matter, Grace?" was Arline's quick question. She had instantly detected the unusual in her friend's enigmatic smile and evasive speech.

Their progress to the veranda, where Mrs. Harlowe waited to greet the unexpected but heartily-welcome arrival, prevented Grace's reply. It was not until Arline had been ushered into one of the large, airy upper chambers which Grace took so much pleasure in reserving for the use of her frequent guests, that the former again repeated her question in tones of deepening anxiety.

"I will tell you when you have made yourself comfortable," stipulated Grace. Assisting Arline in removing her hat and coat, she applied herself assiduously to the comfort of her friend.

"You are a truly ideal hostess, Grace," was Arline's tribute as she finally settled herself in a deep willow chair. "Now I am ready to hear what you have been keeping from me."

"You asked me if I had received your letter," began Grace as she dropped into a nearby chair. "Yesterday morning I *did* receive a letter you wrote, but it was not for me. The envelope was addressed to me, but the letter—I read it before I realized that I hadn't that right—was written to Mr. Stanley Forde. I wrote you an apology, enclosed the other letter with it and mailed them to you."

"Oh!" Arline gave a horrified gasp. "How perfectly dreadful! How in the world did I happen to make such a mistake! This is awful!"

"Then you wrote to me at the same time and confused the two letters? I was afraid of that. But it doesn't matter to me if it doesn't to you." Grace tried to put on an air of kindly unconcern. Secretly it saddened her a trifle to know that a stranger had received even an inkling of her private affairs. Undoubtedly Arline's letter to herself had contained an expression of sympathy which could not fail to put Mr. Stanley Forde in possession of certain painful facts relating to her own trouble.

"But it matters a great deal!" exclaimed Arline, flushing deeply. "In that letter to you I said that I could never be thankful enough that I had had such a wonderful talk with you. I said, too, that you had made me see things in a different light and that I knew now that what I had believed was love wasn't love at all. Worse still, I said that if it had not been for you I would never have had the courage to break my engagement, but would have failed to be true to myself. Now, Stanley has that letter!" Arline made a despairing gesture. "I don't care what he thinks about *me*, but what will he think about *you*?"

Grace was not prepared to answer this pertinent question from the jilted Stanley's viewpoint. Personally she had a disagreeably clear idea of what he was quite likely to think. Yet she was too sturdily honest by nature to regret the advice she had given Arline in good faith. "I am sorry this has happened," she returned slowly, "but I am not sorry for what I said to you. I meant it. I would have said as much to Mr. Forde had an occasion arisen which demanded plain speaking."

"You are Loyalheart, through and through," came impulsively from Arline. "You would stand by your colors to the death. I couldn't blame you if you were terribly angry with me for mixing you up so miserably in my affairs. I should have been more careful, but I was dreadfully upset when I wrote those letters. You see, Stanley came to my home on the evening of the day he returned from Oregon. As you know, I had decided to have a plain talk with him. It began pleasantly enough, but before it ended we were both very angry. He declared point-blank that after we were married I would positively *have* to give up my settlement work. He said a great many hateful, sneering things about the poor people I've been trying to help. I was going to give him back his ring then, but I remembered what you advised about not being too hasty. So I told him I wouldn't

discuss the subject with him any more that evening.

"After that he was very pleasant. I suppose he thought he had won me over to his point of view. When he had gone I sat for a long time on the veranda thinking hard. Then I went upstairs to my room and wrote him, breaking our engagement. Of course I cried a little. I was so unhappy. Then I thought of you and felt like writing you about it. After I had written both letters, I read them over; first the one to him, then yours. It was after midnight and I was so tired. I suppose that is how I happened to make the mistake of putting your address on his letter and vice versa. He will be simply furious. I only hope that he doesn't write you a hateful letter. If he writes to me, I'll send the letter back unopened. You'd better do the same."

"No; I couldn't do that. It is perfectly proper for you to do so, but it would appear cowardly on my part. Let us hope he doesn't bother to write me. Does he know my surname and where I live?"

"Yes; I've told him of you a great many times. I wish now that I hadn't. I am sure he will write you. It's a shame. I came to Oakdale to comfort you and be comforted. Now I've landed both of us in a nice muddle." Arline lifted a pair of mournful blue eyes to Grace.

In the presence of impending tragedy a sudden sense of the ridiculous swept the two girls. Their eyes meeting, they began to laugh. It was the first genuine mirth that had stirred Grace Harlowe since the day on which she had left the Briggs' cottage to return to Oakdale.

"One ought not laugh over such a serious matter," apologized Arline, with a half hysterical chuckle. "But I can't help thinking how surprised you must have been to receive that letter to Stanley, and how wrathful he must be by this time."

"I'd rather laugh over it than cry," smiled Grace. "Don't worry, Daffydowndilly. I'm not afraid of any letter that Mr. Stanley Forde may choose to send me. You had better write him another letter at once, though, and explain matters. You owe him that, at least."

"I will," sighed Arline. "There's just one thing more I have to say. I shall *never, never* fall in love again. It's fatal to one's peace of mind. Now that I've fallen out of love, I feel about a hundred years younger. I'm going to be a nice, kind, spinster and found a home for poor children."

Grace smiled at this naïve announcement. She was unselfishly glad that Arline could thus lightly cast her burden from her dainty shoulders. Perhaps she, too, would have known greater content, had love not entered her heart. Yet in the same instant she put away the thought as unworthy of herself. Come what might she was intensely sure that she had chosen the better part.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INNOCENT MEDDLER

Arline Thayer had entered Grace's home life at a moment when the latter most needed the inspiring companionship of an intimate friend. Quickly recovering from her own woes, it was borne upon Arline that she must exert herself to the utmost to cheer up the girl who had never failed her. The blithesome joy of living which, formerly, Grace had seemed to radiate had entirely disappeared. Although she went about the house, feigning desperately to maintain a cheerful attitude, a subdued air of wistfulness clung to her that filled Arline with a fierce resentment against the circumstances that had risen so unexpectedly to rob Grace of her happiness. She frequently wondered how it was possible for Grace to keep up so bravely in the face of such crushing adversity. Given the same sinister conditions, Arline admitted inwardly that she could never have maintained the remarkable composure which Grace daily exhibited.

She was thinking of this when, on the afternoon of her third day's sojourn with the Harlowes, the two young women had just left Haven Home behind them, Grace having asked Arline to accompany her on one of her frequent pilgrimages to her beautiful House Behind the World. Usually it was Nora Wingate who went with her. Occasionally Mrs. Harlowe bore her daughter company.

Grace never visited Haven Home empty-handed. Always she carried some new treasure designed by herself or her friends to adorn the stately habitation in which she felt sure that some day would indeed mean Haven Home to herself and Tom. Before he had left her to make the journey that had resulted in his complete disappearance, she had promised him that the finishing labors at Haven Home should go steadily forward. Those who knew her most intimately could readily testify that she was unfalteringly keeping her word. In moments of darkest depression she wondered from whence came the strength that enabled her to go on with these visits, each in itself a separate agony. She had been plunged for a moment in one of these painful reveries when Arline asked with an inflection of wonderment, "How can you be so brave, Grace?"

"I'm not very brave," she answered, her eyes wistful. "Not so brave as I wish I were. I have to struggle continually to make myself believe that whatever happens must be for the best. I often feel bitter and resentful and wonder why this sorrow should have been visited upon me rather than on some one else. Of course, that is wrong. No one ought to wish their troubles shifted to other folks' shoulders. Thousands of persons have greater griefs than I. Take Aunt Rose, for

instance, who lost her husband and daughter so many years ago. Tom was the light of her life; her greatest pride. Think what she is suffering! We had such high hopes that David Nesbit would find Tom. Yet, thus far, he hasn't met with even a clue. Poor little Fairy Godmother says she has only one thing for which to be thankful. No one in Oakdale knows about Tom, barring a few trusted friends. She had been in constant fear lest the newspaper reporters should get hold of it. Of course it would be a severe shock to her to pick up some day a paper and read, 'Mysterious Disappearance of Tom Gray,' or 'Young Man Mysteriously Disappears on the Eve of His Wedding Day,' or some cruel scarehead of the kind. I don't quite know how I should feel about it."

"But suppose he never came back," cut in Arline, her usual tact deserting her. "Forgive me, Grace," she added penitently. "I should not have said that."

"Why not?" Only the sudden tightening of her lips betrayed that Arline's thoughtless inquiry had struck home. "I faced that long ago. If we continue to be without news of him, sooner or later his disappearance *must* become known. But Aunt Rose prefers to keep it secret as long as possible. Her constant prayer is that he will return before any such thing comes to pass. Sometimes I think it would be better if it were generally known. I hate secrecy."

During the drive to Mrs. Gray's, both girls were unusually silent. After leaving the roadster in the Gray garage, they went up to the house to spend an hour with the lonely old lady, whose pitiful efforts to be cheerfully hospitable cut them both to the heart. Promising to come again on the following day they left her, the forlorn little chatelaine of a big house, grown oppressively empty since robbed of Tom's genial presence.

As they neared Grace's home, both glimpsed in the same instant a taxicab standing in the street directly opposite to the house.

"That taxicab is from the station!" exclaimed Grace. "Hurry, Arline, it may be—" She broke off short, her heart thumping madly. She dared not voice the hope that perhaps her weary waiting was over.

Arriving on the veranda, Grace made a hasty entrance through the open hall door. Pausing in the hall, deep masculine tones, issuing from the drawing room, caused her to speed toward the sound, Arline at her heels. The voice was not Tom's, yet her first wild conjecture as she viewed the stranger seated in a chair near the door, was that he might be Mr. Blaisdell, the investigator, with news of Tom.

A faint cry of, "Stanley Forde!" from Arline sent over her a sickening wave of disappointment. As they entered, the young man rose, looking the reverse of amiable as he stepped forward, grim purpose in every feature. Ignoring Grace he addressed himself to Arline with the stiff rebuke:

"I have been waiting for you for some time."

"I did not expect you." Arline's blue eyes flashed forth her displeasure. Merely touching the hand he offered her, she said, "Mr. Forde, this is my *friend*, Grace Harlowe."

The young man acknowledged the introduction with an ironical smile in which Grace read trouble ahead for herself. She met him with a frank, kindly courtesy that betrayed nothing of her inner mind. Personally, she was not impressed in his favor.

"You will pardon my leaving you, Mr. Forde?" Mrs. Harlowe had also risen. She now addressed the young man with a distant politeness which Grace recognized as disapproval. From Arline she had learned of the broken engagement. It seemed evident that she also had not been favorably impressed with her guest's ex-fiancé.

"Certainly. Very pleased to have met you," bowed the unwelcome caller. Again Grace caught faint sarcasm in the speech.

Hardly had Mrs. Harlowe disappeared when he turned to Grace, his heavy brows meeting in a decided frown. "I believe I am indebted to you, Miss Harlowe, for a great disappointment which has recently come to me. Your unkind interference has caused Arline to reconsider her promise to become my wife. It is fortunate that she made the mistake of sending the letter she wrote you to me. It has put me in complete possession of the facts of the case. I——"

"You have no right to come here uninvited and insult Grace Harlowe in her own house," cut in Arline in a low, furious voice. "You shall not accuse her of interfering. I won't allow it. It is——"

"Please allow Mr. Forde to say whatever he wishes, Arline." Grace's interruption came with gentle dignity. Her gaze resting untroubled on the angry man, she said: "I had no wish to interfere in your affairs, Mr. Forde."

"Then why did you do it?" came the bitter retort. "What grudge could you possibly have against a man you had never even met?"

"None whatever," was the soft answer.

"But you interfered. This letter proves as much." Triumphantly he jerked the misdirected letter from a coat pocket.

Grace was silent. She did not wish to say that Arline had appealed to her for advice, neither was she anxious to remain in the room as a third party.

"I'll tell you the reason," volunteered Arline sharply. "I asked Grace's advice." Her pretty face pale with resentment, Arline poured forth a rapid outline of her talk with Grace. "That's the reason," she ended. "If you had met me fairly when I tried to talk to you about my work this would never have happened. I am glad now that it has. I don't love you and never have truly loved you. I am glad to be free. I shall never marry any one. All men are hateful! Now I wish you to go away, and never, never speak to me again as long as you live!"

But the unpleasant interview continued for another ten minutes despite Arline's pointed dismissal. Mr. Stanley Forde could not forgive Grace for what he rudely termed her "meddling." The idolized son of a too-adoring, snobbish mother, he had nothing in common with Grace's high ideals. Though she explained to him gently that she had only advised Arline to choose whichever course seemed wisest, remembering only that nothing counted so much as being true to herself, her lofty precepts merely tended further to infuriate him.

"You are one of those empty-headed idealists who go about creating disturbances for sensible persons," was the scathing criticism he delivered the moment she ceased speaking. "You will regret this interference in my affairs. Now that you know my opinion of you, will you kindly leave us? I wish to talk privately with Arline."

"I don't wish to talk to you at all," flared Arline hotly. "Please don't leave me, Grace. Whatever Mr. Forde has to say he must say in your presence."

"I am sorry, Arline, but I must ask you to excuse me from remaining longer in the room. Mr. Forde has come a long way to see you. I think you should grant his request for a private talk with you. Good afternoon, Mr. Forde. I regret that you should have so entirely misunderstood my motives." The finality of her words robbed the disagreeable caller of a ready reply. Before he could rally a further relay of rude sarcasm to his aid, Grace had left the room.

If it is indeed true that actions speak louder than words, the distinctly belligerent manner in which, ten minutes later, Mr. Stanley Forde stormed down the walk to the waiting taxicab, gave glaring proof of the dire result of his untimely call. From the garden, where Grace had fled to recover from the irritation of having been so grossly misunderstood, she saw the boorish young man depart. Privately she marveled that Arline should have so deceived herself in regard to her feelings for him. He was undoubtedly handsome, yet his regular features indicated a certain lack of strength and nobility which she thought totally marred his claim to good looks. His large black eyes had a trick of narrowing unpleasantly, and the set of his mouth betokened tyranny.

Her sympathy going out to Arline, she passed slowly among the winding garden paths, lined with colorful summer flowers, and entered the house. The sight of a pathetic little figure crumpled in a disconsolate heap on a broad settee aroused her pity afresh.

"Don't cry, Daffydowndilly," she soothed, sitting down beside her. "He isn't worth it. You were wise in breaking your engagement. Some day real love will come knocking at your door. You were never intended to be a sedate spinster and live out your days in single blessedness. I'm sorry for Mr. Forde. He loves you, I think. But not in the unselfish way you deserve to be adored."

Grace paused, her hand straying gently over the curly head against her shoulder. All of a sudden she felt very aged and very tired. The unpleasant scene with Arline's disgruntled suitor had shaken her severely. She was living out the Golden Summer, that had promised so much, in a fashion far different from the glorious realization of it for which she and Tom had hoped and planned. Yet she had been mercifully spared the pain of beholding a cherished ideal shatter itself at her feet. God had granted her the priceless boon of a true man's true love. Though she and Tom had but briefly glimpsed their Golden Summer, the remembrance of his unselfish devotion would keep it alive forever.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Two days elapsed, following the call of the belligerent Stanley Forde, before Arline ended her visit to Grace. Once she had departed, Grace missed her sorely. Her coming had been a timely break in the now sad routine which Grace daily pursued. Many of her Oakdale acquaintances and friends were still vacationing at the seashore or in the mountains. Had they been at home, she would not have sought them for companionship. Aside from the many hours she spent with Mrs. Gray, she clung desperately to Nora and Hippy Wingate. Even jovial Hippy was considerably less lively than of yore. His affection for Tom Gray was only second to his devoted friendship for Reddy Brooks, who had been his childhood's chum. Among the four young men, Tom, David, Hippy and Reddy, an ideal comradeship had ever existed, unfaltering and unchangeable. Tom's sudden and still unexplained removal had cast a pall over the remaining trio that was likely to linger indefinitely.

On the afternoon of the next day after Arline's departure, a highly-excited young man, whose plump, genial face wore an expression of angry concern, hurried up the walk to the Harlowe's veranda.

"Why, Hippy Wingate, what are you doing here so early?" demanded Nora, from the porch swing. "You can't have your dinner yet. It's only four o'clock. When you're invited to six o'clock dinner you mustn't arrive two hours beforehand. Didn't you know that?" This wifely counsel was accompanied by a teasing smile that belied its harshness.

"Don't pay any attention to her, Hippy," called Grace mischievously. "Come up on the veranda where it's nice and cool. I give you permission to sit in the porch swing beside the haughty Mrs. Wingate. Better still, I'll bring you some fruit lemonade and a whole plate of those fat little chocolate cakes you like so much."

"Now I hope you understand at last how much other people appreciate me," rebuked Hippy, as he plumped himself down in the swing with an energy that set it swaying wildly. "I shan't give you a single cake."

"I don't want any. I've had four already. I hope *you* understand that you've made me prick my finger," retorted Nora, dropping her embroidery to hold up the injured member for inspection.

"Too bad," mourned Hippy, applying the familiar remedy of the devoted. "Did you really lacerate your itty bitty finger? I don't see any signs of it."

"Only the blind can't see," flung back Nora. "All joking aside, what brought you here so early?"

Hippy cast an uneasy glance toward the doorway through which Grace had just vanished. "This," he returned soberly. Unfolding a New York City newspaper, he pointed to a black headline which read, "Young Man Mysteriously Disappears."

Nora drew a sharp breath of dismay as her startled glance traveled down the column. "Where—how—" she stammered.

"I don't know." Hippy glared savagely at the offending newspaper. "I've got to show it to Grace," he deplored. "I'd rather be shot. Some one broke a confidence. It's outrageous in who ever broke it."

"I should say so," agreed Nora. "You'd better—Here she comes now."

Grace stepped into view, carrying a quaint Japanese tray laden with delectable cheer. In her crisp dotted swiss gown of white, her sensitive face a trifle thinner than of yore, she looked hardly older than in her freshman days at high school. "Here you are, weary wanderer," she said gayly. "Eat, drink and be merry."



"Here You Are, Weary Wanderer," She Said Gayly.

Hippy groaned inwardly as he sprang from the swing to relieve her of the tray. "Grace," he began with grave affection, "I have something not in the least pleasant to tell you. I don't—"

"About Tom?" Grace's question rang out sharply on the drowsy air.

"It's not bad news of him," Hippy hastily assured, "but it's about him."

"Then tell me quickly." Grace braced herself for the shock, her gray eyes riveted on Hippy.

"Here it is." Hippy handed her the fateful newspaper. "I wanted to be the first to let you know it," he added in sympathetic apology. "I am afraid some one has played you false."

Grace focused her gaze on the flaring headline. Sinking into the nearest porch chair she read on, apparently lost to her surroundings. Raising her eyes at last from the printed sheet she astonished both Hippy and Nora with a quiet, "I am glad of this."

"Glad?" rose the inquiring chorus.

"Yes; glad. During the last two weeks I've felt very queer about keeping Tom's disappearance a secret. At first I dreaded to have any one know, on account of Fairy Godmother's horror of gossip and on my own account, too. She was afraid that some malicious person might start the story that he had purposely dropped out of sight. We know that could not be so, yet others might not share our belief in him. But lately I've been seeing matters differently. So long as the affair is kept a secret, he will never be found. With the news of his disappearance spread abroad by the newspapers, some one may come to light who has seen him or heard of him in some way. I am going to try to regard the public as friends who would like to help us all they can."

"I think you are right about that," emphasized Hippy. "You are true blue, Grace. You have carried yourself through this nightmare summer like a soldier and a gentleman. That's the highest praise I can offer. No wonder you annexed the name 'Loyalheart' at college."

"Grace, have you any idea who furnished the copy for this?" Nora pointed a disapproving finger at the newspaper. "Do you—that is—do you suppose one of the girls—I thought—perhaps—"

"No, Kathleen West would never break her word." Grace smiled whimsically. "You were thinking of her?"

"Yes; I knew she was connected with a newspaper," admitted Nora, coloring.

"None of the girls to whom I wrote about Tom had anything to do with this. I trust them as fully as I trust you. This information found its way into the newspapers through a different channel."

"Then you know who—" began Nora.

"Yes, I know," Across Grace's brain flashed the vision of an angry face, lighted by two narrowing black eyes. She mentally heard a threatening voice predict vindictively, "You will regret this interference in my affairs." The misdirected letter had again created trouble. She recalled having feared this when Arline had explained her blunder in confusing the two letters. Undoubtedly in writing to Grace, Daffydowndilly had mentioned Tom Gray's name and, in expressing her sympathy, had practically gone over the information contained in Grace's letter to her regarding the postponement of her marriage.

"I should like to tell you, children," she continued, "but I can't, because the telling would involve a certain person whose confidence I hold. I will say this much. It was petty spite which prompted the deed." Grace's lips curved in faint scorn. Stanley Forde was truly a person of small soul and less honor. Such despicable retaliation against a woman was the last touch needed to prove his unfitness to protect the welfare of loyal little Daffydowndilly.

"Oh, don't think of us," hastily assured Hippy. "We wouldn't listen to you if you tried to tell us. We understand. All the more credit to you for behaving like a clam. That's a compliment. Perhaps I had better explain. You notice I didn't say you *looked* like a clam." Hippy tried to infuse a little humor into the situation.

Grace flashed him an amused smile. "'I thank the gods for a saving sense of humor,'" she quoted. Her face instantly sobering she said: "We ought to see Aunt Rose at once about this newspaper affair. Perhaps the three of us ought to go up to her house before dinner. We shall have time."

"Are you sure you would rather not go alone?" Nora put the question in her usual direct fashion.

"No; I wish you and Hippy to go with me. But first, Hippy, you must eat your cakes and drink your lemonade." Grace picked up the well-filled tray which Hippy had temporarily set aside and held it out to him. "Don't let this queer new turn in my affairs drive away your desire for cakes."

"You are the eighth wonder, Grace. If the universe were to turn upside down I believe you'd forget your own jolts and fly to the rescue of the other human nine-pins." Hippy looked his admiration of Grace's sturdy stand under the buffets of misfortune. "I will eat every last one of these alluring tidbits and drink two glasses of lemonade just to show you that I know hospitality when I meet it on a veranda."

"See that you do. Now excuse me. I must show this newspaper to Mother. When I come back we'd better go to see Fairy Godmother."

The confidential session between mother and daughter lasted not more than ten minutes, yet before it ended Grace crept silently into the shelter of her mother's arms to shed a few tears on her all-comforting shoulder. It was not the printed article relating to Tom which prompted them. It was poignant sorrow for his long unexplained absence from her that brought brief faltering.

When she returned to the veranda, where Hippy was busy with the last of the cakes and his second glass of lemonade, her sensitive features bore no sign of her moment of weakness.

"I have kept my vow." Hippy pointed significantly to the empty plate. "Nothing remains but a few discouraged crumbs." Suddenly changing his light tone, he raised his glass of lemonade and said with solemn intensity: "Here's to Tom Gray; a speedy and safe return. I can't help feeling that it will be so."

"Thank you, Hippy." The faint color in Grace's cheeks deepened. A gleam of new hope kindled in her eyes. "You said a while ago that you wondered at my being so calm about Tom. I can't be anything else, because I never allow myself to think that he won't come back. If I did, I'd be utterly miserable. You thought this article in the newspaper might hurt me. Two weeks ago it would have done so. But now! Somehow it seems to me to be the first definite link in the chain that stretches between him and me. It's the beginning of the end, and just as surely as I stand here I believe something good will come of it."

CHAPTER XV

MERELY A LOOKER-ON

The three bearers of the news, which they had reason to believe would prove so disturbing to Mrs. Gray, were doomed to disappointment. They reached her home on Chapel Hill only to find that she had been summoned early that afternoon to the bedside of an old friend who was very ill, and would not return until late in the evening.

Grace was relieved at being thus able to postpone the detailing of the disagreeable news. She was in a quandary regarding loyalty to Arline and loyalty to her Fairy Godmother. She was of the opinion, however, that it was the latter's right to know all, even at the expense of breaking the confidence Arline had reposed in her. She had little doubt that Arline would not object to such an action on her part, yet such was her nature that she found it difficult to accept this view of the subject.

After Hippy and Nora had gone home that evening she wrote a long letter to Arline, setting the matter frankly before her. She knew that before the letter reached her friend, she would have already told all to Mrs. Gray. Still she reflected that she had at least behaved fairly.

But the following morning brought with it the knowledge that Arline had already taken the initiative. Special delivery was responsible for a letter from an incensed Daffydowndilly, which fairly sputtered with indignation. Grace was obliged to smile as seeking its contents she saw:

"DEAREST GRACE:

"That horrible, hateful old Stanley Forde is the most despicable person in the whole world. I was simply furious when I read that article about your fiancé, Tom Gray. I called Stanley on the telephone and accused him of giving the story to the newspapers. Of course I knew in a minute it was he. I remembered all I had said in that letter to you which I sent him by mistake. He actually laughed and said that he did it to pay you for meddling. I told him he would be held responsible for giving the story to that newspaper, but he said that as long as it was true, as he could prove by my letter, that the editor of the newspaper had a perfect right to use it if he wished. He pointed out that it was nothing against Mr. Gray's character and therefore legitimate news.

"Then he had the unspeakable temerity to ask me if he might call on me. You can imagine what I said. Thank goodness and you that I found him out in time. I would be happier with a blind, deaf and dumb man who couldn't walk than to be married to such a person. I am *so* angry. I have written another letter to dear Mrs. Gray explaining the whole thing. She was so sweet to me when in Oakdale that I felt it my duty to tell her everything. Will you go to her and explain even more fully? You can fill in any gaps which my letter to her may contain. Tell her every single thing about me. I wish her to know it. I am sending her letter by special delivery also. Must hurry and post both letters, so I will close. Write to me soon.

"Faithfully,

"DAFFYDOWNDILLY THAYER

("To the end of the chapter.")

Grace laid down this energetic communication with a faintly glad sigh. This snarl at least had righted itself. Suppose it were an omen? "The beginning of the end," she had said. It was a little thing, but in some indefinable fashion her heart grew lighter. As Arline's letter had come to her in time of need, perhaps out of the vast unknown would come some sign of or from the lost one.

Her straight brows arched themselves in surprise as she devoted herself to the reading of a letter from Miriam Nesbit.

"BELOVED LOYALHEART:

"Can you, your father and mother come to New York City at once? Everett and I are to be married on Friday evening at eight o'clock, then take a night train for California. So my well-laid plans for a grand wedding the last of October will have to end in mere announcement cards. But I'll explain. You know I told you of those wonderful open-air performances of Greek plays that have been going on at a spot not far from Ravenwood, the motion picture studio where Everett and Anne filmed Hamlet and Macbeth. To go back to the Greek plays—they will end next week. They have proved so successful that the management wishes to follow them with a series of Shakesperian performances, as they have had requests for them from all sides. To come directly to the point, the stellar honors have been offered Everett, therefore I am about to sacrifice pomp and ceremony on the altar of true love.

"We are to be married in the Little Church Around the Corner where so many professionals have taken their sacred vows. Only my nearest and dearest are to be there. There will be neither a best man nor a bridesmaid and I shall be married in a traveling gown and turn my cherished trousseau into prosaic wardrobe. Even my wedding gown will have to be used afterward, minus the veil, of course, as an evening frock. I have telegraphed David and hope he can come. If he does, he will go back to his search the day after my marriage. Poor Loyalheart, I cannot write you all I feel for you. I'll try to tell you when I see you. Don't disappoint me. I cannot bear to think of going on this new pilgrimage without your being present to wish me godspeed. With my dearest love and sympathy,

"MIRIAM."

"P. S. I hope Fairy Godmother will come, too. I have written her."

As Grace read the signature, the letter fluttered to the floor unheeded. Her generous soul rejoiced at Miriam's happiness, yet never before had the gloom of her own situation struck her so sharply. One by one her trusted comrades were placing their lives in the care of the chosen men of their hearts. Only a little while before she had been of them all perhaps the most buoyant. Her engagement to Tom, after months of harrowing indecision, had always been a matter of reverent wonder to her. She had looked eagerly forward to attending Miriam's wedding. Now she dreaded the thought. She felt that she could have better borne with attending an elaborate and formal wedding than to mingle with the intimate few who would be present at the Little Church Around the Corner. Yet she had no choice in the matter.

Seeking her mother, Grace gave her Miriam's letter. A short consultation in which it was decided that Grace must represent her family at Miriam's wedding, and she was speeding upstairs to pack a steamer trunk. The mere glance at a huge cedar chest in which reposed her own wedding gown sent a chill to her heart. Listlessly she made her preparations for the flitting. She would take the noon train which would reach New York at nine o'clock that evening, provided her Fairy Godmother should decide not to go to the wedding. Should she do so, then they would probably wait until the following morning. At all events she would be ready.

Her labor of packing accomplished, Grace set off for her interview with Mrs. Gray. She found the lonely old lady raised to the nth power of indignation over the deplorable newspaper notice. Anger at that "detestable Forde person" had electrified her into a semblance of her formerly vivacious self. Grace was delighted at the change, but had considerable difficulty in reconciling her wrathful Fairy Godmother to her own point of view.

"I dare say you may be right, child," she reluctantly conceded, after Grace had held forth at length. "That villainous young man may possibly have done us a good turn, unawares. It was sweet in little Arline to write me so beautifully. What a narrow escape she has had, to be sure! If Tom were anything like this miserable man, Forde, I should not care whether or not he ever came back. The publicity of this has upset my nerves completely. We shall have to weather it, I suppose, now that the mischief is done."

"I am glad you can look at it in that light," was Grace's earnest response. "Are you going to New York to see Miriam married, dear?"

"Bless me, I had quite forgotten Miriam's wedding. When is it to be?"

"Then you haven't received her letter!" Grace cried out in dismay.

"I haven't looked at any of my mail, except this letter from Arline. It was first on the pile. Jane gave me the newspaper when I returned last night. She had already seen the article about Tom. Would you mind sorting the mail? Miriam's letter is probably among the others. I have tried to pay special attention to my mail since my poor boy vanished, for fear of missing something I ought to know. But this morning my mind was on Arline's letter and that newspaper. I think I shall have to engage a secretary. You know I've never had one since Anne gave up the position."

Grace, whose fingers and eyes had been busy while Mrs. Gray talked, held up a square white envelope. "Here is Miriam's letter."

"I think we had better go to-day," decided Mrs. Gray, when at her request Grace had read her Miriam's letter. "This is Wednesday. That will give us two days with the Nesbits. As it is only half-past ten we can catch that 12.30 train, provided you are ready. Ring for Jane. She can quickly

pack whatever I need to take with me. It is lucky that I bought Miriam's wedding gift some time ago. I really think this little trip will benefit me, though the very idea of attending a wedding gives me the horrors. Still Miriam is one of my adopted children. I hope David can come. I am anxious to talk with him. Strange that he can find out nothing about Tom."

Roused from the listless apathy which had so persistently preyed upon her, Mrs. Gray rattled on with a new and surprising cheerfulness which delighted Grace. Perhaps this was another link in the invisible chain. The sudden upheaval of Miriam's plans for a magnificent wedding had at least benefited one person. Then, too, they would perhaps see David and learn more definitely of the territory which Tom had invaded to his sorrow.

Waiting only long enough to see Mrs. Gray deep in her preparations for the coming journey, Grace hurried home to don a traveling gown, say a fond farewell to her mother and leave a loving good-bye message for her father. A telephone call left with her mother for her during her absence informed her that Nora had heard from Miriam, too. She and Hippy would take the evening train for New York.

"We are rallying to Miriam's standard," Grace declared with a flash of her former enthusiasm, when her mother had repeated Nora's message. "If Jessica and Reddy can manage the trip, then—" She stopped, the smile faded from her face. She had been about to say that the Eight Originals would all be there. Turning abruptly she walked from the living-room, the sentence unfinished. For a brief instant she had forgotten that unless the unknown suddenly yielded up its prey, one loved face would be missing from the Eight Originals.

CHAPTER XVI

J. ELFREDA'S MASTER STROKE

As the twilight of a perfect September day deepened into purple night, a little company of persons crossed the threshold of the quaint Little Church Around the Corner. Though few in number it was a gathering strongly fortified by warm affection. The several passers-by who chanced to see this small procession enter the unpretentious sanctuary had no difficulty in divining their purpose or singling out the chief participants in the affair. The face of the beautiful, dark-eyed girl, gowned in a smart tailored coat suit of brown, wore the shy radiance of a bride. The tall, distinguished-looking man who accompanied her was easily identified as the happy party of the second part.

Though destiny had taken an unexpected hand in Miriam Nesbit's wedding plans, she was perhaps better satisfied to make her vows of life-long devotion in the presence of only those she had known best. Miss Southard, Mrs. Nesbit, David, Anne, Grace, Hippy, Nora and Mrs. Gray were present, as Miriam's nearest, and undoubtedly her dearest. Second in her regard were J. Elfreda Briggs, Arline Thayer, Kathleen West and Mabel Ashe, whose residence in or near New York made their attendance possible. Greatly to the regret of all concerned, Jessica and Reddy had been unable to come to the wedding. Though a decided air of informality permeated the little assemblage, the always impressive ceremony of marriage had never seemed more sacred to the chosen few. At Miriam's earnest request they grouped themselves about her, a fond guard, while the minister, Everett Southard's comrade of long standing, spoke the simple, beautiful words that linked two lives together, "for better or for worse, through good and evil report."

From the moment she entered the Little Church until, the ceremony over, she found herself being helped into the Nesbits' automobile, Grace was as one in a dream. She had noted in absent wonder the play of more than one handkerchief as her friends wiped away the furtive tears that are always as sure to fall in the presence of a great happiness, as when the occasion is one of grief. But she had no tears to shed. Weeks of silent suffering had bereft her of that relief. Her sensitive face grew a trifle more wistful as she listened to the sonorous voice intoning the sacred words, but her brooding gray eyes remained dry. She alone knew the agony of dull pain which clutched persistently at her heart.

During the ceremony more than one pair of sympathetic eyes strayed from Miriam and Everett Southard to the slender, white-clad girly whose grave, sweet mouth and unfaltering glance told of a strength that came from within. In the thick of the congratulations which followed, there was not one of those who adored Grace who did not yearn to turn to her and comfort her. Yet her very composure made consolation impossible. They realized that she was sufficient unto herself.

On the way to the station, where the Southards were to entrain almost immediately for the West, she talked in her usual cheerful strain to Mrs. Nesbit, Mrs. Gray and Elfreda Briggs, who shared an automobile with her. David and Anne were in the Southards' limousine with Miss Southard and the newly wedded pair, while the other members of the party had followed in a larger automobile. Secretly, Grace and Mrs. Gray were longing to talk with David Nesbit. He had arrived from the north only an hour before the wedding, thus giving them no chance for an interview. Both were imbued with but one thought and that thought centered on Tom Gray.

When the last hearty words of good will and farewell had been said and the train bearing the Southards westward had chugged out of the station, Grace was still obliged to possess her soul in

patience while the remainder of the wedding party, minus the chief participants, repaired to the Nesbits' home for an informal supper in honor of the occasion. During its progress, however, she and David managed to exchange a few words regarding Tom. David had canvassed the region of the camp as thoroughly as was possible during the time he had been North, but thus far he had met with no clue to Tom's whereabouts.

It was after eleven o'clock when Hippy, Nora, Anne, David, Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Nesbit, Grace and Elfreda Briggs, whom Grace had begged to remain with her, settled themselves in the library to hear David's account of his northern explorations.

"I am all broken up because I have no news for you," he began. "Good old Tom's disappearance is the most baffling problem I've ever dealt with. Blaisdell is completely discouraged. He and I have tramped through those woods for days from daylight until dark. So far as we know, no one saw Tom after he left the village. I found one little boy who insists that he saw Tom that day, but he saw him just before he entered the woods, so that doesn't help much. But I won't give up. I shall have to remain in New York for a day, then I am going back to stay until I find him."

"Mr. Blaisdell has written me that he must go to Cincinnati for a week or two," sighed Mrs. Gray. "A case he was working on, before he took up mine, needs his immediate attention."

"Yes; he told me," nodded David. "He is a splendid man, but he's handicapped in Tom's case by not being a thorough-going woodsman. His work has lain a great deal in large cities. If one of us had disappeared in such a wild region, instead of Tom, I'd say the very man to do the trailing would be Tom Gray himself. What I can't understand is how an expert woodsman like Tom could come to grief in the wilds."

"Tom was always venturesome and reckless of danger," replied Mrs. Gray with an ominous shake of her head. "I wish he had gone into some commercial enterprise rather than to have become interested in forestry. You know that the station master told him a storm was brewing, but he paid no attention to the warning."

"That storm was the cause of Tom's vanishing," broke in Grace almost dramatically. "I've always felt it. It made him lose his way, then—Who knows what happened then?"

"I wish I could go with you, David," declared Hippy earnestly. "I would, too, if I weren't tied up with a law suit which an irate traction company is waging against the city of Oakdale. Although I am not a woodsman, still I know the difference between a tree and a stump, and during my long and useful career I have killed numbers of slimy, slithery snakes."

"At least, that's something to be proud of," lauded Elfreda Briggs, favoring Hippy with an amused smile. The stout young man's remarks were quite in accord with her own distinct sense of humor. Hitherto she had listened without comment, absorbing all she heard and mentally appraising it in her shrewd fashion. She had chosen to break into the conversation at that moment because of an idea that was slowly taking shape in her fertile brain.

"I suppose," she continued nonchalantly, "that as David has just said, it takes a woodsman to trail a woodsman." Her round eyes fastened themselves on Grace. Knowing Elfreda as she did, Grace flashed the speaker a curiously startled glance. Something of signal import to her was about to fall from Elfreda's lips.

"I was just thinking of the story of Ruth Denton's father and old Jean, the hunter, who used to live in Upton Wood. Don't you remember, you told me about how he was hurt and Mr. Denton nursed him back to health! You told me, too, that this same Jean had hunted all over the United States and Canada. There's a woodsman for you! If he's still in Oakdale, why don't you ask him to go and look for Tom?" Elfreda leaned back in her chair, well pleased with herself. The expressions mirrored on her friends' faces told her that she had scored.

"Why did we never think of Jean before?" wondered Grace in a hushed voice.

"Good old Jean!" Hippy sprang to his feet and performed a joyful dance about the room. "Why, of course he's the very man!"

"It was unforgivably stupid in me never to have thought of Jean," admitted David, looking deep disgust at his own defection.

"The reason none of us thought of Jean was because I made such a point of keeping Tom's disappearance a secret," acknowledged Mrs. Gray ruefully. "Did Grace tell you that a New York newspaper had published an account of it?"

"Miriam sent me a copy of the newspaper," returned David. "Who gave out the news?"

Mrs. Gray cast an interrogatory glance toward Grace, who met it with an assuring smile. "It's all right, Aunt Rose," she nodded. "I have Arline's permission to answer. She wishes me to tell anyone whom I think ought to know it. She said so to-day." With this explanation Grace continued: "I wrote Arline about the postponement of my marriage to Tom. She answered, but confused her letter with another which she had written to someone else. That person proved unfriendly to both of us, and so the mystery of poor Tom came into print."

"So that's the way it happened," mused David. Delicacy forbade him to ask further questions. He understood, as did the others, that Grace's explanation had been purposely sketchy. "Personally, I'm not sorry it's now generally known. It may be the means of bringing Tom into the land of the

living again. I don't mean that I think he's dead. I can't and won't think that."

"Nor I," Grace cried out sharply. "I've never let myself believe that for an instant. We ought to give Elfreda special vote of grateful thanks for suggesting Jean. That was a master stroke."

Grace's suggestion brought out a volley of acclamation in Elfreda's direction.

"Oh, forget it," she muttered, unconsciously relapsing into her old-time use of slang. "Old Jean just happened to pop into my head. That's all."

"Just the same, it takes an outsider to show the Oakdalites a few things," warmly accorded Hippy. "I am proud to claim you as a colleague, Elfreda. Some day we may yet grapple together with the intricacies of the law. 'Wingate and Briggs, Lawyer and Lawyeress. Daring Deeds Perpetrated While You Wait,' would look nice on a sign."

"I can see that you are making fun of a poor defenseless lawyeress," retorted Elfreda good-humoredly. "Don't you think so, Mrs. Nesbit? You've been listening to all of us without saying a word. Now we'd like to hear your views on whether or not Wingate and Briggs, etc., would set the world on fire as a law firm."

"I have little doubt of the glorious future of such a combination," agreed Mrs. Nesbit, smiling. There was an absent look in her eyes, however. Her thoughts had been traveling persistently into the past as she sat listening to the interesting discussion over the missing Tom. Was it possible that Miriam, her little girl of yesterday, had actually stepped out on the highway of married life? And Grace Harlowe, the care-free torn-boy who had run races and flown kites with David, was now a tragic-eyed young woman from whose hand fate had roughly snatched the cup of happiness. There were Nora and Hippy, too, a veritable Darby and Joan, despite their love for playful squabbling. Could it be that these alert, self-reliant young men and women were once the children who had romped and frisked about on her lawn, or played house under the tall hollyhocks in the garden?

"You are tired out, Mrs. Nesbit," suggested Grace with concern. She had noted the brooding light in the older woman's gentle face and quickly attributed the cause. "I think it is time to sound taps. We can continue our session in the morning, can't we, Fairy Godmother?"

"Yes. I am not nearly as young as I wish I were. This trouble about Tom has made me realize it," returned Mrs. Gray somberly. "But Elfreda has given us a valuable piece of advice. I am inclined to hope with Grace that we have reached the beginning of the end of our weary waiting."

"I've a favor to ask of you," stated Elfreda mysteriously, when, a little later, she and Grace entered the sleeping room which they were to occupy together.

"It is granted." Grace passed an affectionate arm about Elfreda's plump shoulders.

"All right. I don't need to ask, then. I'll just remark that I'm going home with you to Oakdale."

"Elfreda!" Grace brought both arms into play in an energetic hug of the stout girl. "Will you truly come home with me!"

"I will," asserted Elfreda.

"But what about your work?"

"Let the law take its course—without me," was the unconcerned response. "I wouldn't miss seeing old Jean for anything. But that's not my reason for inviting myself to go home with you. I can see that you need a comforter. Do I get the job?"

"You do," laughed Grace, but the laugh ended in a sob against Elfreda's shoulder. It had been a trying day for poor Loyalheart and the inevitable reaction had set in. "You—understand—don't—you?" she murmured brokenly.

"Yes; I know how brave you've been to-day." Elfreda's soothing tones were a trifle unsteady, as she added in tender whimsicality, "I could see."

CHAPTER XVII

FATE

Returned to Oakdale, Grace's first step was toward finding Jean, whose long residence in the snug cabin in Upton Wood had made him seem like a part of the forest itself. Greatly to her dismay, old Jean was not to be found. Nora, Hippy, Elfreda and herself made a trip to the cabin only to find it locked. On a bit of paper tacked to the door, appeared the laboriously written notice: "Gone way June 2. Come back som day."

It was a tragic downfall to the new hope that Grace had been confidently nursing, and it took all the fortitude she could summon to recover even in a measure from her bitter disappointment. Where to look for Jean she had not the remotest notion. She knew only too well that "som day" was quite likely to mean next winter. Jean was one of those rare persons who can follow the

dictates of his own pleasure. The whole woodland universe was his to roam at will. His life-long communion with Nature had taught him to supply his simple wants with the ease with which the prehistoric denizens of the forest had attended to theirs, and life was to him one glorious succession of light-hearted wayfaring.

Every now and then, however, he would descend upon his lonely cabin, laden with the spoils of the chase, which found a ready market in Oakdale. After one of these jaunts he was always sure to find plenty of work awaiting him, for aside from his prowess as a hunter, he was a veritable Jack of all trades whose services were always in keen demand.

J. Elfreda Briggs was also downcast over the fact that her suggestion could not be immediately carried out. Determined not to be balked, she asked Grace's permission to mail "personals" addressed to Jean to a number of newspapers published in various large cities of the United States. But these notices brought no reply from the old hunter, who, it seemed, had vanished from the busy world as completely as had Tom Gray.

In the meantime the Wingates, Elfreda and Grace made it a point to institute a vigorous inquiry throughout Oakdale, in the hope of finding someone who could give them some definite information regarding where Jean had gone. From several persons who had talked with the old hunter before his departure, they learned only that he had announced his intention to go away on a long expedition, but had neglected to state what part of the country he intended to traverse.

Contrary to Mrs. Gray's and her own expectation that the news of Tom's unexplained dropping-out of his own particular world of friends and acquaintances would create disturbing gossip, Grace was supremely touched by the sympathetic loyalty of her townspeople. Until visited by adversity, she had never even suspected that she ranked so high in their esteem. Each day brought her some fresh proof of consideration and sympathy from the good-hearted residents of the little city of her birth. Not one slighting or detrimental comment against either herself or Tom came to her ears. It was as though the entire populace had risen to her standard in the name of friendship. She was now wholly content that the sad affair was no longer a secret.

Yet even the undivided consideration of her townspeople could not serve to throw a ray of light on the mystery. It was now the latter part of September and not a word of encouragement had come from David Nesbit, who had returned to the lumber country to pursue his lonely search until Mr. Blaisdell should again join him. True, David kept the anxious watchers fully informed of his movements, but the burden of his messages was always, "Nothing new about poor Tom has come to light."

During these days of dreary uncertainty, Elfreda proved herself a comforter indeed. Although a week had elapsed since she had taken up her residence under the Harlowe's hospitable roof, she calmly announced her intention to stay on and await developments. Her repeated cheery assertion, "Everything will come out all right yet," did much to help Grace maintain the hopeful stand she had forced herself to take. She could hardly bear to have Elfreda out of her sight, so greatly had she come to rely on her. On the other hand, Elfreda was supremely satisfied with her rôle of guardian angel. She regarded Grace as the direct inspiration to every good deed she had ever performed, and humbly congratulated herself on being for once granted an opportunity to make some small return for the countless favors she had received at Grace's hands.

To Elfreda herself, however, it appeared that she had been able to do very little. This thought was troubling her one hazy autumn afternoon as the two girls silently ascended the steps to Haven Home, whither they had walked through Upton Wood, to spend an hour or two. Elfreda was not fond of these frequent visits to the House Behind the World. They were invariably fraught with melancholy. Grace was always fairly cheerful at the start, yet the moment her gray eyes glimpsed Haven Home the old, wistful shadow crept into them.

Once inside the stately old house, her depression became even more apparent. Haven Home was now in complete order, even to the little personal touches which greatly enhanced the beauty of the tasteful furnishings. The color schemes for the various rooms had been decided upon by Tom and Grace during those first happy hours of possession. How energetically they had entered into even the smallest details, and how enthusiastically they had engrossed themselves with the joyful labor of planning the arrangement of the furniture and the countless appointments. Both had agreed that everything in the house should signify comfort rather than elegance, in order that, when the last triumphant touch had been given to it, Haven Home should be a home indeed.

To carry on bravely the work which she and Tom had begun had been an excruciating torture to Grace, made endurable only by the thought that at least she was fulfilling Tom's wishes. She was ever urged on to her sorrowful task by the one consolation that when the blessed day of Tom's return dawned, and she believed that it must, he would find that she had been loyal to his interests. She had not sat down to mourn, her hands idle. She had faithfully labored to make their dream of home come true. Though the winter of sorrow held her in its icy grip, the Golden Summer of love still bloomed fresh and fragrant in her heart.

"I don't think you ought to come here so much, Grace." Elfreda's matter-of-fact tones roused Grace from the somber reverie which had obsessed her as she stood in the center of the living-room, her absent gaze on a painting which Tom had especially fancied. It represented a young man in the dress of a cavalier and a beautiful girl in a simple high-waisted gown of white, strolling through a field of starry daisies. On both faces was the rapt expression of complete absorption that betokened the knowledge of their great love for each other. Looming up, a trifle

in their rear, a gigantic black-robed figure, with a terrifying face, was hurrying, with great strides, across the blossoming meadow to overtake the absorbed pair. One had only to glance at the painting to realize that in simply naming it "Fate" the artist had rightly suited the legend to his conception.

"Why not?" asked Grace, her attention still on the painting.

"Because it's not good for you," protested Elfreda sturdily. "It isn't as though the house needed your attention. It's in perfect order and the prettiest, most comfortable place I ever set foot in. You've done everything here that can be done. Now if I were you I'd hold up my right hand and swear not to come here again until I stepped over the threshold with Tom Gray. Every time, after we pay our respects to Haven Home, you go away from it with the expression in your eyes of an early Christian martyr going to the stake. Not that you ever complain. If you went around weeping and wailing and gnashing your teeth, I'd be better satisfied. But you don't. Your face simply takes on a hurt, despairing look that makes me sick at heart."

"I know it isn't good for me to come here," was Grace's frank admission. "Each time I say, 'This must be the last,' and yet somehow I can't stay away. My whole heart is bound up in Haven Home. It's the most wonderful and at the same time the saddest place in the world to me. And this picture! It fascinates me. When Tom and I chose it, we didn't dream that Fate was hurrying to overtake us."

"I'd turn it toward the wall," counseled Elfreda gruffly. "It's beautiful, but it gives me the creeps. It upsets you more than anything else in this house. Every time you come here, I've noticed you go straight to it. I can see that it's a Jonah. Do you give me leave to do the reversing act?" Elfreda grinned boyishly, yet her round blue eyes were purposeful. It would have given her infinite pleasure to summarily bundle the offending painting into Upton Wood, leaving it to the mercy of the elements.

"You may turn it toward the wall if you like." Grace sighed as she tore her gaze from the painting. "It's rather heavy, though, and you will have a hard time reaching up to it."

"Oh, that's nothing. There's a step ladder on the back porch. I noticed it the last time we were over here." Elfreda hurried from the room to wrest the ladder from its lowly haunt. Returning she set it in place before the painting and climbed the four steps to the top with joyful alacrity.

Grace followed the movements of her energetic companion with moody interest. She was glad yet sorry to watch the change Elfreda was about to make.

"I can't reverse it up here," grumbled Elfreda. "I'm afraid of dropping it. I'll have to get down from the ladder with it, then turn it around."

Carefully descending, she laid the so-called Jonah face down on the top step of the ladder, paused for an instant before completing her task.

"Oh, look!" Grace cried out, staring hard at the back of the picture. Standing out on it in letters of blue a single sentence had been pencilled.

Elfreda peered curiously at the writing. "True love laughs at Fate," she read. "That's odd! Who in the world wrote that?"

"It was Tom." Grace drew a long breath. "Seeing his writing gave me a queer thrill for a minute. It was just as though out of the silence he had suddenly spoken. Then I remembered. When the painting was unwrapped we stood looking at it. Tom had a blue pencil in one hand. He had been checking off a list of our belongings. I said that the painting was beautiful but sinister, and that I hoped that no such terrible figure of Fate would ever overtake us. Tom laughed and said he would put a spell on the picture. So he took the blue pencil and scribbled that sentence on the back of it. Then he hung it on the wall. I never recalled the incident until this moment. I'm glad you suggested reversing 'Fate,' Elfreda. I'd rather have it so. The very sight of his handwriting is a comfort."

"It's an omen," Elfreda declared solemnly, her plump face alive with superstition. "Yes, sir; it's an omen. I can see that it's a fore-runner of good luck."

CHAPTER XVIII

A GLEAM OF HOPE

Inspired by Elfreda's emphatic prediction of good fortune, Grace left Haven Home in a livelier frame of mind than she had exhibited when entering the house. As they strolled down the walk she was further cheered by the sight of a single, half-opened rose, flaunting its crimson but lonely glory from a late-blooming bush. Elfreda, who was bent on lightening Grace's mood, soberly assured her that it was merely another lucky sign. Carefully plucking the fragrant token of good fortune, Grace breathed a prayer that this might indeed be true.

Tackling her rôle of comforter with a will, Elfreda enlivened the walk home with numerous

accounts of signs and wonders which had visited friends and acquaintances of hers as heralds of great good fortune. "Of course, I'm only telling you what I've heard," she said humorously. "I can't say that I've ever had any direct manifestations that good luck was signaling to me. Once I went to a bazaar and paid a dollar for the privilege of drawing a number from a hat. I had a hunch that I'd win something. I also had my eye on a hand-painted chocolate pot, but my lucky number drew a toy velocipede instead. Still I was lucky to draw anything. Then another time I found a horseshoe in the road. I hung it over the front door and next day it fell down on Pa's head when he was coming into the house. That was a very unlucky day for me." Elfreda giggled reminiscently. "Pa raged like a lion. He declared I did it purposely and pitched the horseshoe into the street. I let it stay there. I wasn't much impressed with its lucky qualities. Just the same it didn't cure me of my belief in signs."

Grace's ready laughter held a merry note that was intensely gratifying to the narrator of the tragic horseshoe episode. She had succeeded even better than she had expected, was Elfreda's reflection. Then, too, the unexpected sight of Tom Gray's handwriting on the back of the painting, coupled with the finding of the rose, had brought a look of new animation to Grace's too-calm features.

"I am afraid I shall have to take back my promise not to go to Haven Home again soon," was Grace's half apologetic comment as the two emerged from Upton Wood upon the highway that wound its way from the outskirts of Oakdale through the open country beyond the town. "I feel now as though I wanted to go there often, just to read Tom's message. I like to think of it as a message. Strange that I never recalled the incident until to-day."

"It was not intended that you should," maintained Elfreda. "As for taking back your promise, you never really made one. If I were you, though, I'd stay away from that house as long as I could. But if I found that I was determined to go there, then I'd go."

"That is very wise and elastic counsel," asserted Grace. "It can be stretched to cover all my moods and yearnings."

Arm in arm, the two friends swung briskly along the highway, following it until they reached the wide tree-lined street in which the Harlowe residence stood. When within a short distance of the house, their glance became simultaneously fixed on two childish forms racing toward them at full speed.

"Here come Elizabeth and Anna May Angerell." An indulgent smile curved Grace's lips. "They have spied us from afar. They are the dearest little girls. I can't begin to tell you what a comfort they've been to me this summer. They're such joyous youngsters. They fairly bubble with happiness. What a wonderful estate childhood is, Elfreda. Yet we never realize it until long after it has passed away. I've often wished I could go back and live it over, even for one day."

"I'd rather be grown up," disagreed Elfreda. "I never had a very good time when I was little, because I was always grieving over being a prize fat child. The way of the baby elephant is pretty thorny. Well, well!" she exclaimed playfully as the two little girls, laughing gleefully, ended their run by flinging themselves ecstatically upon herself and Grace. "What's the meaning of this onslaught? If we hadn't been very large, sturdy persons we might have tumbled over like nine-pins."

"We saw you coming away up the street," joyfully announced Anna May. "We just had to run. We've been watching at our gate for you quite a while."

"There's company come to see you, Miss Harlowe," burst forth Elizabeth excitedly. "You can never guess who. It's somebody you've known for a long time, but it's somebody you don't see very often. We aren't going to tell you who's on the porch. We want you to be surprised. Do hurry as fast as ever you can, for the person is anxious to see you."

"We thought we'd tell you the minute we saw you, and then we thought it would be more fun not to," explained Anna May wriggling with enjoyment of the great secret.

Elfreda and Grace exchanged lightning glances as they quickened their pace, a devoted worshipper hanging to an arm of each. Could Elfreda's prophesy of good fortune have been thus so quickly fulfilled?

"It's not Mr. Gray." Elizabeth had remembered that long ago Grace had answered her eager inquiry for "nice Mr. Tom" by saying that he had gone on a journey from which he might return at any time. She had remembered, too, how sad her dear Miss Grace had looked when she told her. When the two children had posted themselves at the gate to watch for Grace, Elizabeth had remarked confidentially to Anna May, "If Mr. Gray was sitting on the porch waiting for Miss Harlowe, we couldn't surprise her. We'd just tell her straight out. We wouldn't want to make her guess that, would we?" And Anna May had replied: "No, siree. We ought to tell her the first thing that it's not him, so that she won't look disappointed when she sees who the company is."

The startled light that had leaped into Grace's eyes died as Elizabeth frankly excluded Tom's name from the guessing contest. She inwardly rebuked herself for thus clutching at every straw which the wind blew in her direction. On catching a first glimpse of the veranda, she cried out sharply. Relaxing her light hold on Elfreda's arm and dropping Elizabeth's hand, she darted to the gate, slammed it behind her and raced up the walk to the steps, an animated flash of blue on the autumn landscape.

"Jean!" she almost shouted. "Where, oh, where did you come from?" The next instant she held one of the hunter's rough hands in both hers, half laughing, half crying.

"Mam'selle Grace, it is of a truth the great 'appiness to see you," was the old man's sincere greeting, his small black eyes shining with feeling. "Jean has come far. Long way," he waved a comprehensive hand toward the west. "I come because I hav' learn that you hav' the trouble."

"But how long have you been in Oakdale and who told you about Tom?" questioned Grace anxiously. "We have gone to your cabin in Upton Wood several times, in the hope that you had returned. The first time we went we saw the sign on the door."

"I put him there," nodded Jean, "because I go 'way for long time. Many weeks I stay in Canada. Only to-day I come back. Then——"

"Did some one in Oakdale tell you Tom was missing?" interrogated Grace, cutting almost impatiently into Jean's narrative.

"No, Mam'selle. Only I hav' speak the *bon jour* to my frien's as I come through the town. Some days have pass since firs' I see this." Jean pulled a newspaper from a pocket of his weather-stained coat. Spreading it open and laboriously perusing the first page, he tendered it to Grace, pointing out a column in it.

Grace needed but to glance at it to recognize it as a copy of the newspaper recording Tom Gray's disappearance, which Hippy had brought her. "How did you ever happen to come across this, Jean?" Her query held a note of positive awe.

"It is of a truth strange," admitted Jean. "W'en I stay long time in Canada I come back to this country to Minnesota. I go to Duluth, w'ere I hav' ol' frien'. I spen' two days by him an' talk about many t'ings w'ich 'appen to us long ago w'en we hunt together. He tell me about a young man who come up north an' get los'. Nobody can fin'. He show me this paper an' say, 'W'en I read this I t'ink you, Jean, can fin' this young man, because you great hunter.' Then I look an' see the young man is M'sieu' Tom, an' the paper is ol' one. So I leave my pack skins wit' my frien' and come here quick on the train, because I know Mam'selle Grace will tell all. Then I go fin' M'sieu' Tom," ended Jean, wagging his gray head with deep determination.

"Talk about miracles!" burst forth Elfreda Briggs. "It's the most remarkable thing I ever knew to happen." Elfreda had lost no time in overtaking Grace on the veranda. The Angerell children had not followed, however. They had trotted on home, well satisfied with the result of their mission.

"It is truly marvelous. And to think that Mother isn't at home this afternoon to hear it. It was splendid in you to wait here for me, Jean." Grace turned a glowing face toward the old hunter. "As for your going to find Tom, I am *sure* that you *will* find him. I was so amazed at seeing you, I forgot to introduce you to my friend Miss Briggs. She knows all about you, already."

Elfreda extended a prompt hand of welcome to the intrepid old trapper, who grasped it warmly, saying: "The frien's of Mam'selle Grace are also the frien's of ol' Jean."

"Jean, before I tell you all I know about Tom's disappearance, I think it would be better for the three of us to go on to Mrs. Gray's home and talk things over. She will be so glad to see you. She has suffered dreadfully. We have all suffered. But I feel now as though at last the light had begun to break."

CHAPTER XIX

THE LETTER

"And that is all the information that we can give you about Tom, Jean." Grace sighed as she ended the recital of barren facts relating to the vanishing of the man she loved.

"It is very scant information on which to proceed," deplored Mrs. Gray. "I confess that I made a mistake in keeping our trouble a secret. Since that newspaper spread the news abroad I have done my best to amend the error. I have seen to it that the sheriff of the county in which the camp is located took up the matter. I have also offered a large reward for the finding of Tom, or the positive proof that he is dead." Her voice dropped despairingly on the last word.

"Be of the brav' heart," responded Jean confidently. "I hav' the feeling that it is for me to find the los' M'sieu' Tom. I hav' travel many times over the country w'ere he get los' an' I know it, every tree an' stone. It is a wil' place, an' the men up there know not'ing but cut down trees. Very t'ick in the 'aid." Jean tapped his gray head significantly, better to demonstrate the vast stupidity of lumbermen in general.

"M'sieu' David is one fine young man, but he not know the big woods lak' ol' Jean. The ot'er man, he also not know." Jean shrugged his broad shoulders. "If all Jean's life he stay in cities, it would be so wit' him."

"But Jean, have you any idea of what might have happened to Tom?" entreated Mrs. Gray.

Again Jean shrugged. "Many t'ings might 'appen. P'r'aps he lose the way in storm an' get hurt; mebbe he die. P'r'aps timber t'ieves get him an' shut him up somew'ere way off hid. Of a truth, Jean cannot tell. But I go hunt for M'sieu' Tom an' fin' out. Then I tell." Jean seemed determined to impress upon his hearers that he would "fin'" Tom Gray.

"When can you start north, Jean?" Grace waited breathlessly for the answer.

"Soon; to-morrow," came the quick assurance. "First I go to my cabin to mak' ready. In the morning I come here early an' say the *au revoir*. Then I go an' fin' M'sieu' Tom. You are satisfy?" His shrewd black eyes sought the approval of the trio of tense faces bent earnestly upon him.

"We are more than satisfied." Impulsively Mrs. Gray stretched forth a little blue-veined hand. Somewhat to that estimable woman's astonishment old Jean bent and with true Gallic chivalry raised it lightly to his lips. "I am honor that you trust," he said simply.

Looking on, Grace was immeasurably touched by the woodsman's quaintly respectful act of deference toward her Fairy Godmother. Her romantic fancy transformed rugged old Jean into a gallant knight about to fare forth on a dangerous errand.

"You are a true Frenchman, Jean," smiled the pleased old lady. "A lifetime spent in roughing it hasn't robbed you of inherent chivalry. Did you know that Miss Briggs remembered you from hearsay and was the first one to suggest that you would be the very person to hunt for Tom?"

"Mam'selle Grace has said," affirmed Jean. Turning to Elfreda he continued almost humbly, "Mam'selle, I hav' only to be grateful to you that you hav' remember me. Of a certainty, I shall not forget."

Jean lingered for a little further talk, then departed for his cabin, with many quaint bobbing bows. But he left behind him an atmosphere of revived hope.

"We must go, too, J. Elfreda," reminded Grace, a distinct ring of cheerfulness in her accents. "This is Bridget's afternoon out and I promised Mother that I'd see that neither you or I starved. Father won't be home for dinner to-night, either, so we shall dine in lonely state. Mother went to spend the day with friends in Carrollton, and Father is to go to their house to dinner to-night and bring Mother home," Grace explained to Mrs. Gray.

"Then you had better stay with me," advised Mrs. Gray. "Left to yourselves I haven't the slightest doubt that you will talk much and eat little. Besides, I know that the mere mention of hot waffles and honey will make Elfreda linger. Stay, and we'll have an old-fashioned supper."

"I couldn't be so cruel as to tear Elfreda away from such bliss," laughed Grace. The stout girl's predilection for waffles was known to all her intimate friends.

"How did you know my pet weakness?" Elfreda's round eyes grew rounder with well-simulated surprise. "Did Grace tell you? Grace, I'm amazed to think you would thus betray my fatal waffle hunger, even to Mrs. Gray." Noting the old lady's increasing rise of good spirits, Elfreda purposely pretended ignorance with a view of keeping up the sudden access of cheer which Jean's visit had diffused.

"Don't you remember that morning you came to Wayne Hall for breakfast and asked anxiously if there would be waffles?" teased Mrs. Gray. "It was at the time Grace and I went to Overton to set Harlowe House to rights."

"Oh, yes! So it was." Elfreda looked owlshly innocent. "That was the time you got my waffle number. It seems a long while since then, doesn't it, Grace?"

"Yes." An absent gleam flickered in Grace's eyes, causing Elfreda to wish she had not asked the question. It was replaced almost instantly by a glint of pure amusement. Memories of Overton invariably brought back Emma Dean. Merely to think of Emma meant to smile. "I wonder what Emma's doing to-night," she said irrelevantly. "She must be back at Overton by this time, wrestling with the management of Harlowe House."

"We ought to make her a flying visit," proposed Elfreda, well pleased with this sudden turn in the conversation.

"I'd love to see her," agreed Grace, "but——" She hesitated. "I shouldn't care to go away from home now. After Jean goes north we are likely to hear news almost any day. You see, I have pinned my faith on his ability to accomplish miracles."

"Well, we can wait a week or so and see," declared Elfreda. "If things stay just the same and we hear nothing of interest from him, we can leave Overton on Saturday, spend Sunday with Emma and come back to Oakdale on Monday."

"I think it would do you good to see Emma, Grace," approved Mrs. Gray with a touch of her old decision. "We can do nothing but hope, pray and wait. Your trip to New York to see Miriam married was on the whole depressing. Emma will put new life into you. She's such a comical, delightful girl. Now that our case is at last in competent hands, we must make a special effort to be cheerful. I've failed sadly this summer in practicing what I am preaching. Now I intend to try to make up for it. But if I am to make good my promise to Elfreda to feed her on waffles, I must tell Margaret to make them."

Left to themselves, the two girls conversed softly together regarding the change the advent of old

Jean had wrought in their hostess. When an hour later the trio gathered in the morning room, unanimously chosen as a supper room by reason of its cosiness, the sense of oppression which had formerly held them captive had been marvelously lightened by hope. Later the three spent a quiet evening together in the library, and it was eleven o'clock when Grace and Elfreda turned their steps homeward.

To her father and mother, who had reached home ahead of her, Grace recounted the details of Jean's visit. They received the glad tidings with a joy second only to her own.

Another hour slipped swiftly by before the household retired, and it was half-past twelve o'clock before Grace bade Elfreda good-night and softly closed the door of her room. Alone with her own thoughts, she curled up on a cushioned window seat and gazed meditatively out upon the still autumn night. Through the open window a soft wind caressingly touched her rapt face. It sighed through the trees, sending an occasional leaf to earth with a faint protesting rustle. Overhead the stars twinkled serenely down upon her, as though in tantalizing possession of the answer to the question that lay behind her musing eyes.

In close communion with the night, Grace lived over again those first rare days of her Golden Summer. The present swept aside, the past confronted her in sharpest outline. Her mind dwelt on the evening when the Eight Originals had strolled to the old Omnibus House and Nora had sung the song of Golden Summer. She could almost hear Tom say, "I'd like our lives, from this moment on, always to be one long, continued Golden Summer." She wondered if the very utterance of the wish had broken the spell. Then came the remembrance of those dear hours of preparation at Haven Home. Again she could fancy herself coming down the stairs in her wedding gown and pausing to listen as Nora sang "La Lettre."

Here her musings broke off abruptly. With the memory of "The Letter," a sudden tender resolve took possession of her. To-morrow Jean would start on his search. Very well, he should not go empty-handed. She would write a letter to Tom. When Jean found him, her letter should bridge the gap of distance between them.

Rising from the window seat she sought her desk. Seated before it, she took up her pen and laid a sheet of paper in place. Once she had begun to write it was as though an unseen power guided her to inspiration. She wondered if somewhere under the stars Tom Gray was seeking, at the same time, to send her a message. Never before had she been so thoroughly imbued with the mystical impression of his nearness to her. It was not a long letter, yet somehow she had managed exactly to convey the meaning she had intended. As she was finishing it, she heard the distant chime of the grandfather's clock downstairs, striking the half hour, and she smiled tenderly as the words of Nora's song returned to her. "I wonder: 'Is it I who write to thee, or thou to me?'"

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST CHANCE

Despite her midnight vigil, Grace rose before seven o'clock the next morning. On the previous afternoon Jean had stated that he would come early to Mrs. Gray's the following morning to bid them farewell before starting on his search for Tom. Eight o'clock found herself and Elfreda Briggs walking rapidly up Chapel Hill. They found the old hunter had stolen a march on them, however. When they entered the library he was already there, in earnest conversation with Mrs. Gray.

"I hav' wait for you," he said, after bidding them a quaint *bon jour*. "But now the time grow short. The train, she run at nine o'clock. It is now that we must say the *au revoir*. Not long an' I see the camp and M'sieu' David. It is good that you hav' telegraph the young man. Ol' Jean will do his best. *Le bon Dieu* will do the rest." The hunter reverently crossed himself.

"I have a letter for you, Jean, to give to Tom." Grace was wearing her most hopeful face as she gave the cherished letter into the old man's keeping. "When you have found Tom, and I know that you will, tell him that I am waiting for him and give—him—this—letter."



"When You Have Found Tom, Give Him This Letter."

"It shall be of a sacred trust," Jean assured, crossing himself again. "Be of the brav' heart, Mam'selle. For you and M'sieu' Tom the 'appiness is near. Now it is time to go."

Warmly shaking hands with the two for whom he was about to "do his best," Jean turned to Elfreda and offered his hand with: "I am the lucky man to hav' meet such good frien' to Mam'selle Grace."

"Thank you, Jean." Elfreda colored with pleasure at the sincere tribute. "Some day, when Tom Gray has been found and you are back again in Oakdale, we'll pay a visit to your cabin. Then I'll tell you what a splendid friend Grace Harlowe has been to me."

"It shall be as Mam'selle says," responded Jean gallantly. Accompanied as far as the veranda by the three women, Jean made his final adieus and strode down the pebbled drive to the gate, a sturdy, purposeful figure, despite his years. To the three who watched him almost out of sight, the determined set of his broad shoulders in itself seemed to presage the success of his mission.

"It was certainly nice in Jean to say what he did to me about my being your friend," was Elfreda's abrupt comment when, after saying good-bye to Mrs. Gray, the two young women started down Chapel Hill toward home. "It was the highest compliment that he could pay me. If there had been time I'd have liked to tell him a few of the reasons for it. I guess he would have understood then that I had special cause to be loyal to you. I don't mean by that that anybody would have to have special cause to be *your* friend. One would only have to meet you once, Grace Harlowe, to know that your friendship would be the kind worth having. That is, if one had any sense. That time I plumped myself down in your seat when we were bound for Overton College to begin our freshman year, I was too much wrapped up in myself to know how lucky I was. Isn't it queer, though, how things like that are often the means by which we begin the staunchest friendships?"

"Yes, it *is* strange. If we hadn't met on the train that day in that way, you might have decided to go to another boarding place instead of taking up with Mrs. Elwood's offer to you to share Miriam's room. Then, very likely, we might never have become well acquainted. There were ever so many girls at Overton College during the six years that I spent there, whom I never came to know really well." Grace looked regretful.

"But they all knew you," was the staunch retort. "You are as much of an institution there now as Harlowe House is. Your name has become a household word at Overton College. Emma and I were speaking of that very thing at the reunion. She said that if she were manager of Harlowe House for the next twenty years she'd never come to be known as well there as you were in the time you spent at Overton."

"Emma is a wily old flatterer and so are you," laughed Grace. "Just because you girls like me you think the whole world ought to fall in line and worship me." Her bantering tone changing to seriousness she continued, "Not that I don't appreciate your affection, and love you with all my heart for it. Neither of you ever stops to think how much credit you both deserve. Sometimes I wonder what I ever did to bring me so many true friends. I never properly realized their worth until this summer. Living in the shadow has taught me a great deal."

"The very fact that all my friends have stood by me so firmly has made me see that I owe it to them to be strong and steadfast through all. It has taught me, too, that I can't afford to be selfish. When Tom first went away I used to think that, if he never came back, there wouldn't be anything worth living for, ever again. But it came to me by degrees that such a viewpoint was utterly selfish; that I had a great deal to live for. Father and Mother, first of all; then Mrs. Gray and my friends. So I made up my mind that if worse came to worst, I would devote myself to them more than ever and thus try to make up for my own loss."

"Of course you would," agreed Elfreda, with a ready tenderness that arose from the emotion that had welled up within her at Grace's unconscious revelation of unselfishness. "No one knows that better than I know it."

"I wonder what the postman has brought us this morning?" Grace had decided that it was high time to lead the talk away from herself. She had spoken to Elfreda with utter frankness of her inner resolve, yet she could not bear to continue longer on the subject. It presented too vividly the possibility of Tom's non-return, and she had schooled herself not to dwell upon such a contingency.

"We'll soon know." They were now within a short distance of the Harlowe's home. "I hope Ma hasn't decided that I ought to go back to law school and written me to that effect," grumbled Elfreda. "Now I am here, I'd like to keep on being here until——" She paused.

"Until we hear good news," finished Grace softly. "I wish you would stay with me as long as you can, Elfreda. When the good news comes, I'd like you to be here to share it."

"Oh, I'll stay," assured Elfreda, "provided I can win Ma over to my views. It will be the same as using my powers of eloquence to convince a doubtful jury that the prisoner is innocent. There is nothing like practice," she reminded, her wide, boyish grin in mischievous evidence.

"Have we a heavy mail this morning, Mother?" was Grace's eager inquiry as she and Elfreda came up the front steps to the veranda. Established in a wide-armed rocking chair, her eyes busy with the reading of her own mail, Mrs. Harlowe looked up smilingly as she said, "Heavy enough to keep you both busy for a while. I didn't count your letters. They are on the library table in the living-room. I sorted them into two piles. Elfreda's was the highest."

"Thank you, dear." Blowing a gay little kiss to her mother, Grace made for the living-room, with Elfreda close behind her.

"I ought to receive a few dozen letters," commented Elfreda. "Nearly every one of my correspondents have been lagging and languishing." Running hastily over the stack of letters bearing her name, she separated one of them from the rest. "Here's the letter from Ma. Now we'll see whether its back to law school for J. Elfreda."

"Oh, here's one from Miriam." Having been equally busy with her own mail, Grace drew up a chair before the table. Slipping into it she soon became absorbed in what Miriam had written her.

Seated opposite her, Elfreda perused the letter from her mother with the anxious eye of one about to receive sentence. In the middle of it she uttered a cluck of satisfaction. "Excuse me for interrupting you, but I just wanted to tell you that Ma is a wingless angel. I don't have to do the convincing act at all. She says I may stay with you until I either wear out my welcome or get ready to come home. Isn't that a glorious message? Hooray!" Elfreda waved her maternal parent's unexpected missive of leniency on high.

"Glorious indeed." Finishing the short but interesting letter from Miriam, Grace shoved it across the table to Elfreda. "Read it," she commanded. "I know Miriam would be willing that you should. As her roommate of long standing you are entitled to special privileges."

"Thank you." Elfreda pounced upon the proffered letter with avidity, while Grace continued with her own correspondence. Counting her letters over, she found she had received nine. As was her usual custom, she had begun with the top one, which was from Miriam, and read them in the order in which they were stacked. Elfreda on the contrary, scattered broadcast on the table the whole ten letters she had received. She picked and chose with the air of a connoisseur, keeping up a running fire of ridiculous remarks between letters, that moved Grace to frequent laughter, but did not distract her attention to any degree from her own affairs. She had become too familiar with Elfreda's always entertaining methods of doing things to be other than amused by them.

The contents of her own mail filled her with a quiet joy. One and all, so far as she had read, her friends breathed undying friendship and deep devotion to herself. There was a long letter from Eleanor Savelli, who was summering in Colorado with her father and aunt. It held the glad tidings that Miss Nevin and herself intended to come to Oakdale for the winter. Her father's concert tour would soon begin. She did not expect to travel with him that winter. She was anxious to come back to "Heartsease" for a long rest. Much in the letter was of a deeply sympathetic nature, relating to Grace's misfortune. She begged Grace to inform her at once should matters take a happier turn and hoped before long to be with her.

There was also a letter from Mabel Allison confiding the news of her engagement to Arnold Evans. She was very happy, she declared. Formal announcement of her betrothal to Arnold had not yet been made, but Grace would soon receive a card to that effect. Mabel Ashe wrote much sympathy, her letter fairly bristling with her lovable, vivid personality. She ended with the

jubilant news that she had sold the novel on which she had worked so long and patiently to complete, to a well-known book publishing firm. She had named it, "the Guardian of the Flame." She styled it as "the story of a woman's heart," and her publishers believed it would be very successful.

The Emerson twins sent her a funny little epistle, in which they had taken turns in the writing of its many paragraphs. It had evidently been gotten up with a view to cheering her and she read between the lines the kindness which had prompted the joint authors to the deed. Jessica and Anne came next with loving letters that proved how completely one they were with her in spirit. A colorful account of the doings of the Harlowe House girls at Overton College as set down by Evelyn Ward brought a smile of pleasure to Grace's face.

One of the two remaining envelopes bore Arline's mark. Grace's smile deepened as she opened it and saw:

"DEAREST LOYALHEART:

"You owe me a letter, but never mind. I am of a patient and forgiving disposition, so I'll overlook it. I have a very funny bit of news to write. Stanley Forde, the hateful old tyrant, has gone and engaged himself to be married again. Just like that! Don't think this is a case of sour grapes. I am de-lighted. I am sorry for the poor party of the second part, though. I know her well. She is a pretty but foolish young person who was in love with Stanley ages before he became betrothed to me. Of course he did it to spite Daffydowndilly, but I'm not a bit 'spited.' I feel as though I ought to go to the girl in the case and tell her what I know about him. But it's useless to think of doing so."

Arline devoted further space to affectionate inquiry regarding Grace's troubles and ended with the naïve announcement:

"The other day I met a perfectly delightful young man at a dinner dance. He is as much interested in settlement work as I am, and is as nice as Stanley Forde is horrid. To-morrow he and Father and I are going to motor out to the fresh air home Father founded. He is anxious to see what we have done. Isn't that sweet in him? I do hope appearances aren't deceitful. I'll tell you more about him after I have met him a few more times. It's not wise, you know, to rush into friendships.

"With much love. You owe me two letters.

"Cautiously,

"DAFFYDOWNDILLY."

The last letter on the pile was from Emma Dean. Hastily running over the first page, Grace laughed outright. "Listen to this, Elfreda," she commanded, her eyes dancing.

"DEAREST AND BEST-BELOVED GRACIOUS:

"Hark to the lamentations of a Dean from darkest Deanery, now transported to the Grace-haunted region of Overton! When first I set foot in this desolate waste, my primary impulse was to lift my venerable voice in a piercing wail of anguish. Only my overwhelming respect for the powers which sit sternly in Overton Hall, and a well-founded fear that I might be bundled off the campus to some fell institution for the demented, prompted me to refrain from howling. But the desire to howl still lingers, and some fine day I shall meander moodily to Hunter's Rock and there, upon its lonely height, startle the murmuring river below with my frantic cries. I shall stand well back from the edge of that perilous platform, however, as I have no malicious desire to deprive Overton of the best teacher in English Overton ever had, known to the English-speaking world as Emily Elizabeth Dean, who has now become a manageress (see Dean Vocabulary).

"Confidentially speaking, I should not have minded so much leaving darkest Deanery for this Grace-less wilderness if it had not been for the thought that your dear face would be missing in the picture. Do not rashly misjudge me by jumping to the conclusion that I parted with joy from the estimable Deans of whom I am which. Bitterly did I regret leaving my sorrowing parents. It was not lack of filial devotion to them that made me yearn for Overton. A terrible shadow, or rather several shadows, had hovered over hapless Deanery for a week before I packed my belongings and fled. Our humble home had been turned over to an aggregation of ruthless individuals who paint houses for a living. Darkest Deanery was once a timid shade of brown that grew even more retiring with years. Now it is a dazzling white, with still more dazzling gray trimmings. I can never forget that harmonious combination of gray and white, as I have annexed copious samples of it to most of my meager wardrobe.

"If only I had had the forethought to design a simple burlap costume with bag-like lines, and putting away false pride, worn it on all occasions during that last sad week at home, I should not now be spending my leisure hours experimenting to discover the most efficacious paint eradicator on the market. Every time I hopefully remove a prized garment from my trunk, I am confronted by the unhappy

recollection that darkest Deanery has been freshly painted. It's positively maddening!

"Knowing my fatal leaning toward the absent-minded, you can put two and two together. They don't make four. They make 'paint.' Oh, the supreme tragedy of that week! How well I remember the afternoon when I sat down confidently on the freshly-furbished porch rail in my best pongee dress. I was about to go to a luncheon. I went, but was late. There was a reason. By the time the front porch became a sticky, glistening wonder, I thoughtfully dropped my nice seal handbag in the middle of it. The irate painter remonstrated. Not because I had ruined my cherished possession, but because of the horrifying blank left where paint had lately flaunted itself. By the time it had dawned upon me that the back entrance to the house was the entrance for me, it had also become a trap for the unwary. There were frequent other accidental collisions with the aforesaid paint, all equally disastrous to poor me. Some of them were known to me at the time; some were among the things that were revealed thereafter. I began to feel that the whole vast universe was chiefly composed of paint. So I fled to the greater ill of an Overton without Grace Harlowe.

"As I have suffered deeply and shall continue to suffer until I can look my modest wardrobe in the face and say, 'presentable at last,' I am certain that I deserve a special boon of consolation. In plain English, to which I still cling, despite the fact that I dream of some day establishing a marvelous vocabulary of my own, won't you and Elfreda come to Overton to see me, if only for a day? I have thought things over carefully before asking you. It is not entirely selfishness that prompts the request. I think it would cheer you to come again for a visit to Harlowe House. Though I have replaced you as manager, I can never replace you in the hearts of the girls here. I understand why you may not wish to come. As always, my heart goes out to you. If you write 'no' as an answer, I shall accept it in the best possible spirit. But if you feel that you can drop in on me, even for a day, then I shall surely shriek with joy, right here at Harlowe House, and abide by the consequences. I have written Elfreda, too. If both letters reach you at the same time, and I shall mail them together, then you can shake hands and congratulate yourselves that you have both been invited.

"Yours hopefully,

"EMMA."

"I'd love to go." Grace hesitated. "Do you think it would be disloyal in me to leave Oakdale now, even for a day? I thought it over seriously before I went to Miriam's wedding. That was really a duty, you know. But since Jean has taken up Tom's case, it seems as though I am likely to hear something important within a few days."

"You mustn't be too sure," counseled Elfreda wisely. "You might be disappointed. It may take even Jean a long time to find out anything. I'm not saying that to be cruel."

"You don't need to tell me that. I know I mustn't expect too much, even of Jean. Yet I can't help thinking that if *he* doesn't find Tom, no one else ever will."

CHAPTER XXI

THE CALL OF THE ELF'S HORN

Jean, however, had no intention of failing those who so strongly relied upon him. He approached his difficult task with a confidence in his own powers which long years of the free, independent life of the great outdoors had given him. He knew the secrets of the wilderness as few men knew them. He had little doubt that much which had remained obscure to those already engaged in the search for Tom Gray would be made clear to him. Alone in the world, Jean had long since come to regard the Eight Originals as "his folks." Of the four girls, Grace Harlowe had always been his favorite. Of the four boys, Tom Gray had held first place in his heart. The young man's frank, delightful personality, coupled with his intense love of Nature, had served signally to endear him to the old hunter.

As Jean had reverently assured Grace, it was indeed, to him, a sacred mission on which he was now setting forth, and he longed impatiently for the moment to come when he might leave the narrow confines of the railway train and set foot in the little village nearest to the lumber camp. Mrs. Gray had insisted on providing him liberally with the funds she deemed necessary for the continuance of the search. Jean had stoutly protested against this liberality. Overruled, he had given in somewhat reluctantly, consoling himself with the thought that when M'sieu' Tom was found he would give back the greater part of the money which had been thus thrust upon him. His sturdy soul rose in revolt at the very idea of tucking himself away in a Pullman berth, even for a night. Such cubby-holes were not for him, he disdainfully reflected. He preferred to sit up all night and amuse himself by watching the fleeting, indistinct landscape through which the train

was pursuing its steady run toward the vast northern region that jealously concealed the mystery of Tom Gray's fate.

As he had already informed Grace and Mrs. Gray, the territory for which he was bound was to him a fairly familiar one. True he had not hunted in it for several years, although once or twice he had skirted it in making his slow, deliberate marches to and from Canada. He assured himself that naturally he would discover some changes in the heavy forest growth, stretching for many miles north and west of the lumber camp for which Tom Gray had headed. Yet Jean was not in the least dismayed by the magnitude of his task. More than once he had served as tracer of persons lost in the trackless wildernesses. More than once he had wandered about in the dense, pathless forests, a lost man.

While the train sped through the moonless night, Jean's sharp eyes were trained on the weird, shadowy outlines into which darkness turns the most commonplace objects. His nimble brain, however, was busily sorting out the scant details that had been furnished him regarding Tom Gray, with a view toward evolving a theory on which he might proceed. His own good sense informed him that he could not even make a guess regarding what had befallen his young friend until he had reached the lumber camp and himself surveyed the situation.

Seven o'clock the next evening saw the intrepid old man hurriedly collecting his few belongings, preparatory to making a welcome end to the long, tiresome ride in the train. Mrs. Gray had already telegraphed David Nesbit to be on hand at the dingy little station to meet him. The train rolled into it, puffing and clanging a noisy protest against the indignity of being obliged to stay its flight, even momentarily, before the scattered collection of frame dwellings dignified by the name of village. Hardly had it jolted itself to a reluctant stop before Jean made a hurried exit, to peer searchingly about the station platform for David Nesbit.

"Just the man I'm looking for," sounded a hearty voice behind him. Whirling, he uttered a glad cry as he reached for David's outstretched hand. "I'm certainly glad to see you, Jean."

"It is of a 'appiness to see you, M'sieu' David." Jean's weather-beaten face registered his joy.

"Come with me, Jean. There's an apology for a hotel not far from the station. We'd better stay there to-night, then start for the lumber camp early to-morrow morning. It's a long hike, but I know you'd rather walk than ride. Once we've had some supper, I can tell you what little I know of this part of the country. Have you ever been up here before?"

"Yep; 'bout five year ago, mebbe. I hunt up here a long winter. I know him." Jean indicated the forest beyond the village with a wide sweep of his arm. "Once, twice, after, I pass by him w'en I go an' come from Canada."

"Then you *do* know something about it? I'm mighty glad to hear that. But tell me about Oakdale and how you happened to pop up there just when we needed you most. Grace wrote me that she had tried to find you, but that you'd gone away."

On the way to the hotel which David had mentioned, Jean recounted in his broken phraseology all that had happened to him since his return to Oakdale, while David listened and commented on the strange manner in which the news of Tom's misfortune had been brought before the old hunter. Over a plain but palatable supper Jean continued his narrative to the point where he had landed on the station platform. "An' now the hunt begin," he nodded. "To-morrow we get up 'fore it is light, then we go to camp. All 'long way I look an' remember w'at I see. After that you show me w'ere you go hunt. After that we fin' new places far away. We hunt till we fin' M'sieu' Tom."

"That's the idea," applauded David. "I think we'd better turn in early at that. You must be dead tired. I know you don't like railway traveling. Did you take a sleeper here?"

"I don't lak' him," shrugged Jean. "I sit up all night. In the woods never I am tired, but in the train, yes. It will be good to rest."

After supper the two lingered for a while in the little room. Anxious to get the benefit of a good night's rest preparatory to their long tramp of the morning, it was not long before they climbed the narrow stairs to their rooms.

Five o'clock the next morning saw them eating a hasty breakfast, served by a drowsy-eyed girl. After David had stowed into a knapsack an ample luncheon for the two, and slung the knapsack across one shoulder, the little search party went forth and soon left the village behind them for the rough road that marked the beginning of their long jaunt through the forest. Having traversed it many times since his advent into that territory, David was well posted, yet he knew it no better than did Jean. The sturdy old man seemed familiar with every phase of that section. Now and again as they progressed he retailed some interesting bit of history relative to his own wanderings therein.

Noon found them more than half way to their destination, and by four o'clock they reached the camp, where Jean was introduced to Mr. Mackenzie, who had recovered from his illness and returned to his duties as overseer.

Jean discovered in the rugged Scotchman a person quite after his own heart. Previous to meeting the overseer, he had confided to David that he intended to make use of the tent which his young friend had stored with Mr. Mackenzie, and sleep out of doors. By the time supper was over, however, he was quite willing to accept the sleeping accommodations which David had made for

him at the Scotchman's house.

Seated around a deep, open fireplace, in which a fire burned cheerfully, the three men gravely discussed the details of the proposed search. Mr. Mackenzie was of the opinion that it would be better to blaze new trails rather than to waste time in traveling over the ground which David and his men had so thoroughly covered. But Jean obstinately stuck to his own viewpoint and insisted on re-traveling that territory. For three days the old hunter led the young man on strenuous hikes that began with dawn and ended long after dark. During that time Jean conducted David into all sorts of forest nooks and crannies that the latter had not even glimpsed when searching about with the men of the camp. Yet never did they observe the slightest sign of the object of their search.

At the end of the week, Jean announced his resolve to invade an especially wild and lonely stretch of forest to the west. "To-morrow morning we start," he declared. "We go mebbe twenty-five, mebbe fifty mile, mebbe more. Mebbe gone a week."

"But Tom could never have gone so far away in so short a time," reminded David. "Besides, when last seen he was headed directly north."

Jean shrugged. "Mebbe he lose his way. Mebbe travel all night in storm in wrong direction. Then ——" Again Jean's square shoulders went into eloquent play. "Anyway we go wes'," he stubbornly maintained.

The evening of another day saw them wending their difficult way westward, according to Jean's plan. Surrounded by a particularly dense and rugged stretch of forest growth they rolled up in their blankets and slept under a great tree. Jean assured David that they had come not more than fifteen miles, due to the difficulty they had encountered in forcing their way through the endless undergrowth, though the young man felt sure they had traveled fifty.

"I couldn't get those fellows from the camp to come over here for love nor money," remarked David the next morning, as he and Jean fried their bacon and made coffee over the fire. "They say that a wild man was once seen somewhere in this range of forest. I guess it's all talk, though. Mr. Mackenzie never saw him. He says it's a story made up by timber thieves to keep people away."

Old Jean looked reflective. "Once I know wil' man," he remarked. "First time I see him, jus' lak' any man. He great, big man; long black hair, an' strong; very strong. 'Bout six foot, three inch. He live in little cabin, 'bout hundred mile from here, wit' his son. Every year they go Canada an' hunt. Then come back and sell skins. My, how that man love that son! One day storm come an' tree fall on son. Kill him dead. Then the father go wil'; crazy in the 'aid. All his black hair turn white. After that I never see him again. Mebbe dead, too."

"I hope nothing like that happened to good old Tom." David shuddered. "Jean, honestly, do you think we'll ever find the boy?"

"*Le bon Dieu* know," Jean crossed himself reverently.

"I don't think much of the sheriff up here," continued David. "He simply laid down on his job after the first week or two. After Mrs. Gray had offered a reward he made quite a lot of fuss. But it all died out quickly. Blaisdell's done his best, but this isn't his kind of a job. Half a dozen so-called woodsmen up here have tried their hand at it, too. I spoke to the sheriff about this very piece of woods that we've invaded, but he claimed he'd gone all over the ground. I don't believe it, though. He gave me to understand that he thought the whole affair was very queer. He even asked me if Mrs. Gray wasn't holding back something. He hinted that she and Tom might have quarreled over family matters and that Tom was keeping out of sight on purpose to worry her. I reminded him that Tom had come up here to help Mr. Mackenzie out and told him a few things about Tom that ought to have changed his opinion. But I don't think he believed me. He's a bull-headed kind of fellow that would never admit himself in the wrong," ended David in disgust.

"I hav' seen many such," commented Jean soberly. "Anyhow we are here. W'en we hav' finish the breakfast then we start again. Mebbe some good come to-day."

"I hope so." David's voice sounded a trifle weary. It was hard indeed to meet with such continued discouragement.

Breakfast finished, the seekers again took up their quest. Noon found them not more than three miles away from the spot where they had breakfasted. The necessity of halting frequently to inspect some especially tangled bit of undergrowth or suspicious looking covert large enough to conceal the body of a man, made their progress painfully slow. Toward the middle of the afternoon, a cold rain set in, thereby adding to the discomforts of their march. Although it was early October, the great trees above their heads were partially stripped of their foliage, thus offering them little protection from the unceasing drizzle.

"This is awful, Jean!" exclaimed David Nesbit, as two hours later, drenched to the skin, the wayfarers huddled together under a giant oak tree to consider the situation. "We ought to try to find some sort of shelter for the night. It will soon be dark and we can't go on then. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Yep; this place 'bout eighteen mile from camp," Jean nodded confidently. "'Bout mile mebbe little more to little valley. In valley is the little cabin. I know him. Somebody say this cabin hav' haunt. Somebody kill 'nother man once who liv' there. Then nobody ever go near because dead man

walk aroun' there at night. Cabin mebbe not there now. Anyhow we see, because we know dead man can't walk aroun'."

"Lead me to the cabin. The dead man may walk around there all he likes, provided he doesn't object to our sheltering with him," declared David with grim humor.

Floundering through dense growths of impeding bushes and crackling underbrush, their feet sinking into a thick carpet of soggy, fallen leaves, the two at last reached the top of a steep, rocky elevation. From there, in the fast fading light, they could look down into a narrow valley, formed by the precipitous slant of two hills.

"I see him." Jean pointed triumphantly to a tiny hut, seemingly wedged into the upper end of the valley. In the October twilight the outlines of the shack were just visible.

"It's going to be some work to get down there," observed David, doubtfully eyeing the uninviting prospect before them.

"Up there, not very far, it is easy," assured Jean. "You follow me, then wait. I go ahead an' fin' the way." The indefatigable old hunter took the lead, plodding along with the same energy that had characterized the beginning of his day's tramp. Sturdy though he was, David soon found himself well in the rear of the tireless old man, and it was not long until he lost sight of him in the fast falling darkness.

Peering anxiously ahead, David flashed the small electric searchlight he carried in an effort to discern Jean. Fearing lest he might become lost from Jean entirely, he returned it to a coat pocket, cupped his hands to his mouth and emitted a peculiar trumpet-like call, known as the Elf's Horn, which Tom Gray himself had taught him. Twice he sounded it, before he had the satisfaction of hearing Jean answer him, repeating it several times.

Guided by the sound, and with the aid of his searchlight, David stumbled his hurried way toward Jean, who had now halted to wait for his young friend.

"Jean, you old rascal, I thought I'd lost you for good and all," laughed David as he brought up at the hunter's side. "You mustn't expect too much of a tenderfoot, you know. I'm ashamed to admit it, but——"

David's laughing admission was never finished. Over the monotonous complaint of the rain rose a sound which made their hearts stand still. From the very depths of the narrow valley floated up to them that unmistakable trumpet call, the Elf's Horn.

CHAPTER XXII

OUT OF THE VALLEY

"Did you hear that, Jean?" David's voice sunk to a sibilant whisper. He was trembling violently as he asked the question.

For answer, Jean raised shaking hands to his mouth. Again the call of the Elf's Horn shrilled above the murmuring rain, and again, this time clearer and louder, came the answer.

"*Le bon Dieu* hav' hear!" came the hunter's reverent exclamation. Stopping only to make the sign of the cross, the old man plunged down the perilous steep, David Nesbit at his heels. How they had come safely into the valley, neither was afterward able to explain, nor did they stop to remark it, once they had descended. Both men were intent only on reaching the spot from whence had emanated that blessed call.

"There's only one person up here who could answer that call, Jean." David's tones were vibrant with emotion. "It's Tom Gray! I know it, and he's in that hut."

Stumbling desperately on in the greater darkness of the valley, they reached the hut at last.

"Tom!" shouted David at the top of his lungs. "Tom Gray! Are you there?"

"Yes," sounded the unbelievable reply from within the hut. "Is that you, David! I was sure of it when I heard the Elf's Horn and answered the call. I knew you'd come for me some day."

"Yes, old fellow; it's David," rang out the triumphant cry. "Thank God, you are alive! Jean is with me."

"*Le bon Dieu* hav' hear," was Jean's muttered repetition, as the two men made a concerted dash upon the shack, in a wild effort to locate the door. Finding it by the aid of their flashlights, they made a determined onslaught upon it, but it stubbornly resisted their importuning hands.

"Hello, Jean! It's too good to be true. I might have known I could count on you, though," came the welcome salutation from within. More anxiously Tom Gray added: "You'll have to break the door down, if you can. It's locked from the outside. *He* carries the key. Hurry or he may come back." Tom's voice quivered with dread.

David groaned. His mind on this unexpected obstacle, which now confronted them, he did not stop to consider who the mysterious "he" in the problem might be. Tom's very tones indicated the hovering near of some great danger. "Isn't there a window in the cabin? Can't you climb out of it?" he shouted desperately. Inwardly he marveled that stalwart Tom Gray should be caught in such a trap.

"There are two windows, or rather holes in the cabin, but they are too high up. I can't reach them. My leg was broken and it's not strong enough yet to risk such a climb." This response was made in despairing tones.

At the mention of windows, Jean had begun to circle the cabin. Turning his flashlight on the strong-timbered walls of the hut, he soon made out one of those windows. "M'sieu' David," he called, "come. You will lif' me an' I will clim' in this hole. Then we 'urry an' get M'sieu' Tom out, mebbe." Jean's "mebbe" indicated uncertainty. The situation did not look hopeful and there was evidently no time for questions regarding the how, when and why of the affair.

Helped by David, Jean's sinewy fingers soon clutched the lower part of the primitive window. Being thin and wiry, he had no difficulty in drawing himself up to it. With the skill of an acrobat he swung one leg over the opening. The task of drawing himself through was much harder to accomplish. But the will to do so was paramount. Emitting a jubilant shout of accomplishment, he dropped, landing lightly on the cabin floor.

Before he could bring his searchlight into play, an indistinct form had seized him in a feeble but affectionate grip. "Jean—good—old Jean!" Tom's broken utterance held a sob of relief and thankfulness.

"Oh, M'sieu' Tom," Jean's own voice overran with emotion, "is it of a truth that we hav' fin' you at las'?" Tears of joy were rolling down his weather-beaten cheeks, as he added with sublime faith, "*Le bon Dieu* hav' hear!"

In the overwhelming joy of reunion all else was for the moment forgotten. David's stentorian tones asking, "Are you all right, Jean?" brought back swift realization of the situation. "Can't you manage between the two of you to do something to that door? I'll help all I can from this side."

"Yes; all right," returned Jean. Then to Tom: "Hav' you not then the axe, to chop him into splinter'? This very queer way to fin' you, M'sieu' Tom. But now we not stop to ask question, we 'urry, get you out. Go 'way an' then talk. It is to see that you are the prisoner."

"Prisoner!" Tom's exclamation vibrated with bitterness. "You can't believe what I've been through. You're right about hurrying to get me out. There's no time to be lost. No, there's neither an axe or a hatchet here. He's too cunning for that. But in one corner of the room is a heavy iron bar. It hasn't done me any good. I've been too weak to use it. Is your rifle outside, Jean? If he should come back before we can get away, you'll need it. Two sturdy men and one poor excuse like myself couldn't handle him. He's the strongest fellow I ever saw." His voice rising he called warning to David. "Keep a sharp watch, old man. If you see or hear anyone coming, give us the signal."

"I'm on the job," floated back David's reassuring response.

"Show to me the bar," ordered Jean with the brevity of one whose mind is set on swift action.

Without replying, Tom limped a straight course in the dark to a corner of the one-room shack. "I've looked at that bar so often and so longingly I could find my way to it if I were blind," he commented with grim wistfulness. "There's not much else in the room, except a bench and a bough bed."

Following at his heels, Jean used one hand to train his light on the bar. Soon the other hand had fastened itself firmly around it. "He very strong," was his terse observation. "If you will 'old the light, I try him." Raising his voice he shouted, "M'sieu' David, we hav' foun' very strong piec' iron. Now we try smash open the door. You stan' by, ready. Then soon we go 'way from here with M'sieu' Tom."

Limping ahead of the old hunter, Tom flashed the searchlight directly on the heavy door. "There's the door, Jean," he said, his tones thrilling with new hope. "Wait a minute until I limp out of your way. I'm not going to risk further accident. Now; go ahead and strike hard!"

Jean needed no second bidding. Resolutely gripping the bar, he raised it on high and dealt the stubborn obstruction to Tom's freedom a reverberating blow. Three times he brought it down upon the opposing portal. Half a dozen more swings of the bar and splinters began to fly from it.

Outside the shack, David Nesbit's eyes and ears were busy obeying Tom's warning instructions. Whom Tom feared and why he was afraid, his chum had not the remotest idea. Every crashing blow which Jean dealt the door, sent a thrill of joy to David's heart. He would have liked to shout his jubilation, but refrained for fear his friends within the shack would misinterpret his loud rejoicing as a danger signal.

For at least fifteen minutes Jean continued to batter the door, resting briefly at intervals. At the end of that time, he had demolished it sufficiently to make room for a man to crawl through. To break it down completely would have taken too much precious time.

"It—is—don'!" he panted at length. "Now we go 'way soon. First I try him. If still you hav' the coat

an' 'at, M'sieu' Tom, put him on; but 'urry."

"I've already done so," assured Tom with fervor. "It's lucky for me that lunatic didn't see fit to hide my clothes."

Jean pricked up his ears at the word "lunatic," but said nothing. "Careful," he cautioned solicitously, as Tom, essaying to make his exit from the hut, drew back, uttering a faint moan of pain. "It is for me to 'elp you." Secretly marveling at Tom's light weight, Jean lifted him in his arms. Bidding him straighten his legs, Jean called to David to stand by to receive his burden. Then the old hunter passed him through the opening to David as though Tom had been a bag of meal. Hastily scrambling through after him, Jean was just in time to witness the affecting meeting which took place between the two young men. Tom's first words after greeting David were: "Tell me quickly, how are Grace and Aunt Rose?" And in the darkness no one saw the flood of emotion that mastered Tom Gray as he learned the deep, abiding belief of his loved ones that he would return.

Though the night lay black around them, the rain had ceased falling. Directing the rays of his searchlight on Tom, David gave a horrified gasp at the sight of his chum's pale, emaciated features.

"I don't look much like myself, do I?" asked the prisoner with a short laugh. "The fact is, I don't know just how I do look, but I guess it's pretty bad."

"But how in the world did you ever come to be——" began David.

"No time for talk now," broke in Jean. "We mus' 'urry, an' get way off from here. You can walk a little, M'sieu' Tom? Not far? We 'elp you. There is easy way out of valley."

Yet it was not an easy matter, even with the combined force of the two men, to conduct Tom Gray out of the valley in which he had spent so many weary, hopeless weeks. His left leg, which had been broken above the knee, was far from strong. It was only within the past week that he had been able to limp painfully about the narrow confines of his jail. Once outdoors, the darkness of the night and the roughness of treacherous, rock-strewn ground made progress barely possible. Neither did Jean nor David dare to undertake carrying him. Burdened with Tom, a single misstep on the part of either was likely to prove disastrous to all three.

"We mus' tak' the chance," declared Jean gravely to David, when at last the arduous ascent from the valley had been stumblingly accomplished. "'Bout four mile 'way we caché the t'ings. Only I hav' the rifle an' the blanket of us two, an' M'sieu' David hav' the knapsack. In that we hav' the supper. We go little funder. W'en we fin' the big rock, we lie on it the blanket, an' on him we lie M'sieu' Tom. Then, you an' me, we stay up an' watch. W'en morning com', then we mak' litter an' carry M'sieu' Tom. I hav' hear him speak of wil' man. If wil' man com', Jean will be ready to shoot at him the rifle. You are satisfy?"

"I don't see that we can very well do differently," was David's rueful reply. "At least we shall have a chance to find out from Tom just what has happened to him."

"No; M'sieu' David." Jean shook a respectful but decided head. "For to-night we mus' say no much. M'sieu' Tom is too tire' to talk. Also we mus' keep the quiet. No much nois'; no fire to cook the supper. The ear of a wil' man hear far off. It is good if we miss him. You hav' hear M'sieu' Tom say the wil' man is very strong. Jean is not 'fraid. But many year he hunt, an' never shoot the rifle at any man. Now he pray *le bon Dieu* that he never may hav' it to do."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STRANGE STORY

Jean's fervent declaration that he prayed never to be obliged to use his rifle against a human being may have acted as a potent charm against evil. At any rate, the welcome light of a gray October morning saw the little company still undisturbed by any unpleasant intruder. It had been a strenuous night for the three men, yet daylight found them signally cheerful and alert. The long weary vigil that David and Jean had kept, the greater part of it standing on their feet, was a watch of pure affection. The object of their solicitude had been hardly more comfortable. The cold, rain-beaten rock on which Jean had spread his own and David's blankets was a poor couch at best. But to Tom it represented the freedom he had despaired of ever again attaining, and he was more than satisfied with his makeshift bed. Worn out by his recent exertion, he had fallen asleep directly after they had eaten supper. He awakened at daybreak declaring that he felt refreshed and much stronger.

As soon as the first indications of dawn appeared in the still-cloudy sky, Jean was about and stirring. As they devoured the few sandwiches they had left, he gravely urged the necessity of starting at once for the spot where he had cachéd their supplies. Among these supplies was a coil of thin, tough rope which Jean proposed should serve in the construction of a litter on which to carry Tom. Once that important detail had been attended to, they would be able to proceed much faster toward Mr. Mackenzie's camp.

Again old Jean had insisted that Tom must postpone the telling of his story until they were well on the way to camp. "You talk now, you get tire', M'sieu' Tom," he said with a solemn wagging of his gray head. "We know wil' man have shut you up an' keep you hid for long time. It is enough to know. We are satisfy." Privately Jean was alive with curiosity regarding the mysterious "wil' man," yet his duty to Tom came first and he did not intend to slight it in any particular.

The hike to the cachéd supplies was painful for Tom Gray, yet he limped along uncomplainingly, part of the time supported by Jean's ready arm; then again helped over the rough spots by David. Though they had set forth with the dawn, it was after mid-day when they reached their goal. Almost immediately after they arrived, Jean scoured the vicinity for enough dry wood to build a fire. Once a blaze was well started David prepared the simple meal, while the intrepid old man turned his attention to the construction of the litter. Armed with a hatchet he hacked sufficient boughs from the trees with which to make it, and went at his task with a will.

He left his task only long enough to snatch a hasty bite, then returned to it, his wiry fingers fairly flying as he worked. When completed, the litter would be a rude affair at best, made somewhat more comfortable by the folded blankets which covered it. Tom, meanwhile, was rejoicing openly over his coffee and crisp fried bacon. "It's the first square meal I've had for over a week," he declared. "If you only knew—but I'll have to wait to tell you. Won't I, Jean?" He called this last to Jean, who was putting the finishing touches to the litter.

"It is for M'sieu' Tom's own good that I mak' the reques'," replied Jean. "But for this, that you min' what ol' Jean tell you, I will give you the rewar'." His shrewd black eyes very tender, Jean fumbled in an inner pocket of his rough coat. Drawing forth Grace's letter he rose and tendered it to the astonished young man.

"Now him is done," Jean referred, not to Tom, but to the finished means for Tom's transportation. "I go, put 'way the t'ings till we com' after, som' day." With this pointed assertion, Jean promptly made good his word. David followed him with alacrity, leaving Tom alone with his unexpected treasure. Despite Jean's frequent admonitions that they "mus' 'urry," it was fully fifteen minutes before either he or David returned to the wan, but happy-faced figure by the fire. Man-like, not one of the three made any allusion to the letter which was now tucked away in one of Tom's coat pockets. Jean and David had seen the light of a great joy flame up in their comrade's gray eyes, and in the old hunter's vernacular, they were "satisfy."

Having again cachéd their few effects, with the exception of Jean's trusty rifle, Tom was soon established on the litter and the hike was again renewed. Difficult as it had been for David and Jean to make their way to the point in the woods which they had just left, the return was a trebly laborious journey. The approach of night found them not yet halfway to the lumber camp. They had calculated that the increased supplies in David's knapsack would furnish them with supper, leaving a comfortable allowance for breakfast the next day. By starting again at daylight the following morning they hoped to reach camp before the middle of the next afternoon. As they drew nearer to the camp they knew they would find the road less difficult.

"We hav' not done bad," congratulated Jean when, at twilight, they halted to prepare supper. "We hav' meet no one that hav' the wish to 'arm us. M'sieu' Tom he get better all the time. Mebbe now because he get better an' we so near camp, after supper he tell about wil' man. Then we turn in; go to sleep quick, an' to-morrow we are safe."

"You are right, Jean. I am getting better every minute, thanks to you fellows. Since I have your permission at last to talk about myself, I'll tell you what I've been crazy to say ever since I heard the call of the Elf's Horn and you found me." Tom gave an involuntary sigh as the events of the past few weeks came to his mind.

Supper was somewhat hastily disposed of. Both David and Jean were as anxious to hear Tom Gray's story, as the latter was to tell it. Self-denial in this respect had been hard to practice. Yet all three had acquitted themselves with credit. Seated on a log, with his friends on either side of him, Tom started his strange narrative with:

"At the very beginning I'll say that I'm primarily to blame for my own troubles. The afternoon I landed in that little village nearest to the camp, I had made up my mind to get to camp that same day. When I found I couldn't get any kind of conveyance to take me there, I decided to walk. The station master warned me that a big storm was coming, but I thought I could make the trip before it came. The sky didn't look very threatening to me.

"He was a better weather prophet than I, for I hadn't gone two miles when the storm broke. And such a storm! It was a terror! At first it was a gale of wind, and maybe it didn't hit the trees, though. The way they came crashing down made me sick at heart. You know how I feel about trees. That I might get hurt didn't bother me half so much as to see the way those magnificent old wonders were being demolished.

"Though it was summer it grew pretty dark in the woods and, for the first time I ever remember, I lost my way, I didn't know it just then. I thought I was going north, when all the time I must have been going west. I didn't want to stop. I thought I would be courting just as much chance of getting hit by a falling tree if I stood still as if I kept on going. Besides I was anxious to reach the camp. I had been following a narrow trail, as well as I could under the circumstances, and I supposed I was still on it. It was not until long afterward that I realized that I had made a mistake.

"Well, I plodded along for hours thinking I'd soon reach the camp. It was then pitch dark and raining hard. I was beginning to tire, too. I wasn't in the least worried about not finding the camp. I knew, of course, by that time that I was lost, but I knew, too, I'd be all right when morning came. What bothered me was to hunt some place where I could get out of the rain and spend the night. But I couldn't find even an overhanging rock, though I kept my pocket searchlight going constantly.

"The last time I turned it on my watch I saw it was ten o'clock. After that—well here comes the queerest story you ever heard. I was stumbling along in the dark, when all of a sudden the ground seemed to disappear under my very feet. I felt myself falling. I don't suppose it was more than ten feet, but it seemed a mile. I struck something hard, all in a heap. After that I didn't remember anything until I opened my eyes, groaning terribly. It was just getting daylight. I was lying at the bottom of a gorge. Bending over me was the most terrifying person I had ever seen in all my forest wanderings. It was a man and he was a regular giant. He had a head of long snow-white hair and a long white beard that made him look like Father Time. But his face was young, almost child-like, except his eyes. They were big and black and wild. When he saw my eyes were open he gave a kind of leap into the air and shouted at the top of his lungs: 'He is alive again! My son has come back!'

"Before I could say a word he stooped and grabbed me up in his arms. As my left leg hurt me terribly, I knew it must be broken. I groaned and tried to tell him, but he hung me over his shoulder as though I were a feather and went crashing through the woods. I fainted with pain and didn't come to myself again for quite a while. We were still traveling along as though the fellow had on seven league boots. The pain in my leg became even worse and I fainted again. When I came to myself the second time, the sun was shining down through the trees. I was lying on the ground and this crazy fellow—I was sure by that time that he *was* crazy—was circling around me, muttering and laughing to himself.

"I tried again to talk to him, but I was suffering too much to do more than mumble. I don't know how long we'd been there. I suppose he'd only stopped to rest, for before long he hoisted me over his shoulder again and away we went. Quite a while after that we struck that little valley where the hut stands. He carried me into the shack and laid me on the floor. I hadn't the least idea of what he was going to do, and I was too sick to care. I knew he was crazy and that I could expect almost anything to happen. What really happened was the biggest kind of a surprise. He undressed me with the greatest gentleness and then examined my broken leg, and afterward set it and fixed it up with the skill of a doctor, in spite of the fact that he had no conveniences to help him. You can imagine how I suffered during the process. I groaned a good deal and he must have really sympathized with me, for he crooned and lamented over me all the time he was doing it. He kept calling me his dear son and said over and over, 'God has given you back to me at last.'

"Then he went out of the hut and came back after a while with a forest of balsam boughs. He made me a bough bed in one corner of the room, spread a blanket over it and laid me on it. After that he rummaged around the place and fished out an iron kettle from a heap of stuff in a corner. Then he took it and went out of the shack, and I heard him lock the door after him. He was gone a long time, several hours, I presume. When he returned he hunted up a battered tin dish and went out again. Pretty soon he came back with part of a cooked rabbit and some broth. And I was glad to get it.

"Matters ran along in about that way for some days. I tried at first to keep track of them, but I was in so much pain that I soon lost count. It wasn't physical pain alone, either. I went almost crazy myself wondering what Grace and Aunt Rose would think at not hearing from me. I knew that as soon as they realized that I had disappeared, they would send some one to find me. I hadn't the least idea of where I was. I still supposed that I wasn't far from the lumber camp and expected any moment to see a search party descend on the hut. I soon found that I couldn't expect any help from my host. He was crazy as a loon and besides he had a fixed idea that I was a son of his who had evidently been supposed to be dead for several years and had now come to life again in the woods. I tried once to explain to him that I wasn't his son, but it made him so angry that I was afraid to say anything more about it for fear he'd finish me. He wouldn't talk much. When he did say anything it was absolutely without sense. But he'd sit on the floor beside my bed by the hour, and stare at me out of his wild black eyes. He was good to me, though. He fed me and took care of me in a way that surprised me.

"Twice he left me for a whole day and a night. When he came back he brought a lot of provisions with him. He had quite a bit of money in notes in the shack. He kept it in a box under a board in the floor and almost every day he'd go there to look at it. He never counted it. He'd lift the board, haul out the box, pat the roll of bills, croon over it, and stuff it back again. One thing kept me thinking we were near to the camp was the provisions he brought in. How he managed to get them without getting himself locked up was a mystery to me.

"As my leg began to get better, he began to grow less careful of me. Knowing that I couldn't possibly get away, he would set food and water beside my bed, lock me in the cabin—he never failed to do that—and go away for three or four days at a stretch, sometimes longer. Often I used to be faint with hunger before he'd come back. On one of those jaunts somebody must have seen him, for he came tearing into the hut late one night saying, 'I am afraid they saw me! I hid in the woods until dark for fear they would follow me. They must not see me nor find out where I live. If they do, they will try to take you away again and then tell me you are dead. They would not believe that you have come to life again. If they ever come I will kill them.'

"After that he stayed in or near the shack for days. He was so upset for fear someone would find me that instead of going around as usual without saying much, he would talk all the time. He was cunning enough not to talk loudly, though. He had a glimmer of sense even if he was crazy, for he kept his voice down to a mutter. I dare say my broken leg would have healed a good deal faster, if he had gone on giving me as good care as he gave me at first. He wasn't anxious for me to get well. He used to say, 'When you can walk again, you will have to stay shut up just the same. If you go into the woods, they will see you and take you away.'

"Privately I made up my mind that as soon as I was well enough I wouldn't wait for 'them' to 'take me away'; I'd go of my own accord. But I had to be careful. As I've already told you he was a giant. He was at least six feet three and strong as a gorilla. I often used to wonder who he was and all about him. One day, about a week before you came, I thought I'd try my damaged leg to see if I could use it. He was off on one of his jaunts or I wouldn't have dared to try it. I found I could hobble about a little and just for curiosity I lifted up the board in the floor, not because I wanted to count his money, but to see what else he kept in the little old-fashioned box he always took it from. All I found besides the money was a battered photograph of a little boy. On the back of it was written in a round, childish hand: 'To my father. You little son, Wallace Lindsey, twelve years old.' I suppose it must have been——"

Old Jean interrupted Tom's recital with a sudden ringing cry of, "It is the wil' man! He hav' the name Lindsey. You remember, M'sieu' David, I hav' tell you 'bout him!" In his excitement Jean leaped from the log, Tom and David viewing him in amazement. "But w'en I hav' see his son, he big man lak' his father."

"What do you know of him, Jean!" Tom's question was freighted with eagerness. "It's evident you must know something."

"Do you mean, Jean, that you think this fellow is the one you were telling me of?" demanded David skeptically.

"It is the sam'," almost shouted the hunter. "I hav' know the name when I hear it, but never could I remember. But I think he dead long time, because after his son who he hav' love much get kill by tree, he turn to wil' man an' run 'way to Canada, an' no one know after where he hav' gone. Of a truth we hav' done well not to meet him. No wonder you say 'urry an' get away, M'sieu' Tom."

"Yes, I knew the danger if you didn't," returned Tom. "He had been gone three days when you came and I was expecting him back at almost any minute. Now I understand why he called me his dear son. How we managed to dodge him is a miracle."

"Finding you was a miracle!" was David's reverent exclamation. "I feel as though I'd been living in a nightmare and just awakened from it."

"*Le bon Dieu* never forget the one' he lov'," nodded Jean positively. "An' he hav' lov' Mam'selle Grace an' M'sieu' Tom much or we never fin' the M'sieu'." Jean made his usual sign of reverence for the Supreme Being in which his faith was firmly grounded. "Now we mak' ready to spen' another night outdoors. Jean will watch while his frien's sleep. To-morrow an' we see the camp. Then, M'sieu' David, it is for you to go to the village an' sen' the message that we hav' not fail, to those who watch an' wait."

Late the following afternoon the overseer of the lumber camp received the surprise of his life. The sight of two exhausted, weather-beaten men who toiled painfully into his front yard, bearing a rude litter on which reclined a third man, sent the amazed Scotchman racing joyfully to meet them. A little later Tom Gray was surrounded by the comforts which had so long been denied him. After a hearty meal and a brief rest, David Nesbit set off for the village on the overseer's horse to telegraph to Grace Harlowe and Mrs. Gray the glorious news that Tom Gray had been found and would soon be restored to them.

But David had also another equally important commission to execute which directly concerned Jean's "wil' man." After sending the two telegrams he went at once to the home of the county sheriff, who lived in the village. Completely disgusted with the lax manner in which the sheriff had conducted the search, David reported to him the finding of Tom, with a scathing arraignment which the inefficient official accepted in scowling silence. Convinced by David's rebuke that it was high time to redeem himself, he agreed to send out a posse of men the very next day to cover the western stretch of forest in which the demented man had managed to keep himself so cleverly concealed.

It may be said here that the sheriff kept his word. For two weeks the hunters of the unfortunate man scoured the forest to find him. Due to the wildness of the region they had great difficulty in locating the place of Tom Gray's imprisonment. Once discovered, they found the hut empty. A guard was posted around it, but the fearsome tenant never returned. It was not until almost a year afterward that those whose lives fate had briefly linked with his, read in a newspaper a lengthy account of his capture in a town a long distance from the territory surrounding the lumber camp. The news that he had been placed in an asylum for the insane was a matter of relief to all concerned.

On the very afternoon that Tom Gray was carried into the overseer's yard Grace Harlowe and J.

Elfreda Briggs were making arrangements to leave Oakdale for a brief visit to Emma Dean at Overton College. They had planned to depart for Overton on the nine o'clock train the next morning, little dreaming of the remarkable upheaval that was soon to take place in their plans. Having waited long and patiently for news from the north Grace was feeling the suspense most keenly. She had expected so much from Jean that with each day's dawn the struggle to maintain a hopeful aspect grew more difficult. It was now over two weeks since Jean had departed from Oakdale, and aside from two brief letters from David, written during the first week of the renewed search for Tom Gray, she had heard nothing further from him. From Jean she had not expected to receive a letter. It had been agreed beforehand that David should do the letter-writing.

Despite her efforts at concealment, her deep depression now began to stamp itself so strongly upon her sensitive features, that Elfreda Briggs had again pleaded with her to consider paying a brief visit to Emma Dean. Fond as she was of Emma, Grace's heart was not in the proposed trip to Overton. She finally made reluctant consent, merely to please the girl who had stood by her so staunchly.

It was therefore a most mournful Loyalheart who listlessly packed a traveling bag, preparatory to the next morning's journey. Long after the house was quiet for the night, she lay awake, debating with herself whether or not it were wise to go to Overton. Morning found her still undecided. When at half-past eight o'clock she and Elfreda descended the stairs, luggage in hand, she experienced a wild desire to refuse flatly to go. The thought that the taxicab ordered to convey them to the station was probably on its way to the house, brought her a remorseful reflection that she had no right to back out at the last moment, thus disappointing Elfreda.

"What's the matter with that taxicab, I wonder?" grumbled the latter. Standing beside Grace on the veranda, she was engaged in peering frowningly down the street. "When I make up my mind to go, I want to go. If that driver loiters along the way until he makes us miss our train, he'll hear what I have to say about it. The idea of him being so late——"

"Oh!" A sharp cry from Grace, whose gray eyes had been pensively staring up the street, put an abrupt end to Elfreda's remark. Coming down the street toward the house a bicycle appeared ridden by a youngster in the uniform of a messenger from a world-known telegraph company. Where was he going? Was the telegraphic communication he bore for her? Grace cried out again as she saw him stop before the gate and dismount.

Before he was fairly through the gate a lithe figure had darted down the steps toward him. Halfway up the walk they met. "Telegram for you, Miss Harlowe," announced the boy cheerily. "Sign here, please." Handing her a stub of a pencil, he held the book. With a shaking hand she managed to trace her name. As he turned and went down the walk whistling shrilly, Grace stared at the yellow envelope, hardly daring to open it.

In the same instant she felt Elfreda Briggs' reassuring arm about her. From the veranda the stout girl "could see" and had acted accordingly.

With a quick gasping breath Grace tore open the envelope, her trembling fingers fumbling at its contents. Then the world seemed suddenly to recede, leaving her alone with the unbelievable information: "Tom found. O.K. Sends love. Coming home Tuesday. Will wire train. David."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NOON OF GOLDEN SUMMER

It was high noon on a gloriously sunshiny Indian summer day in November; one of the last fond concessions of Mother Nature to those who still mourn her departed "darling of the year." In a stately church on Chapel Hill, Golden Summer was at high noon in two hearts. To Tom Gray and Grace Harlowe, as they knelt for a moment before the altar, preparatory to taking their vows of eternal constancy and devotion, the world held but those two.

In the sweet silence that pervaded the overflowing church, the two young voices rang out clearly as they repeated their solemn pledges. Unflinchingly they had weathered their winter of despair. It was eminently fitting that happiness should now flood their loyal souls. Among the large assemblage that had gathered to witness the welding of that holy bond, there was not one person who did not rejoice with Grace and Tom.

Over a month had passed since that memorable October evening when Tom Gray, looking but a shadow of his formerly robust self, had set foot on the platform of the Oakdale station to receive the fervent welcome of those whose lives and interests were centered in his own. As his arrival had been kept a secret, few by-standers were at the station when he arrived. After the first rush of greeting had spent itself, he was affectionately conducted to Mrs. Gray's limousine with herself, the Wingates, Grace, David and Jean as a bodyguard. Though still weak, three days of rest had done much for him. Whatever he still lacked in mere physical strength, he was the same buoyant, cheerful Tom, with only a slight limp in his walk, and a touch of haunting wistfulness in his gray eyes as a reminder of his terrible experience.

At home once more and surrounded by every luxury and with every consideration that those who loved him could offer, health came back with a rush. His rugged constitution had stood him in good stead during those dark days in the sequestered hut, and by the first of November he was quite himself again.

During the days of his rapid convalescence, the earlier-interrupted wedding plans went steadily forward. The bitterness of loss had doubly endeared Grace and Tom to each other. Out of the ashes of suffering, affection had put forth a new growth which to them seemed completely to dwarf their love of previous days. In proportion to the sorrow which had been hers when she wrote to her comrades regarding the postponement of her marriage was the supreme joy she experienced in writing them of Tom's return. With Tom at home and entirely well again, she felt that she could this time defy fate in setting her wedding day for the sixteenth of November.

And now the day had dawned, perfect in its autumnal beauty. Though the trees were bare of leaves, the Oakdale gardens and lawns still flaunted a few late-blooming, rich-hued chrysanthemums. Perhaps it was because of the dark season of suspense through which she and Tom had passed that Grace declared herself for the cheerful daintiness of a pink and white wedding. In contradistinction to the weddings of her chums, who with the exception of Miriam Nesbit had each been accompanied to the altar by a bevy of bridesmaids, Grace announced that she wished the services of only a maid of honor and two flower girls. Nor did any one complain when her choice of bridal attendant fell upon J. Elfreda Briggs. As for the latter, she was in the seventh heaven of delight and wondered humbly how it had all happened. Anna May and Elizabeth Angerell felt equally proud and delighted to have been chosen by dear Miss Harlowe as flower girls.

As the greater part of the townspeople of Oakdale were desirous of seeing Grace Harlowe and Tom Gray married, Grace rather reluctantly decided in favor of a church wedding. Privately she would have preferred being married in her own home, but this she kept strictly to herself. There was also another secret which she and Tom sedulously guarded. It related to where they intended to go on their honeymoon. Only Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe and Mrs. Gray had shared their confidence regarding their purposed destination, and their elders proved themselves to be good secret-keepers. Withholding this bit of information was in the nature of a whim on Grace's part, and though she and Tom were daily besieged with questions by their friends, no one had any serious thought of spoiling Grace's little surprise by endeavoring to pry it from her smiling lips.

Apart from the Six Originals and her many intimate Oakdale friends of school and later days, countless others gathered from far and near to be on hand for the great day. The Semper Fidelis girls had journeyed to Oakdale to a member. Judge Putnam and his sister, Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Allison and Mabel, Arnold Evans, the Southards, Eleanor Savelli, her father and her aunt, Miss Nevin, had all congregated to do her honor. Even Professor Morton and Miss Wilder were among those present. Mrs. Gray insisted on making herself responsible for the appearance of the Harlowe House girls, who received special permission from Professor Morton to attend the great event in a body.

Kathleen West, Laura Atkins, Mabel Ashe and Patience Eliot came to the wedding, as did Madge Morton and the Meadow-brook Girls. In fact, Oakdale had the air of a town holding a convention, and it would not have been surprising to many had the streets of the little city suddenly burst forth in gay decorations. As for wedding gifts, their name was legion, and Grace laughingly declared herself to be hopelessly embarrassed by the number of beautiful and costly offerings which poured in upon her.

Perhaps she was most deeply touched, however, by the arrival of a wonderful set of martin furs, sent her by Jean. The old hunter occupied a front seat in the church, at Tom's and Grace's earnest request, his rugged face glowing with proud happiness as he watched the two young people united in marriage. The ceremony over, Tom's first act after saluting his bride, embracing his aunt and newly acquired mother-in-law and grasping the hand of Mr. Harlowe, was to beckon Jean to him. "You come next, Jean. You gave me my happiness," were words which the old hunter treasured to the end of his life.

"For once I hav' the honor to salut' Mam'selle Grace," smiled the old man as he gripped Tom's hand. Then he kissed the radiant girl lightly on both cheeks, after the fashion of his nation. To him she would always be Mam'selle Grace.

Due to the flood of congratulations which constantly poured in upon the newly-weds, it was some time before they left the church to enter a waiting automobile which was to convey them to the Harlowes' home.

In order not to slight anyone, an elaborate reception had been arranged to take place there after the performance of the ceremony. The reception began shortly after the bridal pair reached the house, yet it was past five o'clock when the numerous guests had departed with the exception of a few of Grace's close friends, who stayed to see herself and Tom depart on their honeymoon.

"At last the mystery of 'Where lies honeymoon land?' is about to be solved," proclaimed Hippy, in a loud, jubilant voice. Occupying the center of the spacious flower-decked living-room he beamed benevolently on the company of young folks who had tarried at the Harlowes' to learn that very thing. Gathered there were six of the Eight Originals, Miriam, Everett Southard and Miss Southard, the Savellis and Miss Nevin, Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Nesbit, old Jean, Kathleen West and Patience Eliot, Mabel Ashe, Laura Atkins and the Semper Fidelis girls. Despite the goodly size of

the room it was a trifle more than well-filled by those who waited till Grace and Tom should reappear to say good-bye before starting on their trip. The latter had briefly absented himself to go on a mysterious errand to his aunt's home, which they guessed had something to do with the secret.

They had been waiting together perhaps twenty minutes, when Hippy launched his loud, cheerful remark, for which he was laughingly taken to task by Nora.

"Why should I not announce that the momentous time is at hand?" he demanded in a purposely grieved voice. "I am merely voicing the sentiments of the multitude. Look at their eager, wistful faces and dare to say I am not right."

"For once I'll stand by you," conceded Reddy graciously. "I never expected to do it, but the unexpected sometimes happens." He sidled nearer to Hippy as he spoke.

"Is that a threat?" flung back Hippy, taking several cautious steps away from the approaching Reddy.

"It depends——" began Reddy.

He did not finish his speech. The sound of approaching feet on the stairs turned the eyes of every one toward the wide doorway. A ripple of fond surprise circled the room, as Grace descended the last step to be met by Tom Gray. Into the room, hand in hand, stepped two veritable foresters. In his suit of brown corduroy, with his high-laced tan boots, Tom looked as though he were about to start on one of the long hikes in which he so delighted. Attired in a trim suit of hunter's green that reached a trifle below a pair of high-laced boots, the counterpart of Tom's, except that they were small and dainty, a hat of soft green velour upon her golden brown hair, Grace was a true forest maid.

An instant and they were surrounded by an eager, buzzing throng. Their very appearance told its own story. Knowing them so well, those present understood the meaning of their unusual attire. For half an hour the two lingered among these friends who were so loth to part with them. Then the grandfather's clock in the hall sent out its ringing chime of six o'clock. Tom and Grace exchanged affectionate glances. "It is time to say good-bye." Grace's clear voice wavered a little on the last word. "But when the last good-bye has been said, won't you please all of you see us as far as the gate?"

A unanimous assent went up from every throat as their dear ones hemmed in the two foresters to offer them heartfelt good wishes and exchange final good-byes. Heading a smiling procession to the gate, Tom and Grace paused to say a last word of farewell to Mrs. Gray and Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe, who had followed directly behind them. Grace's final caress was reserved for her mother. For an instant the two clung fondly to each other, then, accepting Tom's hand, Grace Harlowe passed through the gateway of her first home to begin her pilgrimage to a second that awaited her beyond Upton Wood.

The brooding tenderness that lighted Mrs. Harlowe's eyes was reflected in those of the silent group that stood watching the two figures as, side by side, they swung bravely up the quiet street in the last warm rays of the setting sun. An eloquent silence reigned as the intent watchers followed the progress of the foresters up the street to the point of disappearance. It was broken by Kathleen West. Out of the love she bore Grace Harlowe she had christened Grace, "Loyalheart." It seemed only natural that she should be the one to speak the epilogue to this little drama of human love and happiness. Clearly and sweetly it fell on the still evening air: "Having ended her pilgrimage in the Land of College, Loyalheart has gone to Haven Home."

THE END

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