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The Girl in the Apple Tree Read on.
Frontispiece.

MADGE MORTON'S SECRET

By

AMY D. V. CHALMERS

**Author of Madge Morton, Captain of the Merry Maid;
Madge Morton's Trust, Madge Morton's Victory.**

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Madge Morton's Secret

CHAPTER I

THE INTERRUPTED STORY

A girl in a green gown was cosily ensconced among the spreading branches of an old apple tree. She was reading, and she never stirred except to turn the pages of her book or to reach out for another red apple after dropping the core of the previous one.

It was a glorious morning in early September, and the old Virginia orchard was sweet with the odor of ripening apples. A press under a tree still dripped with the juices of yesterday's cider-making. The bees and flies buzzed lazily about it. There was no one but the girl in sight.

Some distance to the left was a red brick house, separated from the orchard by a low stone fence and the length of the kitchen garden. It had a big, white colonnaded balcony in front and a smaller veranda in the rear.

The girl in the apple tree read on, unaware that a carriage had driven up to the front of this house and that a woman and a young man were alighting from it. A few moments later a girl came out on the back veranda. She put her hands to her lips and hallooed. She whistled and called. Then she ran up and down the garden, searching everywhere.

"Madge, Madge! where are you?" she cried. "Oh, do answer me in a hurry! I have something so important to tell you!"

The girl in the apple tree did not stir. She was oblivious to everything except her story. Her cousin, Eleanor, called and called again, then ran to the stables. Pompey, the colored boy, declared that he had not seen Miss Madge all morning. Once Eleanor leaned over the orchard fence. The green of Madge's frock was too near the color of the foliage to show through the trees. Eleanor gave up her search in despair.

"All right, Madge Morton," she murmured, "if you will go off by yourself without telling a soul where you are going, you must take the consequences—though I am so sorry," added Eleanor. "Poor Madge will be so disappointed."

An hour later a book dropped from the apple tree to the ground, bringing a scurry of leaves with it. Madge Morton descended after her book, swinging herself down without a thought of her

dignity. "Oh, dear me!" she exclaimed. "Why did I have to drop my book when I had only a few more pages to read? I suppose it is nearly luncheon time now, and I ought to see what has become of Nellie."

Madge strolled lazily along under the fruit trees. Now and then she stopped to look critically at the heavily-laden branches. Mr. William Butler, her uncle, owned a fruit farm, consequently the girl was interested in their autumn and winter crop of apples.

At the gate of the orchard she paused to peep at her book for another stolen moment and came face to face with her cousin. Although it was not yet midday, Eleanor Butler had on a white company frock and her hair had been freshly braided. Madge did not see her cousin at first. Nellie eyed her sympathetically, but at the same time her face wore an expression of disapproval. "Where have you been, Madge?" she demanded. "You've gone and done it this time, I can tell you; I have been looking for you for more than an hour."

"Sorry, Coz," returned Madge lightly. "Did Aunt Sue want me? I have been reading in the orchard. But why are you dressed so bravely? We can't be having a party at this early hour of the day."

Nellie looked serious. "We have not had a party," she returned, "but we have had some visitors. We had iced tea and cakes on the front porch, too."

"Lucky me, to have escaped the company, Eleanor. It is much too warm for morning callers, even if it is September," declared Madge indifferently. "I'll wager that they talked gossip and bored you and Auntie dreadfully."

"They did no such thing," replied Eleanor, nettled by her cousin's bantering tone. "If you'll stop talking a minute, I'll tell you who our visitors were. You'd never be able to guess in a thousand years. Our old friends, Mrs. Curtis and Tom, have been to 'Forest House' to see us. They were passing through the town on their way to Richmond and stopped over between trains."

"Take me to them, take me to them!" cried Madge, setting off for the house on a run, closing the orchard gate behind her with a force that caused it to shut with a resounding bang.

Nellie followed her tempestuous relative, calling, "You can't see them. That is just the trouble. Mrs. Curtis and Tom drove away about a quarter of an hour ago. I am so sorry, but I did look for you everywhere; so did Pompey. We called and called you. Mrs. Curtis and Tom were dreadfully disappointed. They were afraid to wait any longer for fear they would miss their train. They left a great deal of love for you. Mrs. Curtis was charmed with 'Forest House.' You may see them soon again. Mrs. Curtis wants us——"

"Oh, I am so sorry I missed them," lamented Madge. "When does Mrs. Curtis's train go?"

"At one o'clock," answered Eleanor. "Mother wished them to stay to luncheon, but they had hired such a slow old horse at the station that they thought it wisest to leave in time."

"And they have been on the way only a quarter of an hour?" questioned Madge. "I know what I am going to do: I am going to ride Dixie down to the station. I know I can overtake Tom and Mrs. Curtis before their train leaves the station. I may be able to get just a peep at them. Here, take my book, please, Nellie. Make it all right with Uncle William and Aunt Sue. I am sure to be late for luncheon." Madge was off across the fields, running as though her life depended on it.

Readers of "MADGE MORTON, CAPTAIN OF THE 'MERRY MAID'," already know the story of how four girls, with more enthusiasm than money, found and transformed a dilapidated old canal boat into the pretty floating summer home which they christened the "Merry Maid" and launched on a quiet shore of Chesapeake Bay.

Their subsequent meeting with a Mrs. Curtis and her son, Tom, persons of wealth and social position, who were summering at one of the fashionable hotels along the shore of the bay, prepared the way for a series of eventful happenings in which the crew of the "Merry Maid" amply proved their mettle.

It was through the efforts of Madge Morton and Phyllis Alden that a young woman was rescued from the clutches of a family of rough and uncouth fisher folk, and taken aboard the "Merry Maid," where it developed that she was none other than the daughter of Mrs. Curtis who had been lost at sea twelve years previously.

After a succession of happy weeks on the houseboat, the girls repaired to their various homes to spend the remainder of their vacations with their families. They had promised Mrs. Curtis, however, that for two weeks before returning to school they would be her guests on their own houseboat, which she had arranged to have removed from Pleasure Bay, where it still lay, to a spot opposite Old Point Comfort, where she and her son and daughter were spending a few weeks before returning to New York City.

Madge knew without being told that the time for their happy holiday had come. Still, it was not of this she was thinking as she raced across the fields. She had missed Mrs. Curtis more than she could say, and her sole desire was to see the woman who had done so much to add to their pleasure on their previous trip.

In a nearby meadow Dixie, Madge's fat black pony, was lazily eating grass. Her mistress called to her coaxingly as she ran toward the enclosure. But the pony was bent on a frolic. She heard Madge, saw her approaching, and, eager for a game, the pony kicked her heels together and trotted off across the field at a lively pace.

Madge was in despair. Every moment was precious. Why should Dixie choose this time of all others to refuse to come when she called to her? With a sudden thought Madge reached into her pocket. There, to her joy, she discovered an uneaten red apple. Madge held it out invitingly, standing perfectly still, as though she had no intention of stirring.

The pony threw back her head, neighed softly, then came trotting over to her mistress and appropriated the apple; but the next instant Madge's hand was in her mane, and she vaulted lightly on Dixie's slippery back, still keeping a tight hold.

"Nellie," she called, as she cantered past her cousin, "tell Aunt Sue she must forgive my riding bareback this time. I never will again. But I simply couldn't wait to put a saddle on Dixie. I might miss seeing Mrs. Curtis and Tom. No; they won't be shocked. They'll know it is only Madge!"

She rode swiftly away, sitting on the pony's uncovered back as easily as though she had been riding in the most comfortable of saddles.

It was three miles down the pike to the railway station nearest to the old Butler homestead. Madge knew that her friends had hired a carriage at the depot, and that her pony was capable of making twice the speed of any horse that they had been able to hire. But the day was warm. It was near Dixie's feeding time, and the animal saw no reason for making unnecessary haste. Madge coaxed and urged her pet to do her best. If she could only overtake her friends in their journey to the station! But the pony would not hurry. At last Madge stopped under a big maple tree, breaking off a switch. A few mild cuts from an unaccustomed whip made Dixie leap ahead.

The pike followed the railroad track for a mile. At the end of the mile, at a sharp curve, the track crossed the road. There was no watchman stationed at the crossing to give the signal, not even a red flag to tell of danger, only a great sign, printed in huge, black letters: "Look Out for the Locomotive. Stop. Look. Listen."

A hundred times Mr. Butler had warned Eleanor and Madge of this dangerous point in the road. Almost every day they crossed this track, driving back and forth from the village and they had always heeded Mr. Butler's warning.

To-day, just as reckless Madge neared this point in her journey, she saw a rickety carriage drive over this crossing about a hundred yards ahead of her.

"Wait, Mrs. Curtis! Stop, Tom!" cried Madge joyfully. Her blue eyes were shining, her cheeks were flushed. Madge's old-time heedlessness was upon her. She gave no thought to her promise to her uncle, to the chance of the oncoming trains. Madge-fashion, she saw only the goal ahead of her. "Go it, Dixie, darling!" she entreated, touching her pony sharply with her maple switch.

At the girl's first call Tom Curtis had reined in the old horse he was driving. His mother leaned out of the carriage to look back. "Madge!" she cried sharply.

At the same instant Madge plunged recklessly toward the railroad crossing. It was too late to rein in her pony. She and Dixie dared not take that risk. She saw a huge monster bearing down upon her. A shriek from the engine, a hoarse call from the engineer as he swept around the curve and saw the pretty figure on the track so close to his train. Madge felt the wave of heat from the locomotive. It seemed almost to scorch her, it was so near. She felt her fingers stiffen with fear; her hold on her pony's mane relaxed. She knew she was slipping off her horse's back and down on the track.

But she was country born and bred. She had ridden horseback all her life. In that moment of terror she flung herself forward, with both arms about her pony's neck. Dixie gave a single, frightened leap. She cleared the track just as the train raced by. Then Madge slid limply to the ground, while her pony stood by her shivering with fear.

"Don't scold me, and don't tell Uncle," she pleaded as Mrs. Curtis and Tom climbed hurriedly from the wagon and came back to her. "I know it was dreadful of me, and Uncle would never have forgiven me if I had killed myself."

At this characteristic speech both Madge and her friends laughed. Madge kissed Mrs. Curtis affectionately. Then, holding out her hand to Tom, she said, "Do you think I could let you get away without seeing you for a minute at least? Perhaps you had better go on to the station. I will

follow you on Dixie. We can talk after we reach there."

The carriage, closely followed by Madge on her pony, reached the little station at least ten minutes before the time for the Curtis's train. Madge could not leave Dixie to walk to the front of the station, so Mrs. Curtis and her son walked to the road where Madge had alighted and stood waiting for them, one hand in her pony's mane.

Tom thought he had never seen her look so pretty, but he was too wise to say so. He had learned by embarrassing experience that Mistress Madge frowned disapprovingly at the slightest intimation of a compliment.

"Tom and I stopped at 'Forest House' to tell you that we are ready for you. We wish you four girls to be our guests as soon as you can make ready to come to us. Your uncle and aunt have given their consent to the arrangement. We leave it to you and Nellie to communicate with Lillian, Phil, and Miss Jenny Ann. You must rally the houseboat party. Write to Madeleine and me and tell us anything you think you would like to do. We are at Old Point Comfort. Good-bye, dear; here comes our train. Don't disappoint us."

Mrs. Curtis and Tom boarded their train, leaving Madge staring after it in happy anticipation of the good times that were sure to be theirs when once more aboard the "Merry Maid."

CHAPTER II

WHAT MADGE FOUND IN THE ATTIC

"Aunt Sue," declared Madge gravely, wrinkling her straight, dark eyebrows into a solemn frown, "there is only one thing that worries me about our second houseboat party: Nellie and I haven't enough pretty clothes."

Mrs. Butler looked as though she quite agreed with her niece. It was the day after Mrs. Curtis's hurried call.

"You see, it is this way, Auntie. On our first trip our houseboat was anchored in a quiet, out-of-the-way place. We met Mrs. Curtis only by accident and had a few parties at the Belleview Hotel. This time we are to be Mrs. Curtis's guests. Although the houseboat won't be on the Virginia side of the bay, because the water is much too rough there, we shall probably be crossing over to Fortress Monroe and Old Point and all the lovely places near. Mrs. Curtis will be sure to get up parties for us. We may even look on at some of the dances at Fortress Monroe. So Nellie and I ought each to have a new evening gown, besides our white silk gowns. Don't you think so?"

Aunt Sue sighed in answer to Madge's question.

"I don't see where new party gowns are to come from, dear. Even if I felt we could afford them, I simply haven't time to go to town to get the material for them. It has taken a great deal to get you and Nellie ready for school, since you will go directly to Miss Tolliver's when your houseboat party is over. Fortunately, your new school clothes will be suitable for most occasions, as the weather will probably be cool. Somehow I feel uneasy about this second houseboat party. I have a premonition that something will happen to you girls. Your uncle thinks I am absurd. He says you are very fortunate to have made a friend like Mrs. Curtis, and to have another opportunity to enjoy your houseboat. I suppose I am foolish." Mrs. Butler smiled nervously. "You know I am rather given to having premonitions, so don't concern yourself about anything I have said to you."

Mrs. Butler was a delicate, high-bred looking woman, with soft blue eyes and brown hair lightly streaked with gray, who was quite likely to be influenced by her wilful niece's opinions. It was in her Uncle William that Madge met her match.

"Nellie!" called Madge when her aunt had finished speaking, "please come in here. I want to persuade Auntie to do something that I am going to ask of her, and I wish you to help me."

Nellie appeared at the dining room door, her fingers stained with grape-juice. She was determined to help her mother with the jelly before she and her cousin left for their second houseboat holiday.

"You don't need any one's help when it comes to having your own way," retorted Mrs. Butler. "What do you wish this time?"

Madge lowered her voice. "Auntie, you know that upstairs in Mother's old trunk there are two rolls of silk—a roll of rose-color and one of turquoise blue. You have always said that Father brought them home to Mother from China just after I was born, and that Mother never had them made into dresses, because she died soon afterward, when Father failed to return from his trip."

Mrs. Butler bowed her head quietly. She looked away from her niece.

"Yes, that is what I have told you. I am saving the silks until you are older. You have very little else of your mother's except her jewelry."

Madge clasped her hands together pleadingly. "O Aunt Sue! why must I wait until I am grown for those silks? I wish you to give them to Nellie and me now. Please, please do. I am sure we are old enough to appreciate them. Nellie would be a perfect dream in the pink silk, and I should dearly love to have the blue. We never, never can need the dresses more than we do *now*! Why, in two or three years Nellie and I may be rich! Who knows? What is the use in keeping them for some future time, when Nellie and I need them at the present moment? You know we ought to have one handsome gown apiece, Auntie. Mrs. Curtis and Madeleine are always beautifully dressed."

"Yes, Mother, please let Madge have her way," entreated Nellie. "But I can't accept one of the frocks. I wouldn't take it away from you for the world."

"Very well, Auntie," replied Madge, with a little choke in her voice. "I am sorry I mentioned the subject to you. I don't care for the silks, then. I won't even look at them, unless Nellie will take one of them."

"Silly Madge!" remonstrated Eleanor, coming up behind her cousin and tweaking a loose curl of her auburn hair. "I know you wish me to share everything with you, and I thank you just the same. But, Madge, I can't accept one of those dresses. Don't you see, they were your mother's, and that makes all the difference in the world."

"I can't see what difference it makes if I wish to do it. You always divide everything you have with me, and I don't see why you can't let me be generous for once."

Madge's eyes were misty. The thought of her mother and father made it hard for her to speak without emotion. "Besides," she added, smiling in her charming fashion, "I will never wear a pink gown. No one need try to persuade me. It wouldn't be in keeping with my red hair!"

Eleanor put her arm around her cousin. She understood the little quaver in Madge's laughing voice.

"Of course I will have the dress, if you feel that way about it," she said gently. "And I shall adore it. Why, I can see myself in it this minute, with a pink rose fastened in my hair. But all this time you and I have been arguing Mother has not yet said that you could use the silks. Please consent, Mother; there's a dear."

Mrs. Butler looked grave. "I suppose it is all right," she hesitated. "The silks belong to Madge and she is old enough to decide what she wishes to do with them. Look in my left-hand bureau drawer, Madge; you will find the key to your mother's trunk there. The silks are in the bottom of the trunk, wrapped in a piece of old, yellow muslin. We might as well find out whether the material is still good before we decide what we will do about it. I must go back now to my jelly; it must be nearly done."

"Come up to the attic with me, won't you, Eleanor?" invited Madge.

Eleanor shook her head. She knew her cousin liked best to make these visits to her mother's trunk alone. "No," she answered, "I must help Mother with the jelly."

Nellie slipped quietly away and left Madge looking dreamily out on the elm-shaded lawn, her thoughts busy with the story of her own past and the little she knew of her father.

He had been a captain in the United States Navy, and one of the youngest officers in the service. The Mortons were an old Virginia family, and after Robert Morton's graduation from Annapolis he was rapidly promoted in the service. He had married Mrs. Butler's only sister, Eleanor, for whom Nellie was named. Two months after Madge's birth, while her husband was away on a cruise, Madge's mother died at her sister's home, and, as her father never came back to claim her, she had been brought up by her uncle and aunt. This was all she had been told of the story of her mother and father. It made her aunt unhappy to talk of them, so Madge had asked few questions as she grew to young womanhood. But to-day she felt that she would like to know whether her father had died and been buried at sea—she always thought of him as dead—or whether a tablet had ever been erected to his memory at Annapolis. She had never been to Annapolis, although it was not a great distance from Miss Tolliver's school, but she knew that the Government often honored its brave officers and sailors with these memorials.

She was thinking of these things as she left the dining room and climbed the steep, ladder-like stairs that led to the attic. The attic of "Forest House" was worth a longer journey than Madge had to make. It was built of solid cedar wood, with beams a foot thick over head, and put together with great cedar pegs. The attic was a long, low-ceilinged room, dark and fragrant with the odor of the cedar. It was lit by four big, old-fashioned dormer windows in the front and four in the rear.

Her mother's trunk was kept in one corner of the attic behind an old oak chest. Mrs. Butler did not wish to be haunted by sad memories when she made her frequent trips to her attic to look after the family clothing and bedding, so she had partly hidden her sister's trunk.

Madge opened the trunk in the half light. On top of everything was a pile of her first baby dresses. Farther down she came upon a sandalwood box containing her mother's jewelry. The box contained a beautiful and unusual collection of rare stones. Captain Morton had brought many of the jewels back from the Orient as presents to his wife.

Madge picked up a necklace of uncut turquoises, set in links of curiously carved dull gold. For an instant she looked at it, then slipped it over her head. There was also a tortoise-shell comb of wonderful beauty to match the necklace. The crown of the comb was formed of turquoises and pearls. Just in the center of the comb was a tiny scarab made of turquoises. The scarab Madge knew to be a beetle sacred to the Egyptians. She wondered if the beautiful set of jewelry had an unusual history. Madge put the comb in her hair, then plunged deeper into the lavender-scented trunk. Under a pile of old-fashioned gowns she found the bundle that she desired, tied up in yellow muslin just as her aunt had described it. Tucking it under her arm she hurried to the front windows and sat down Turk fashion on the floor. She wished to examine carefully the well-remembered silks. It had been several years since she had seen them, yet how well she recalled them! She and Nellie had never grown tired of marveling at the beautiful fabrics when, as little girls, they were allowed to glance at the silks by way of a special treat.

The young girl untied her precious bundle slowly. She gently unrolled the pink silk. It was a wonderful rose color, a pure Chinese silk, as light and soft as a butterfly's wing. Madge saw a vision of Nellie in this dress. It must be trimmed with an old collar of Venetian point lace, which was one of Mrs. Butler's heirlooms. Then she unrolled the blue silk. The material to be used for her frock was a Japanese crepe. It had a border of shaded blue and silver threads forming a design of orchids. It was too beautiful a costume for a young girl, Madge thought. She held her breath as she looked at it. Would her aunt allow her to use it?

Spying a broken mirror on an old bureau in the attic, she brought it over to the light and propped it against the back of a worn-out chair. Then she wrapped the blue silk about her shoulders and stared at herself in the mirror.

Madge was an exceedingly pretty young girl. This afternoon her face showed a promise of the unusual beauty that was to come to her later in life, when she had learned many things. There was a hint of tragedy in her charming, wayward nature. The friends who loved her knew that her path through life would not follow an easy and untroubled road. She could never do anything in a half-way fashion, whether it were to love or to hate, to be happy or to be miserable.

To-day her blue eyes were dark with wonder at her own appearance and with the memory of her dead mother and father. With the strange jewels in her hair and about her throat, the beautiful blue robe around her shoulders, little country-bred Madge looked as though she might have been a beautiful princess of the long ago.

Being free from vanity, however, she calmly folded up her silks, took off her jewels, and turned from the window to go downstairs to show her cousin her treasures.

At the door of the attic she paused and glanced back at the open trunk, then, walking slowly toward it, deposited her jewel box and armful of silks on the top of the old cedar chest and sat down before the trunk. What strange influence drew her back to it that day Madge could never explain. She knew only that the longing for the love of the father she had never seen, and the mother she could not remember, was strong within her.

"What made you leave me when I needed you so?" she murmured, half under her breath. Then she bowed her head on the edge of the trunk and her tears dropped on a little, old-fashioned black velvet coat that had been her mother's. Impulsively Madge caught it up and pressed it to her lips. After a long moment she laid it across her lap and began smoothing it with loving hands, tenderly tracing its lines with her forefinger. As she was about to fold it and lay it in its accustomed place her hand came in contact with something hard in the cuff of one sleeve between the velvet and the satin lining.

"What can it be?" she wondered, as she fingered it through the cloth. "It feels like a key. If I break two or three stitches, I can pull it out."

It was at least five minutes before she managed to make an opening large enough to admit the

working out of the little hard object. As she had guessed, it was a small brass key with a bit of faded violet ribbon attached to it.

Madge looked curiously at it as it lay in her hand. To whom did the key belong? What did it unlock? Why had her mother sewed it into the sleeve of the black velvet coat? Or had her mother placed it there? The little captain sighed. She could ask endless questions concerning her find, but she could answer none of them.

"There may be a box in the trunk which I have overlooked," she reflected. "I never do things thoroughly."

Springing from the floor, Madge ran across the attic to where her aunt always kept a pile of brown wrapping paper. Tearing off a strip she carried it to her corner and, laying it on the floor at one side of her mother's trunk, sat down beside it. One by one, with reverent hands, she lifted the various garments from it, piling them over one another on the paper. But when the trunk, bereft of its last article, stood empty before her, she stared in disappointment at the pile of articles at her side. There was nothing in it that bore the slightest resemblance to a box.

"It's like 'hunting for a needle in a haystack,'" she mourned. "This key might fit a lock thousands of miles from here. It can't be the key to the trunk; it is too small." She bent forward to examine the lock. "No, the key to this trunk is ever so much larger. Perhaps the trunk has a false bottom!"

This being a positive inspiration, Madge set to work on the bottom of the trunk, her investigations meeting with no success. She was more disheartened than she cared to admit, even to herself, as she replaced the contents of the trunk and, reluctantly shutting down the lid, gathered up her treasures and went down the stairs with dragging feet. Her pleasure in the beautiful fabrics had vanished, and the longing to probe into the past of her dear ones was uppermost in her mind.

Her first impulse on entering the kitchen, where Eleanor and her mother still labored with the jelly, was to show them the little key. Then the same strange influence which had forced her to return to the trunk kept her silent. The finding of the little key should be her secret.

Mrs. Butler and Eleanor exclaimed admiringly over the silks. It was as though they were seeing them for the first time. Eleanor was delighted with the prospect of possessing an evening gown of the rose color, and the two girls were soon deep in planning the way in which they intended having their frocks made.

"May I keep Mother's jewel box with me, Aunt Sue?" asked Madge an hour later, as she rose to go to her room, her roll of blue silk tucked under one arm, the sandalwood box in her hand.

"Of course you may, my dear. As long as you are going to use the silks you might as well take the jewels too," sighed Mrs. Butler.

"Thank you," returned her niece, bending to kiss the older woman's cheek, then she walked quietly from the room, her cheerful face unusually sober.

"Madge is always sad after a visit to her mother's trunk," remarked Eleanor, after her cousin had gone.

Mrs. Butler nodded, her own face saddened as she went back over the years. Some day she would tell Madge the truth concerning her father and why he had never returned to the homestead, but not now. She did not wish to cast the slightest shadow upon her niece's joyous anticipations of the coming trip.

Once in her room Madge took the little key from the pocket of her middy blouse and laid it on her dressing table. Drawing up a chair, she sat down, and opening the jewel box, began taking out the ornaments, spreading them on the table before her. To her eyes, unaccustomed to the sight of jewelry, they made an imposing array. When the last trinket was out she turned her attention to the box itself. Empty, it was larger and deeper than she supposed. Despite the fact that the jewelry had been removed it was still heavy.

"It must be the weight of the wood that makes it feel heavy," she reflected. "Why, it has a keyhole! I never noticed that before, it is so far down, and, besides, the box has been unlocked ever since I can remember."

She carefully examined the keyhole, then, with a swift rush of disappointment, came the thought that the mysterious key was merely that of the sandalwood box. To be sure, there were two little brass catches which fastened the box tightly together. The lock had been put on, no doubt, as an extra security, and rarely, if ever, used. But if such were the case, why had the key been secreted in the sleeve of the black velvet coat? After all, it might not fit the lock on the box. If it did, then her secret was not really a secret after all. Madge reached for the object of her cogitations and inserted it in the lock. It fitted. She gave it one quick turn, then endeavored to

pull it out. It stuck. Madge held the back of the box with one hand to keep it from slipping and pulled hard. She felt the box itself give. Then to her astonishment she saw that the lower part of the box formed a drawer, the existence of which was cunningly hidden by the carving, and it now stood open before her. In it lay a small black leather book, and under the book was a single envelope addressed to her mother.

With wondering eyes the girl peered into the envelope. Her hands shook as she drew forth several closely written sheets of paper. Unfolding them she saw only the salutation, "Beloved"; then she turned to the signature. It read, "Your devoted husband, Robert Morton."

Madge gazed in fascination at her father's clear, bold handwriting. If it were in the least indicative of character, her father must have been a good man and true. Undoubtedly he had proved himself an honor to the Navy and the Flag he had sworn to serve. She experienced a curious thrill of satisfaction at this thought. Tearing her eyes from the beloved name, she went back to the first page of the letter and began to read, but when she reached the end of the second page she cried out in anguish, and, laying her curly head on the dressing table, sobbed heart-brokenly.

"I can't bear it!" she wailed. "O Father, Father! how could they be so cruel?" After a few moments she raised her head with a long, quivering sigh, and went on with the letter. When she had finished it, she took up the little black book. Her tears fell fast as she perused its pages. It was her father's log book and contained, besides the notes concerning his last fateful voyage as a naval officer, memoranda of his personal life aboard ship as well.

Over the last half dozen pages—the record ended abruptly—Madge's grief burst forth anew. After she had finished she sat for a long time holding the little book against her cheek. The distant ringing of the supper bell brought her to a realization of her surroundings. Tenderly she laid the book and the letter in the secret drawer that had held them so faithfully, inviolate from the eyes of the world; then, locking the drawer she withdrew the key, and, taking from a box on the dressing table a slender gold chain, her only bit of ornament outside her mother's jewelry, Madge opened the catch and hung the key upon it.

"It will be safe there," she said half aloud. "But now I have a secret worth keeping until I find the man who spoiled my father's life. And when I do"—Madge's red lips set in a determined line—"I'll make him tell the truth about Father to the whole world."

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

Although the prospect of the coming visit to Old Point Comfort filled Madge and Eleanor with a delightful sense of their own importance, they still had certain misgivings as to what might be expected of them as the guests of Mrs. Curtis. She had written them that as long as they were to be anchored near Fortress Monroe, she hoped to show them the social side of the Army and Navy life centered there. To the two country girls the idea of "Society" was a trifle appalling. Phyllis Alden had also written them that she knew nothing of Society and was almost afraid to venture into that awe-inspiring realm, while Miss Jenny Ann at first refused to consider the idea, but finally relented and made her preparations to join the girls in anything but a joyous frame of mind.

Lillian Seldon was the only one of the little company who took the prospect of balls and parties and meeting hosts of new people quite calmly. She had two older sisters, who had made their entrance into Philadelphia society, and Lillian had been allowed to be present at their coming-out parties. Mrs. Seldon, Lillian's mother, was devoted to Society, while Mrs. Butler cared for nothing outside her own home interests, and Mrs. Alden was too busy taking care of a large family on a small income to think of anything else. Phil's life had been largely centered in her school. Eleanor and Madge had divided their allegiance between Miss Tolliver's and "Forest House" until their houseboat had opened a new world to them.

After a long talk with Eleanor, Madge finally wrote Mrs. Curtis, confessing that they were rather afraid to venture into the social life of the point. In reply Mrs. Curtis only made light of their fears and misgivings and insisted that they should come. Tom, who had undertaken the duty of finding a landing for the houseboat, announced that it was safely sheltered near the southern end of Cape Charles; it was too rough to anchor the boat on the Virginia side of the shore.

Besides, Tom was camping with some college friends on the shore of the cape, and had arranged that the houseboat should be no great distance from his camp. The houseboat party could cross over to Old Point, or any of the resorts on the opposite beach, in a small steamboat that made its way back and forth from one coast to the other, or in Tom's new motor launch, which would be always at their disposal.

The careful way in which the Curtises had arranged for the comfort of their young guests finally conquered the last faint objection on their part, and when on the morning of the day appointed, escorted by Mrs. Curtis and Tom, the four girls and Miss Jenny Ann boarded the "Merry Maid" for their two weeks' stay, their former fears and misgivings were entirely forgotten. They remembered only that they had come into their own again through the generosity of Mrs. Curtis, and for her sake were willing to brave even "Society."

The ballroom of the great hotel at Old Point Comfort was crowded with dancers. It was an official military ball. The army officers were in full-dress uniforms. The midshipmen from the fleet were in white. There was a large sprinkling of naval officers from the battleships in the harbor at Hampton Roads. Many of them were foreigners, as there were several ships of other nations anchored there. There were beautiful women in beautiful gowns and wonderful jewels. Altogether it was a scene calculated to make a lively impression upon Madge and her friends, and it was with rapidly beating hearts that, in company with Mrs. Curtis, Madeleine and Tom, they entered the brilliantly lighted ballroom which contained for them no familiar faces.

"Oh, dear, Miss Jenny Ann," whispered Eleanor, keeping close to her chaperon's side, "why did we ever imagine we could appear at home in a place like this? I wish we had not come." Her distress looked out from her brown eyes as she watched the throng of fashionably dressed women and uniformed men swaying and gliding in the figures of one of the new dances that had taken society by storm.

"Don't be afraid, Nell," returned Phil, fighting down her self-consciousness, "they are just mere men and women. Besides, they are too busy to think of us."

Just then an elderly man in uniform, accompanied by a woman of about his own age, stepped forward and claimed the attention of the Curtises. For the moment the girls, who were following their friends, became separated from them by the dancers. Realizing that they were too near the center of the ballroom for comfort, the little party stepped back, edging nearer the wall. Madge, too fully absorbed in the gay scene before her to see just where she was going, collided with a young woman, who, accompanied by two young men, was coming from the opposite direction. Before she could apologize an unpleasant voice broke upon the ears of the houseboat party with disconcerting distinctness.

"Oh, dear, let us move out of the way, if we can. It is quite evident that certain other persons have no intention of doing so. Such stupidity! Still, what can one expect from a crowd of country folks? I wonder how they happened to be here? I doubt if they were invited. It is a pity we can't keep tiresome nobodies from spoiling our hops here at the hotel."

A moment later the owner of the voice, a young woman of perhaps twenty years, had the grace to blush under the battery of five pairs of indignant eyes that was turned upon her. Miss Jenny Ann, Lillian and Eleanor looked cold astonishment at the rude speaker. It was plain to be seen that Phyllis was very angry. To Madge, however, was left the "retort courteous," and before Miss Jenny Ann could lay a restraining hand lightly upon her arm, the little captain said in a sweet, clear voice: "We are so sorry to be thought stupid. It is very unfortunate that we stepped in your way. As you remarked, we are from the country, but, at least, we have been taught that courtesy is a most desirable virtue. Rest assured we would not be here without an invitation. Mrs. Curtis is our hostess. It is possible you may know her."

Madge's tones were freighted with such unmistakable sarcasm that the rude young woman was too thoroughly taken aback to reply. She had fully intended her ill-bred speech to be overheard, but she had not for a moment imagined that one of these apparently shy newcomers would fling back an answer. The two young men with whom she had been talking looked very uncomfortable. There was an instant's strained silence, then the ill-bred young woman found her voice.

"I did not think you would hear what I said." She turned haughtily to Madge. "As you did hear me, I suppose I owe you an apology. I am one of the hostesses here to-night, as my father is an officer at Fortress Monroe. I know Mrs. Curtis and also her son and daughter."

Madge acknowledged the grudging apology with the merest inclination of her head. She was too angry to trust her voice. She turned away, and the little party was about to move on when Tom Curtis hurried to her side.

"How did you become separated from us?" he asked. "Mother thought you were directly behind

her. Why, good evening, Flora," his eyes happened to rest on the disagreeable young woman, "you are just in time to meet Mother's guests."

Tom proceeded to introduce the houseboat party to her. "I am sure you will be pleased to know Miss Harris," he declared innocently. Then he presented the two young men respectively as Lieutenant Lawton and Mr. Thornton.

Miss Harris acknowledged the introduction with far more graciousness than she had previously exhibited. It was evident to the girls that she did not wish Tom Curtis to know how rudely she had treated his friends.

The young man introduced as Mr. Thornton addressed Madge with a view toward being gracious, but she replied briefly and turned her attention to Tom. Far from being dismayed with the rebuff, he tried again.

"I am over in camp with your friend, Mr. Curtis," he volunteered.

"Are you?" rejoined Madge indifferently.

"Yes," he went on, unabashed. "I came over to the dance to-night because Miss Harris is a great friend of mine. Don't hold that rude speech of hers against us; she did not imagine you would overhear it. Mr. Lawton and I were awfully cut up over it." He was doing his best to melt the snow image he was addressing. Madge showed no sign of relenting.

"Do you golf?" he questioned, hurriedly changing the subject.

Madge shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Not well enough to count," she answered.

"Do you swim?" was his next question.

Receiving no answer, he continued: "It is getting rather late in the year for sea bathing. The water is too cold for comfort."

"I like to swim in cold water," commented Madge stiffly. Then, taking pity on the discomfited young man, she smiled faintly and said, "I should not blame you for your friend's rude remarks, but I am still very angry with her. Her conduct was insufferable."

"She didn't mean what she said," defended Alfred Thornton. "I can't understand why Flora spoke as she did. She is a splendid girl. I've known her for a long time. She is the daughter of an officer whose father is a retired admiral in the Navy and a favorite socially at Old Point."

"That is very nice for her," returned Madge without enthusiasm. In the face of the discourtesy which Miss Harris had just exhibited she thought Mr. Thornton's eloquent defence in rather bad taste. She was about to retort that her father, too, had been an officer in the Navy; then, remembering, her face flushed and she compressed her red lips. Not yet. Not until she had found the man she sought and cleared her father's name. Suddenly the thought came: "Suppose I were to hear news of him while at Old Point? Suppose he were known to some of the officers whose ships are stationed here? Perhaps it was Fate that sent us to visit Mrs. Curtis."

"Have you decided to be angry, after all?" Alfred Thornton's voice recalled Madge to her surroundings.

"I am not angry," replied Madge. "To tell you the truth, I was not thinking of my own grievances."

"Sorry to interrupt conversation, Thornton," broke in Tom Curtis, "but there is a whole line of midshipmen waiting to be introduced to my friends."

"I hope you will give me a dance, Miss Morton," said Alfred Thornton.

Madge assented, although she felt more inclined to refuse. She was not in the least certain that she liked this dark, thin-faced young man. When he talked he had a peculiar trick of turning his eyes away from the person with whom he was talking that did not please her.

"Come on over in that corner, girls," invited Tom. "There we shall be out of the way of the dancers and you can hold court. Just wait until you see that line of midshipmen!"

Keeping out of the way of the dancers, the party moved toward the corner designated by Tom. There he left them, returning shortly with several young men in the midshipmen's uniform, who seemed not only willing, but eager, to have the pleasure of dancing with the four girls. Miss Jenny Ann, who looked very handsome in a pretty gown of black net over white silk, came in for a full share of attention, and was not a little worried as to whether as chaperon she ought to sit quietly and watch her charges or dance. She confided this to Madge, who merely laughed, told her that she looked "too sweet for anything" and to "go ahead and have a good time." Whereupon Miss Jenny Ann sank her last scruples and proceeded to enjoy herself as much as did the four girls,

who did not miss a dance. They were showered with attentions from not only the midshipmen, but the old officers as well asked the privilege of a dance.

Pretty Lillian Seldon was in her element. This was her first real ball and she was delighted with the opportunity it afforded to play "grown up." She wore her golden hair piled high on her shapely head, and as her white silk evening gown was the longest frock she owned she felt at least twenty, which to her seemed very old indeed.

Phil danced for the pure love of dancing. She was more level-headed than Lillian and was less likely to be carried away by pleasure. Still, she felt as though she would like to go on dancing forever with Lieutenant James Lawton, who she decided was the nicest young man she had ever met.

Undoubtedly it was the excitement of the dance that appealed most strongly to Madge. The music, the flowers, the beautiful gowns worn by the women, the subdued murmur of laughing voices, stirred her imaginative temperament as the sunshine awakens flowers. The earlier thought of her father that had threatened to cloud her pleasure disappeared and she gave herself up to the enticement of the gay scene and the invitation of the music.

It was after midnight before the ball ended. Tom's car was at the hotel entrance to take the tired but enthusiastic girls and their chaperon down to the landing where the launch lay ready to take them to the "Merry Maid."

"I've had the most glorious time," exulted Lillian.

"And I," was the chorus.

"It was too delightful for words," declared Madge, with shining eyes. Then the light suddenly left them and she became strangely silent. "I forgot you, Father," she said under her breath. "I was so busy having a good time I didn't ask a single officer if he knew that dreadful man. But another time I'll not forget. I'll find out where he is before we leave here if there is any possible way to do it."

CHAPTER IV

THE CHALLENGE

"I declare, Miss Jenny Ann," declared Madge fervently, "I believe I was born to live on a houseboat, I feel so perfectly at home. Do you think I care so much for the sea because my father was a sailor?"

"I suppose you do, my dear," returned the chaperon, who sat listening to Madge's animated chatter with an indulgent smile.

Several days had passed since the ball, and the girls had settled down to a thorough enjoyment of their floating home. Madge, who was looking particularly pretty in her sailor suit of blue serge, had been energetically sweeping the decks. Now she paused for a moment to lean on her broom and survey Miss Jenny Ann reflectively.

The "Merry Maid" now lay at anchor along a stretch of sandy beach, in a cove formed by a point of land that jutted out into the bay. It was the quietest spot Tom Curtis could find in the vicinity. But the landing was so near the mouth of the great Chesapeake Bay that, should a storm blow in from the Atlantic Ocean, the houseboat would probably be lashed by the waves. There was no shade along the beach, so Mrs. Curtis had transformed the houseboat into a charming Japanese pagoda. Mammoth Japanese umbrellas were swung above the decks. The latter were covered with pretty straw mats. There was a dainty green tea table securely fastened near the stern, with half a dozen green chairs near it. The window boxes around the upper deck of the boat had been refilled with bright scarlet geraniums and nasturtiums, as they would bloom until late in the autumn. Fresh draperies hung at the little cabin windows. Wrought-iron lamps, holding beautiful yellow-tinted glass globes, were attached to the outside cabin walls, so the entire deck of the houseboat could be lighted at night. Indeed, "The Merry Maid" presented a far more elaborate appearance than she had worn during the first of the houseboat vacations.

It was small wonder that the four girls sighed from pure content. Mrs. Curtis had not spent a great deal of money in re-decorating the little boat, she did not wish her guests to feel under any

obligation to her, but she had made their holiday craft as attractive as possible, and had stored their small larder with all the good things she could find to eat.

"Miss Jenny Ann!" exclaimed Madge impulsively for the second time in five minutes, "do you think it is wrong to dislike people very, very much?"

The little captain's expression had entirely changed. She was frowning as though recalling something unpleasant.

"I suppose it is," answered Miss Jones gravely. She knew that Madge's likes and dislikes were not unimportant—they were so intense that they were likely to change not only the course of the girl's whole life but to influence the circumstances of the people about her.

"I am sorry," answered Madge, "because I have taken a dreadful dislike to that Flora Harris whom we met at the ball the other night. I wish that Tom had not asked us to invite her to the houseboat this afternoon. I did not like to refuse him, but I wish that I never had to see her again."

Madge returned to her sweeping with redoubled ardor. She acted as though she were trying to sweep the objectionable Miss Harris off of the houseboat.

"Don't take a rude speech so to heart, my dear," remonstrated Miss Jenny Ann. "Really, Miss Harris isn't worth it. It's dreadful to have a long list of grudges; it only hurts one to remember them."

Madge listened politely, though she didn't appear convinced by their chaperon's remarks. Wilful Madge was never convinced except by experience.

"I don't hate the Harris girl just because she made one rude speech, Miss Jenny Ann," she returned; "I hate her because she is hateful! She was impolite to us, and a sneak not to tell Tom Curtis what she had said about us. Then she is very haughty and proud because her father is a prominent officer at Fortress Monroe. She treated us as though we were nobodies from nowhere!"

"Here, here, Madge!" cried Phyllis Alden, appearing suddenly with the bread knife—she had been making sandwiches for their party—"them's my sentiments to a T! I'll cut off Miss Harris's head with the carving knife if you say so."

Madge laughed. "Oh, no, Phil, I suppose we shall have to be as sweet as cream to her because her friends are our Mrs. Curtis's friends. Miss Harris will probably be invited to all the parties we have while we are here."

"Lieutenant Lawton is nice and interesting, at any rate," interposed Phil. "Don't think that he talked to me about himself. He only said that he was in the Navy. But Tom told me that Lieutenant Lawton was working on a wonderful invention. I think it is something about a torpedo-boat destroyer that will go twice as fast as any other torpedo boat," Phil went on vaguely. "Lieutenant Lawton has a work-shop near Fortress Monroe. It is kept absolutely private through fear that some one will steal the model for the boat before Lieutenant Lawton has completed it."

"You became very well acquainted with this young lieutenant, Phil," teased Madge. "I suppose he will be rich if he succeeds with his invention."

Phil shook her dark head enthusiastically. "No; that is why I think he is so splendid," she argued. "He will make no money, unless our Government chooses to make him a gift, or to give him a higher rank in the Navy. Tom says that several foreign countries have offered Lieutenant Lawton thousands of dollars for his invention. There are American ship-building companies, too, that would give him a great deal of money for it. Two men are at Old Point now trying to tempt Lieutenant Lawton to sell his secret. But Tom says nothing will influence him; he is such a patriot!"

"Girls, it is time to dress for your tea-party," announced Miss Jenny Ann.

For an instant she experienced a vague regret that her girls were about to come in contact with so many fashionable people. She wished that she could transplant them to the free outdoor life that had characterized their first houseboat holiday. Here was sensible Phil, her head filled with stories of wonderful secret inventions and young inventors. And Phil had been the most dependable of her charges.

But Miss Jenny Ann was looking in the wrong direction for trouble. She should have concerned herself with the naughty plan that was forming in Madge's mind. It had never been worth while to pretend that the little captain was always noble and high-minded. She was capable of generous impulses and she loved her friends so dearly that she would do anything in the world for them. But she was proud and a trifle vain. She hated to be snubbed and treated as though she were absolutely of no importance. So she had quite made up her mind to be revenged on Flora Harris.

Just at the time she could think of no better way than to make friends with Flora's particular admirer, Alfred Thornton. He was an extremely wealthy young man in prospect, his father being a Pittsburg millionaire. Flora was a snob; she was only seventeen, but her mother was a foolish, flighty woman, who allowed her daughter to think that she was already grown-up. Although Flora was not out of school, her mother never ceased to preach to her that she was not to marry a poor Army officer, so the young girl was pleased to have a wealthy young man as one of her admirers.

Madge knew that Alfred Thornton was snobbish and mean-spirited. She did not like him. She decided that on the night of the ball. She had seen him exchanging smiles with Miss Harris behind their backs before Tom Curtis had introduced him as his friend. This merely confirmed her bad opinion of him. But she realized that young Thornton had been attracted by her, and she naughtily resolved to turn his attentions from the elegant Miss Harris to herself. When she went into her cabin to dress for their tea-party it was with the determination to teach the girl she disliked that Madge Morton, country-bred though she might be, was a force yet to be reckoned with.

At two o'clock that afternoon Miss Jenny Ann and the four girls received their guests, and a little later tea was served on the deck at the dainty tea table under the big Japanese umbrellas. Madge, looking radiant in a little frock of white organdie dotted with tiny green leaves, poured the tea.

Tom Curtis had brought with him four or five young men from the camp. Flora Harris, looking utterly bored, a faint smile of cynical amusement on her face, accompanied by her cousin, Alice Paine, had crossed the bay in a steam launch with Jimmie Lawton. Never before had the houseboat held so many visitors, and the young hostesses did all in their power to entertain their guests.

"We have had a delightful afternoon," smiled Alice Paine as, later, the two young women declared that they must go back to Old Point. "I think the 'Merry Maid' is lovely, don't you, Flora?"

"The *boat*? Oh, yes," drawled Flora. Then with a touch of malice she added, "You told me you made your houseboat from an old canal boat, didn't you, Miss Morton?"

"Yes," returned the little captain briefly; then, as though unconscious of any malice aforethought on the part of the other girl, she continued a laughing conversation with Tom Curtis and Alfred Thornton.

"I should have guessed it," commented Flora Harris, shrugging her shoulders. She frowned as she noted that Alfred Thornton appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. Furthermore, no one had paid the slightest attention to her malicious little thrust. Madge had answered her without seeming to realize the insult her words contained.

Madge had fully realized, however, the hidden insolence of Flora Harris's reply, but she would have died rather than allow the other girl to know it.

"Did you say I didn't dare, Tom?" she exclaimed in answer to a laughing remark on the part of the young man. "I don't see anything very daring about your proposal. O Phil!" she turned to Phyllis, "Tom and Mr. Thornton dare us to row against them in the camp regatta next week. Will you do it?"

"Of course," agreed Phyllis, who would have cheerfully acquiesced to almost anything Madge saw fit to propose. "We are likely to come in last, but never mind a little thing like that. We are out of practice though. I wonder if we can't persuade a number of other girls to enter the race too?"

Flora Harris glanced disdainfully at Madge and Phyllis. She and Alice had lived near salt water all their lives, and had been taught to row by experts. It was too absurd to think of these two country girls rowing against them! As for entering a racing contest with boys from the camp—surely they were joking! But if they meant it seriously, she and Alice were ready for them.

"Oh, yes, we will enter the race," she answered with a kind of amused indifference. "I suppose Alice and I can row as well as your other friends. But we really must be getting back to the Point. Lieutenant Jimmy, we are sorry to interrupt you, but we have a long trip ahead of us." Her significant tone caused Phyllis and that young man to flush.

It was quite true that Lieutenant Jimmy had devoted himself exclusively to Phyllis, and that she had forgotten every one else in listening to the stories of naval life which he had been relating to her. Still, Flora Harris need not have directed the attention of the others to their absorption in each other. The young lieutenant looked rather sulky as he bade good-bye to his hostesses, with his eyes on Phil, and helped Miss Harris and Miss Paine into the motor boat.

Alfred Thornton and Tom Curtis left the "Merry Maid" soon after Lieutenant Lawton's launch steamed away, and when the five young women were alone they looked at one another in silence. Each one of them was possessed of the same thought. It was Phyllis who voiced it.

"I quite agree with you, Madge," she said, a note of anger in her voice. "I think that Miss Harris is detestable. One thing is certain, we must outrow those two girls in the race. I couldn't endure seeing them win."

"Nor I, Phil," returned Madge. "We'll win that race just to spite that hateful Miss Harris. I despise her snobbishness."

"That is a very ignoble spirit in which to enter it," reproved Miss Jenny Ann.

"Remember, we are to race with a very ignoble person," retorted Madge.

CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX

After the tea-party a variety of things came up to engage the attention of the "Merry Maid's" crew. For the first time since they had banded themselves together their interests lay apart. Phyllis Alden was so deeply impressed with the fact that Lieutenant James Lawton had chosen her as a confidante and insisted on telling her all his aims and aspirations, that she had thought of little else except him. Lillian Seldon was experiencing her first taste of society and it had gone to her head. The young officers at Fortress Monroe and the midshipmen vied with one another in paying her devoted attention, and she reveled in the knowledge that she was pretty and a favorite. Madge's sole idea in life seemed to consist in annoying Flora Harris, and with this intent she deliberately encouraged the attentions of Alfred Thornton, thus arousing the lasting resentment of that young woman, who looked upon young Thornton as her own particular cavalier. Secretly Madge despised him, nevertheless she concealed her dislike under a gay, gracious manner that she used continually to draw him away from the girl whom she had resolved to annoy and tease on every occasion.

Only Eleanor and Miss Jenny Ann remained unchanged. Both women loved the quiet of the "Merry Maid" far better than they did Society, and while Madge, Phil and Lillian flitted here and there like gay young butterflies, the chaperon and the little brown-haired daughter of Virginia kept the boat ship-shape and looked after the wants of the others.

They were by no means stay-at-homes, however. Mrs. Curtis had arranged all sorts of good times in which the five young women took part. One of her latest ideas was that her young guests should give a play. She had engaged the private ballroom of the hotel for a certain evening, and had arranged for the erection of a temporary stage on the day previous to the evening on which the play was to be given. She and Madeleine had invited a number of their friends and there would be a supper and dance afterward.

Madeleine, who had developed into a veritable bookworm, had, after considerable hunting, found a story called "The Decision," which she had arranged as a play. There were but five characters in the play, which was the story of a girl who, holding a position as private secretary in the home of a man of wealth, discovers that his daughter, a girl about her own age, has been unduly extravagant and, needing money, has forged a check in her father's name. While she deliberates as to what is to be done, the father discovers the forgery, and taxing his daughter with it, she becomes panic-stricken and lays the forgery at the door of the private secretary. Her employer, a hard man, brings the two girls together, declaring that if his daughter is at fault he will turn her from his home and utterly repudiate her.

A struggle begins in the secretary's mind. She realizes that if she confesses falsely to the forgery, it means not only the loss of her own position but her good name as well, whereas if she makes the daughter of her employer admit her fault, it means that, driven from home, the girl whose weakness has brought about this distressful situation stands little or no chance of redeeming her error if thrust upon the mercy of the world.

In the end the secretary shoulders the daughter's guilt and is about to leave her employer's house forever, he having declined to prosecute her, when his daughter, aroused to latent remorse by the nobility of spirit of the girl she has wronged, confesses the truth, and is forgiven by her father solely on account of the earnest pleading of the other girl.

Madge had been chosen to play the secretary, Flora Harris the daughter. Tom Curtis was to portray the role of the stern father, while Lillian Seldon played a pert maid and Alfred Thornton an inquisitive footman.

Flora Harris was secretly chagrined when she discovered that the role of heroine had fallen to Madge. Although the part of the erring daughter furnished plenty of opportunity for acting, the honors of the play fell to Madge. Flora was far too clever to show by any outward sign that she was not pleased with the part assigned to her, but privately she registered another grievance against the little captain, and the determination to lower Madge's pride to the dust was never long out of her thoughts. Just how this was to be done she could not yet see, but she felt that sooner or later the opportunity was sure to present itself.

Of one thing she was certain, Madge Morton and Phyllis Alden should not win the boat race. She did not believe there was much possibility of their winning. She had watched them rowing about in the "Water Witch" and had decided that they possessed neither skill nor speed. She knew that since their agreement to enter the race the two girls had been practising diligently during the mornings on their side of the bay. She and her cousin Alice had not been idle. They had done considerable rowing in the mornings, also, and confidently expected to carry off the prize, whatever it might be.

As for Madge and Phyllis, they entertained little idea of winning the race. It was not to be expected, considering the fact that they were competing with boys. Still, they hoped to make as good a showing as Flora Harris and Alice Paine. They devoted their morning hours to their practice, for the rehearsals of the play occupied Madge's afternoons, and it must be confessed that Lieutenant James Lawton took up the greater part of Phil's evenings. But whatever may have been his failings in this direction, he was proving himself to be an efficient coach.

His two pupils had placed themselves entirely under his training and, according to his enthusiastic commendation, were improving rapidly.

"You girls are doing better with every minute!" was his lively praise one morning as they rowed the "Water Witch" toward the houseboat. Their practice was over for the day, and Lieutenant Jimmy was to take luncheon with them.

It had been a particularly interesting morning. Madge felt more drawn toward the young lieutenant than on any previous occasion. He had been telling her and Phyllis of his life in the Navy, his hopes and aspirations, and Phyllis had purposely drawn him into describing his invention. He had just completed a model of his torpedo-boat destroyer and expected to take it to Washington within a few days. He was to show his model boat to a committee of naval experts, who were to decide whether his invention were of value.

Aside from the pleasure it gave him to tell the girls of his invention he had another graver reason for doing so. He had decided to ask Phyllis to do him a great favor. From the beginning of their acquaintance the young man had been impressed with Phil's sterling qualities. She was loyal to her friends and absolutely dependable. He felt certain that she would respect a confidence and keep a secret. He believed her to be the one person he could trust absolutely. Yet he did not wish to draw her into a promise without the knowledge of at least one of her friends. For this reason he had chosen to make Madge his confidante also.

Just how to begin he hardly knew, and it was not until they had rowed within close range of the houseboat, where Tom Curtis and Alfred Thornton stood waving from the deck, that he said nervously:

"Won't you and Miss Morton stop rowing for a moment, Miss Alden? I wouldn't have bored you with the story of my invention, except that I wish to ask you a strange favor. If I go away in a few days, of course my work-shop will be closely watched and guarded. Yet I shall not feel it to be perfectly safe. I alone know that I am being spied upon, that certain men are shadowing me ready to report every movement that I make. If, after leaving here, I should fall ill unexpectedly, or—disappear suddenly, the secret of my invention might never be known. So I wish to ask you, Miss Alden, to keep a small, square box, which I shall give you before I leave. I shall ask you not to examine its contents unless some unusual circumstance should develop, when you feel obliged to ascertain what the box contains. You may think it strange that I do not ask one of my men friends to do this favor for me. But I have a special reason for desiring to place the box in the care of some one who will never be suspected of having it. Will you keep it for me, say for a week, or until I ask you or write to you for it?"

The skiff had nearly reached the houseboat. Madge and Phyllis were allowing the "Water Witch" to drift in. Their friends on board had seen them and were signaling for them to come aboard.

Madge's usually sunny face was clouded with disapproval. Why should Lieutenant Lawton wish a young girl like Phyllis, a mere acquaintance, to guard a mysterious box for him? What could possibly happen to him when he went to Washington! It was all too vague and too absurd. She

decided that she and Phyllis would have nothing to do with Lieutenant Lawton's invention.

"I don't believe, Phil, that you and I ought to do what Lieutenant Lawton asks unless he takes us fully into his confidence," she protested.

Phyllis closed her lips with an expression of quiet resolution. "I will take care of the box for you while you are away, Lieutenant Lawton," she declared. "If Madge doesn't wish to have anything to do with it, she will keep your secret, at any rate. I know it will be all right, Madge; I am sure you will agree with me," she ended coaxingly, turning to her chum. "We could not refuse to do such a simple favor for a friend. And I think Lieutenant Lawton is a true patriot to give his invention to his country, instead of selling it to make a fortune, as so many other men would do, and I am proud to aid him in even the smallest way."

Lieutenant Lawton blushed. It occurred to Madge that she and Phyllis knew little of the young officer's real character. Suppose, after all, he did not intend to present his discovery to his Government? Were she and Phil to be used as dupes? A long, searching look into the young man's earnest face seemed to reassure her.

"When do you wish to give Phil the box, Mr. Lawton?" she said slowly.

"To-night, when you come to Mrs. Curtis's to rehearse for your play," replied Lieutenant Jimmy. "I shall want to see you and Miss Alden alone somewhere. It will only take a minute to hand you the box, but do not, for the world, let either Tom Curtis or Alfred Thornton know what I have asked of you."

"We won't," promised Phyllis readily.

"Then I can depend on you?" asked the young man anxiously. "You are certain that you are willing to stand by me, Miss Morton?"

"Yes." Madge gave an emphatic nod. "I feel that you would not ask us to do anything unless you were sure that it was for the best. We will take care of the box for you and no one need suspect that we have it."

"I thank you." Lieutenant Lawton shook hands with the two girls, and thus the compact, involving far more than either of the girls could possibly guess, was sealed.

CHAPTER VI

FLORA BETRAYS A STATE SECRET

Alfred Thornton had not come to spend several weeks in camp with Tom Curtis and a dozen other of his acquaintances solely for the pleasure of the outdoor life and sports. He had a secret and far more important mission. His father was a steel magnate. He was also a silent but deeply interested partner in one of the largest ship-building concerns in the United States. The elder Mr. Thornton and his associates had heard rumors of Lieutenant Lawton's probable invention.

If the young officer could be induced to sell the model of his destroyer to their concern, it would mean millions of dollars. If their company alone could make the fastest torpedo-boat destroyer in the world, not only would the United States Government be forced to buy such boats from them, but every government in Europe would have to seek them to find out the secret of the highest speed ever attained by such a craft.

Alfred Thornton had been appointed to watch Lieutenant Jimmy Lawton. He was to make him an offer for his patent, if it could be managed without the knowledge of the Government authorities. In any case, he was to wire his father the moment he believed Lieutenant Lawton had completed the model of his boat.

It was easy, therefore, to see why Alfred Thornton had cultivated the friendship of Flora Harris. He wished to be about Fortress Monroe in order to hear the gossip of the Army and Navy people, to see Lieutenant Lawton, yet never in any way to be suspected of spying upon him. For this reason Alfred had chosen to live over in the camp with Tom Curtis and his friends, rather than to be any nearer the scene of action.

It occurred to the young man on the night of the first rehearsal of their play in Mrs. Curtis's private drawing room that he had been paying too much attention to Madge. He did not wish to

estrangle Flora Harris. He must be more careful. For this one evening, at least, he would leave Madge to herself. Had Madge been able to read his thoughts she would not have been disturbed at his decision. She was growing tired of her new acquaintance. She thought him dull and too curious about other people's affairs. He was too fond of referring to Phil's friendship for Lieutenant Lawton in a joking manner. For the moment Lieutenant Lawton and the mysterious box occupied her thoughts so completely that she forgot Alfred Thornton's existence.

She saw Lieutenant Lawton come into the drawing room, watched him as he explained his unexpected appearance to Mrs. Curtis. Then, looking pale and worried, he took his seat next to Phyllis, though he did not have a chance to say a word to her that would not be overheard. For once Miss Jenny Ann Jones, who had always been the most lenient of chaperons, determined to play the part of a stern dragon. She decided that, of late, the young man had been altogether too attentive to Phyllis. She sat on the girl's side and took part in the conversation between her and the young lieutenant. When he proposed that Miss Alden walk with him in the hotel garden, Miss Jones quietly rose and went out with them.

Lieutenant Lawton was desperate. He must give Phyllis the box which he desired her to keep for him before the evening was over. Yet how could he appoint the time and place where she could receive it if he never had a moment with her in private? Miss Jenny Ann entered first the revolving door that formed the ladies' entrance to Mrs. Curtis's hotel. Before the door swung around again Lieutenant Lawton had time to whisper:

"You and Miss Morton meet me, if you can, by the tree on the south side of the hotel porch just before you start for the houseboat."

Phil had just time to nod in reply when she caught Miss Jenny Ann gazing at her reproachfully through the glass of the door.

If Phyllis had not thought Lieutenant Jimmy Lawton a patriot and a genius, she would never have undertaken to help him without being allowed to confide her part in the affair to her chaperon. But if Madge were romantic in her way, Phil was equally so in hers. While Madge dreamed of lovely ladies and romantic knights in the days of chivalry, Phyllis had visions of the glory of self-sacrifice, of patriotism, of doing great deeds for other people. She wanted to study medicine because she thought some day she might be able to go as a hospital nurse on the field of battle. To be able to help Lieutenant Lawton in even the smallest way to do a service for his country was a source of great delight to Phil. She was actually thrilled by it.

Madge, who had been watching her friend, wished that she would not show her feelings so plainly. Across the room she could see that Phyllis was pale and restless. Once or twice Madge saw Alfred Thornton staring at Phyllis; then he turned to hold a whispered conversation with Flora Harris.

Early in the evening Lieutenant Lawton disappeared from the drawing room. As soon as the rehearsal of their play was over Alfred Thornton made his escape.

Lieutenant Jimmy did not go to his work-shop; he went to his quarters. Half an hour later he returned with a square box in his hand, which looked like a five-pound box of candy. Instead of returning to the room where Mrs. Curtis and her guests were, he strolled nervously about the grounds of the hotel. It was dark under the tree where he had asked Phil and Madge to meet him. About ten minutes before he could look for them he went cautiously toward this tree and waited with his back close against it.

A figure, coming up behind him suddenly, startled him. The man had time only to lean over and say, "Two hundred thousand dollars!" when a sound of voices was heard at the southern end of the hotel veranda.

Phyllis also had found it difficult to have a private word with Madge, but toward the close of the evening she did have time to whisper the account of her appointment.

When Miss Jenny Ann suggested that it was time to leave for their houseboat, Madge and Phyllis went hurriedly, ahead of the others, into Mrs. Curtis's dressing room. They slipped into their evening coats, and, taking their pink and blue chiffon scarfs in their hands, they reached the hotel veranda before any one missed them.

There were few people staying in the big summer hotel, for it was late in the season. The night was cool and the big front porch was almost deserted. The two girls felt like conspirators. They were perfectly willing to keep Lieutenant Lawton's box for him. But why was he so mysterious?

At the southern end of the long veranda they plainly espied the figure of a man walking slowly up and down in the darkness. It was too dark to distinguish Lieutenant Lawton's uniform. The girls called faintly to the man under the trees. He did not hear them, nor move in their direction.

"Come on, Madge," whispered Phyllis impatiently. "If we are going to help Lieutenant Lawton by taking care of his box for him, we may as well go out on the lawn to receive it. Miss Jenny Ann

will be after us in a minute, if we don't hurry. I believe she thinks I am getting into mischief. She told me yesterday that she thought we were all behaving in much too grown-up a fashion."

They were talking as they walked toward the solitary figure they had seen standing under the tree. "Lieutenant!" Phyllis called softly. The young officer did not reply. The girls drew nearer. The man was not Lieutenant Lawton!

Alfred Thornton was grinning maliciously. "Were you looking for Lieutenant Lawton?" he inquired. "He was here a few minutes ago. He has gone back to his home. I can look him up for you if you are really anxious to see him, Miss Alden."

Phyllis turned pale with embarrassment. She made no reply.

Madge answered for her. "No, Mr. Thornton," she returned quietly, "it won't be necessary. We *did* wish to see Lieutenant Lawton on a little matter of business. It was not important. We shall probably see him some other time. We are sorry to have disturbed you."

Madge spoke calmly, but her cheeks were flushed. It did look rather ridiculous for them to be searching the hotel grounds for a young man who had not even waited to see them.

Alfred Thornton insisted on walking back to the hotel with Phyllis and Madge. He even accompanied them to the motor launch, but as the girls were going aboard he purposely dropped behind the party, apparently to talk to Flora Harris. He had seen Lieutenant Lawton reappear among the group of his friends. The young officer went straight up to Phyllis, handing her the oblong box under the cover of the darkness. "Here is the box," he whispered, when he caught Miss Jones looking directly at him.

Phil took the box. It was extremely heavy. She could scarcely hold it. But she never put it down until she had safely reached the shelter of the houseboat and had placed it at the bottom of her steamer trunk.

Alfred Thornton did not cross to the camping grounds with Tom Curtis in his motor launch that night. He had decided, for reasons best known to himself, to spend the night on the Virginia side of the bay. After seeing Madge and Phyllis to the launch, he returned to the hotel in time to walk home with Flora Harris.

"By the way," she exclaimed, as they were about to say good night, "didn't you once ask me to tell you if I ever heard that Lieutenant Lawton were about to leave Fortress Monroe? Why did you wish to know?"

Alfred Thornton glanced sharply at his companion. His father had promised him ten thousand dollars if he managed his detective work successfully. Was it possible that this girl possessed valuable information concerning the affairs of Lieutenant Lawton?

"Oh, I have a personal reason," he answered with an assumed carelessness.

Flora Harris was not deceived. She had read eagerness in his quick glance. She therefore intended to tell him that which he wished to know, because she desired having him on her side if any difficulty should arise between herself and Madge Morton.

"Well," she continued, after a moment's pause, "I am telling you a state secret, and one I really have no right to know. I believe that Lieutenant Lawton leaves for Washington within a few days. He has finished the model of that old torpedo-boat destroyer that everybody is making such a fuss about. It is a great secret, so don't let any one know that I have told you. Lieutenant Jimmy came to see Father to-day and had a long talk with him. Afterward I overheard Father tell Mother that things were O.K. with Jimmy Lawton, but she was not to mention the subject to a soul."

Flora laughed. She did not in the least realize the importance of the information she had just given. Yet she did know enough to understand that she should never have repeated a word that she had heard within her father's house that in any way referred to Government business.

"Oh, well, you needn't worry over having told me," assured Alfred Thornton. "As I am a friend of Lawton's, naturally I am interested in anything pertaining to his invention. He has been so very stiff and close-mouthed about it, he would be rather surprised if he knew that I'd found out something about it, after all."

"Don't you dare let him know that I told you anything!" exclaimed Flora in alarm. "If you do, it will go straight to Father and then—— I wish I hadn't told you," she concluded regretfully.

Flora's sudden change of mood caused Alfred Thornton to purposely look offended and say haughtily, "I am sorry you have such a bad opinion of my honor."

Flora, who had not intended to make the young man angry, tried instantly to apologize, and after a certain amount of sulky hesitation he condescended to accept her apology. If she had seen

the expression of triumph that gleamed in his eyes as he turned from her door and strode down the walk, she would have been still more alarmed.

That night Alfred Thornton sent a telegram to his father. It was written in a code that had been arranged between them. When the messenger boy departed the young man went to his room in the hotel with the air of one whose mission had been accomplished.

CHAPTER VII

AWARDING THE PRIZES

The boat race between the four girls and six men at the camping grounds, which had begun as a joke, was really to take place.

The boys had desired to do something for the entertainment of their friends on the houseboat at Old Point Comfort. So the day of the boat race was to be turned into a long day of feasting and amusement.

The summer camp was about to break up, and the young men who had been members of it were to return to their homes to get ready for the opening of college. The picnic at the camp was to be their swan song. The camp was composed of fourteen young men and two professors from Columbia University. Professor Gordon looked after the athletics and Professor Gamage the general management of the camp. The men lived in three small, portable houses, which were set up along the shores of Oyster Sound, a little stretch of quiet water between the mainland and a small island.

Tom Curtis and Alfred Thornton, insisting that they be allowed to act as masters of ceremony for the day's amusements, had arranged a regular programme for their guests.

Madge requested Tom Curtis to let their boat race take place first. She and Phyllis were nervous and wished to have the race over in order that they might be free to enjoy the day's pleasures. But, for once in their acquaintance, Tom was obdurate and would not agree either to Madge's entreaties or to her commands. He had arranged his programme and would make no changes in it, he declared stubbornly.

The guests were to arrive at the camp and eat their luncheon; an hour later the young men were to give an exhibition of wrestling and racing. As a last feature of the day the famous race was to take place between the boys and girls. The race was supposed to be rowed "just for fun," but Mrs. Curtis had secretly provided two silver cups. One was to be presented to the victors, the other was to be awarded to whichever of the two pairs of girls outrowed the other.

Madge and Phyllis had no particularly pretty suits to wear in the coming race. The sailor suits they had worn on their first houseboat excursion were now quite shabby, but neither of them felt that they could afford to buy new ones. Two days before the boat race Miss Jenny Ann came to the rescue. She made two beautiful new blouses of white flannel with wide collars and cuffs of pale blue. Upon the right sleeve of each blouse Eleanor embroidered in a shade of blue that exactly matched their collars and cuffs the mysterious letters, M.M.M., which stood for "Mates of the Merry Maid." These blouses worn with their dark blue serge skirts made very attractive rowing costumes.

The time appointed for the boat race was at noon on Saturday. The boys had worked manfully and the grounds looked as though they had been arranged for a Fourth of July picnic.

When the houseboat party arrived they were greeted with great cordiality by the young men of the camp. Flora Harris and Alice Paine did not put in an appearance until within five minutes of the starting time of the race. Both young women were attired in expensive boating costumes of heavy cream-colored pongee. They wore white silk stockings and white buckskin shoes. Their only touches of color were the scarfs of pale green crepe de chine which were passed under their sailor collars, and tied in a sailor knot at the open necks of their blouses.

Madge could not help feeling a tiny pang of envy as she gazed at her beautifully dressed rivals. It was only for a moment, however. She turned to Tom Curtis, who had hardly left her side since her arrival, and said, "I have one last particular favor to ask. Will you ask your crew to come and stand in a line before me?"

"Certainly," agreed Tom wonderingly. The next instant the six men stood in a line before her. They were Tom Curtis and Alfred Thornton, who were to pull together, Harry Sears and a Maryland boy, named George Robinson, and two brothers, Peter and John Simrall. The six youths had on their rowing costumes, with their sweaters over them. They looked like a row of good-natured giants as they smiled cheerfully down on Madge.

Phyllis, Eleanor and Lillian were standing just behind her. Flora Harris and her cousin, Alice Paine, were not far away. Flora Harris and Madge had barely spoken to each other all day. Before she had an opportunity to explain what she wished of the young men, Flora whispered to her cousin, so audibly that not only Madge but her three friends heard "I suppose Miss Morton has arranged this tableau to make herself conspicuous, as usual."

Madge flushed hotly. A quick reply sprang to her lips. The three girls cast indignant glances at Flora. Madge shook her head slightly. She meant that they were to remain silent. She had determined not to lose her temper again with Flora Harris, no matter what the other girl said or did, and she did not wish her friends to fight her battles. Then she turned to the boys, who stood in an expectant row.

"Gentlemen," she began solemnly, not a sign of laughter on her usually merry face, "before we begin our boat race, you will have to make us a solemn promise." She gazed searchingly at the six oarsmen. "You must promise us that you will play fair this afternoon in our rowing contest."

"Why, Madge Morton!" exclaimed Tom, "what do you mean? Do you take us for cheats?"

Madge smiled. "No, I don't take you for cheats. I am afraid that you are going to behave like knights of chivalry, and that you will not try to win the boat race, which you are to row against Miss Harris, Miss Paine, Phil and me. So you must vow that you will row fairly and squarely and that you will not hold back or give us any unfair advantage."

The young men hesitated, looking sheepishly at one another. How had Madge guessed their plan?

"We won't row with you unless you make us this promise," threatened Phyllis.

Flora Harris and Alice Paine also insisted that this promise be given, and after a good-natured protest on their part, the young men finally agreed to Madge's demand.

The five sculls were waiting out on the water. There was a sixth boat for the umpire, Professor Gordon, to follow the race. Professor Gamage was to act as judge at the finish.

The girls got into their boats first, taking their station a hundred yards ahead of the three sculls to be pulled by the men.

Madge and Phyllis, who were on the inside course, remembered every word of Jimmy Lawton's coaching. They had won the spring regatta at Miss Tolliver's school. But then they had rowed only against other girls. Now, they were to enter into a different kind of contest. They did not even know how skilful their feminine competitors were. The boys, of course, had superior strength and training.

Lieutenant Lawton had declared that the one chance for Phyllis and Madge lay in the start. If they could get away in good style, and make a spurt toward the goal, the fact of their hundred yards advantage and the shortness of the course would give them considerable chance of winning the race.

The disadvantage under which Madge and Phil labored was that they had not been accustomed to rowing in anything but quiet waters. Flora and Alice were accustomed to rowing in the surf. The few days' practice on the bay under Lieutenant Jimmy's direction had helped the two girls. They had learned the advantage of the long stroke with the high "feather." Phil was acting as stroke oar in their boat, Madge as bowman; Alice Paine was stroke and Flora bowman in the rival skiff.

The four girls pulled gloriously. It was a lovely September day, and no time or strength was wasted in false starts. None of the girls dared to look back at the men when the signal to get away rang out. No cry of false start rang after them, and they saw that their masculine rivals were in close pursuit.

At the beginning of the contest Phyllis and Madge made the best forward spurt. A moment later Flora and Alice brought their boat up bow and bow.

Neither Madge nor Phil glanced toward their opponents. Their work lay plainly ahead of them. The girls sat squarely in their skiff, their bodies bending sharply forward, then back to recover. They held their oars firmly but lightly, and pulled for their lives.

The four girls saw that the men were gaining on them. But they had already covered half of the

course. None of them cared very much whether the boys were the victors. The two pairs of girls were intent only on outstripping each other.

Madge and Phil knew they could not hold out long. But how they were pulling! They had never done such splendid work before in their lives. The boys were amazed. They were trying to keep their word to Madge. Now it struck them that, after all, they would have to make a real effort to win. The girls had made such a splendid advance that the men pulled a little harder at their oars.

Flora Harris and Alice Paine gained a few feet on the other girls. The experience of the former pair in rough waters was beginning to show.

Determination to win made Madge and Phil redouble their efforts. Their opponents were only a shade ahead of them now. The boats were keeping to their straight courses in the open sound. It is a first rule, in boat racing of any kind, that each boat shall keep to its own water throughout the race.

Flora Harris, as bowman, was responsible for the steering of her boat. Whether from accident or intention, just as the bow of the rival skiff came about midway the body of their shell Flora Harris pulled harder on her port oar. Her boat swerved to the left. For a brief second the bow crossed directly in front of the skiff rowed by the "Merry Maid" girls. Madge was taken completely off her guard. She had not time to call out to Phil. Phyllis, as stroke oar, was not expected to know what was happening. Her duty was to row steadily ahead. Her companion's sudden exclamation, the unexpected vision of the other boat in their course, confused Phil. She lost her stroke. In the same second, Flora Harris and Alice Paine returned to their course and pulled triumphantly ahead. Their mistake lost them first place. But they outclassed Madge and Phil. Harry Sears and George Robinson swept past and came up to the stake. Flora and Alice were second. Tom and Alfred, the two Simrall brothers, pulled past Madge and Phil. They had fulfilled Phil's prediction and brought up the rear.

Professor Gordon, who, as umpire, had been following the race, was worried. Of course, he had seen the foul made by Alice and Flora. Yet he did not know exactly what to do. It was possible that girls did not understand the rules of boat racing. This race was being rowed for pleasure. The girls were the guests of his boys at the camp. Flora Harris's father was an officer at Fortress Monroe. It would hardly do to accuse his daughter of cheating. He decided to allow the competitors to register a complaint. He would say nothing until the complaint was made to him.

When Madge and Phyllis pulled in to the line of the other racing boats Professor Gamage, the judge at the finish, was about to announce the victors. Phil's face was white. She looked tired and dispirited. Madge's cheeks were flaming. Every muscle in her body was tense. She did not appear to feel the slightest fatigue.

"Don't say anything, Madge," pleaded Phil, before they came up with the others. "If the umpire does not declare the race to be a foul, we must not mention it. We were rowing only for fun. We don't wish to make a scene. If we were to accuse Alice and Flora of committing a foul, they would be likely to deny it."

"I must speak! I won't bear it!" breathed Madge passionately. "Why should I allow Flora Harris the use of what we have rightfully won? Tom or Alfred Thornton ought to speak."

Phyllis had no chance for further argument with her friend. The announcements were being made.

"Sears and Robinson, first place; Miss Harris and Miss Paine, second," the judge called out. "If you will row back to the starting place, I believe Mrs. Curtis has some prizes to award. We couldn't manage to transport our audience up here."

The crews accepted the verdict in silence. Harry Sears and George Robinson looked appealingly toward Madge and Phil, then toward their umpire. Madge glanced at Tom from under her long lashes. Tom's face was flaming, yet he said nothing. During the short row back to the camping grounds the canoe crews were significantly silent.

At the starting place Mrs. Curtis, Madeleine, Lillian and Eleanor waited to greet them, their arms filled with flowers. Before leaving for Washington, Lieutenant Lawton had placed an order with a florist for two bouquets of red and white roses tied with blue ribbon, to be presented to Madge and Phil.

When Madeleine presented the bouquets the girls took their flowers with half-averted faces.

The guests of the day, however, were eagerly watching Mrs. Curtis, who was holding two beautiful silver loving cups in her hands. Professor Gordon announced Harry Sears and George Robinson as the winners of the race. They received the larger of the cups in rather an embarrassed fashion.

"But I wish to know the girl winners," protested Mrs. Curtis, glancing about the group of young

people.

Flora came toward her smiling in the superior manner that proud Madge particularly disliked. "I believe we came next, Mrs. Curtis," she announced.



Madge Surprised the Little Company.

Mrs. Curtis had just opened her lips to congratulate the winners when a high, clear voice surprised the little company.

"Professor Gordon, did you not, as umpire, see that Miss Harris and Miss Paine committed a foul which disqualified them in our boat race?"

"O Madge!" Mrs. Curtis spoke in a tone of intense displeasure. Madeleine's lovely face flushed with embarrassment. Lillian and Eleanor felt the color rise to their own faces. Miss Jenny Ann stepped to the side of impetuous Madge, who had precipitated this awkward situation.

Flora Harris paused with her hand lifted to receive the prize. Her cousin, Alice Paine, looked as though she would like to sink through the earth.

"Does Miss Morton object to our receiving the prize?" Flora queried icily. "Then, please don't give it to us. I hardly thought Miss Morton could endure to see any one but herself as the winner. An Army officer's daughter is not likely to receive a reward after she has been accused of cheating, nor will she ever overlook the insult."

Flora moved away from Mrs. Curtis, her head held high, her face white with anger.

The sympathy of most of the onlookers was at present with Flora and Alice. Phyllis said nothing, but she moved nearer to Madge, her lips closed in the firm line which never meant retreat.

"You should have made your complaint to me, Miss Morton, before we left the boats," answered Professor Gordon sternly. "Don't you think it is too late, now that we have come ashore and the places have been awarded?"

"It is not the prize that we wish," returned Madge unsteadily. "It is only that I think it is dreadful to win anything unfairly. Tom, you saw what happened. Will you not speak?"

"Yes," began Tom sturdily, determined to stand by Madge, "I saw Flora——"

Mrs. Curtis laid her hand on her son's arm. With one appealing glance at his mother Tom subsided. "I am sorry this error has occurred," she announced to the assembled guests. "I am sure that, if an error in the race were committed, it was not intentional. I insist on Miss Harris and Miss Paine accepting this cup. Madge should not have made her accusation at such a time and place. I think that she owes her opponents an apology."

Mrs. Curtis was gazing at Madge with more disfavor than she had ever before shown her favorite.

The little captain felt that she would like to put her arms about some one's neck and cry her heart out. She was sorry she had spoken, she was ashamed to have made such a scene and to have spoiled the boys' party, but she was not ready to apologize for having told the truth. Now her eyes were flashing ominously and her red lips were curled in scorn. She had never looked prettier or more obstinate.

"Any apology I have to offer will have to be made to you, Mrs. Curtis," she answered between her teeth. "I can not apologize to Miss Harris or Miss Paine for having told the truth. Of course, I accept the umpire's decision. I know that we should have entered our protest before we left our boat."

Madge walked proudly away from the group. Her arms were full of flowers, but her heart was full of woe. Why did she always seem to be in the wrong where Flora Harris was concerned? What a bad-tempered girl everyone must think her!

Phyllis turned to follow Madge, nor would she desert her chum for a moment until the houseboat party left the camping grounds. Mrs. Curtis did not notice Madge. She was thoroughly

incensed. Tom had only a chance to whisper: "Course you were right, dear girl. Flora Harris and Alice cheated abominably. It was my fault too. I should have spoken up at first. I let things go only because Mother was set on it, and I didn't wish to see our party break up in a quarrel. All the fellows in the race are with you. They saw what happened. They were cowards, just as I was. They didn't want to raise a fuss with the girls."

The rest of the day did not pass very pleasantly for Madge. Mrs. Curtis could not forgive the little captain for what she considered her lack of diplomacy, and, knowing herself to be under the ban of her friend's displeasure, Madge was singularly uncomfortable and ill at ease. Miss Jenny Ann and the three "Merry Maid" girls could not help feeling that though Madge had been somewhat hasty, still she had done nothing reprehensible, and that it looked as though Mrs. Curtis were almost taking sides with Flora Harris.

It was with unmistakable relief that the houseboat party said good night to Mrs. Curtis and boarded Tom Curtis's launch for the ride back to the "Merry Maid."

Madge drew a little apart from the others, staring moodily out over the moonlit water. Finally Tom seated himself beside her and they talked impersonally. She was too proud to bring up the subject of what had occurred on shore, and Tom's sense of delicacy prevented him from trying to discuss the disagreeable scene she had precipitated with her.

Once on board their boat the girls were unusually quiet, and preparations for bed that night were accompanied by little conversation. Knowing Madge's disposition, and that she was already suffering deeply from her too frank expression of opinion that afternoon, her friends had decided among themselves to allow the subject to rest.

It was long after midnight, and the "Merry Maid" and her crew were supposedly deep in slumber when Miss Jenny Ann was awakened by the sound of low sobbing from Madge's berth. A moment later the chaperon was bending over the little captain.

"Madge, dear, what is the matter?" she asked in alarm.

"O Miss Jenny Ann!" wailed Madge, "when shall I learn to keep my temper? Phil told me to say nothing, and I did intend to hold my tongue. But when that Harris girl stepped up so coolly to receive the prize, knowing what a cheat she was, the words rushed out before I knew they were coming. No one will ever forgive me for spoiling the day. I'll never forgive myself."

"Don't cry so, Madge, dear," soothed Miss Jenny Ann. "You mustn't blame yourself too severely. You had great provocation."

"I am not a bit sorry for what I said." Madge sat up in bed, a defiant gleam in her eyes. Then her lips quivered and she said brokenly: "It—it's—Mrs. Curtis. I—am—sorry—she—is angry with—me."

"You had better go over to the hotel and see Mrs. Curtis in the morning," advised Miss Jones, "then, if she decides it to be necessary, you must apologize to Flora Harris."

"Why should I apologize to her?" Madge's eyes grew dark with anger. "She behaved very dishonorably."

"But you precipitated a very disagreeable scene, which, as you yourself have said, spoiled the pleasure of the party for all Mrs. Curtis's guests," reminded her teacher. "I know that you were severely tried. My private opinion of Flora Harris is not a flattering one, but Madge Morton is too great of spirit not to admit her fault and apologize to Miss Harris for telling the brutal truth in a brutal manner."

Madge gazed almost sternly into the other woman's serious eyes. "I will apologize to Miss Harris on one condition only," her red lips took on an obstinate curve, "if Mrs. Curtis wishes me to do so."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUR OF TRIUMPH

The morning after the boat race Tom Curtis came over to see the girls in the launch, and took Madge back to Old Point with him to see his mother.

Mrs. Curtis was not proof against Madge's sincere apology. She had been very angry with her young friend until Tom had privately assured her that Madge's abrupt accusation was true. Flora and Alice had won the race unfairly. One pleading look from the little captain's blue eyes the next morning caused her to surrender. She was no longer sure that she wished Madge to apologize to a girl who had been guilty of so dishonorable an action.

"I am sorry that you and Flora are not on friendly terms," she said regretfully. "I am afraid we can not give the play. Flora Harris will no doubt withdraw from the cast simply to complicate matters."

"Mrs. Curtis," said Madge with compelling directness, "would you rather I should apologize to Flora Harris?"

Mrs. Curtis eyed Madge reflectively. "I don't know, my dear," she hesitated.

"I am going to do it!" cried Madge, springing to her feet. "Don't say a word; I'd rather make Miss Harris fifty apologies than spoil all your lovely plans."

Mrs. Curtis insisted firmly on accompanying Madge to Flora Harris's home. The little captain walked across the parade ground at Fortress Monroe to the house of Colonel Harris, her face very pale, her auburn head held high.

They had been seated in the Harris's drawing room for at least ten minutes before Flora Harris entered. She did not so much as glance at Madge, although she greeted Mrs. Curtis rather effusively.

If Mrs. Curtis could have signaled to Madge, she would not have permitted her to humiliate herself by an apology to this ill-bred girl. She was extremely angry at Flora's rudeness and regretted that she had held the slightest sympathy for her. But before she could catch Madge's eye the little captain had begun her apology.

"Miss Harris," she declared quietly, "I am very sorry to have created the scene that I did at the boat race yesterday. It was not very diplomatic in me, and I am afraid I destroyed everyone's pleasure in the party."

Flora Harris favored Madge with the merest fraction of a glance. "I thought you would soon see your mistake," she answered coolly.

"My mistake?" For an instant Madge's blue eyes glittered with anger. Then, rallying her self-control, she said sweetly, "I suppose it *was* a mistake to speak openly. It must have been very disagreeable for you. It would have been kinder to remain silent."

Flora Harris turned scarlet. Mrs. Curtis bit her lips to keep from smiling. Madge bowed distantly to Flora. Then she rose and said demurely: "Are you ready to go, Mrs. Curtis? Good afternoon, Miss Harris."

There was a distinct note of constraint in Mrs. Curtis's voice as she said good-bye to Flora Harris. She was heartily disgusted with the cavalier manner which the officer's daughter had exhibited, and privately registered a vow that after the play she would invite Miss Harris to her hotel but little.

Madge stayed to luncheon with Mrs. Curtis and Madeleine. In the afternoon Tom came in with the news that the Army headquarters at Fortress Monroe were ringing with the story of the disappearance of Lieutenant Jimmy Lawton. It was rumored that he had started for Washington, where he was to appear before a body of naval experts selected to judge the value of his invention. Up to that time he had not arrived in Washington. He had made no report in regard to his failure to appear. Gossip was beginning to whisper that Lieutenant Jimmy was not such a patriot after all. Possibly he had run away to a foreign country to sell his model to the highest bidder. He might never again be allowed to wear his uniform as an officer in the United States Navy.

Madge wondered what she ought to tell Phil in regard to the strange rumors. She was afraid Phyllis would be grieved, and be sadly worried. What had the two girls concealed in the mysterious package left in their charge by the vanished officer, who had evidently foreseen that gossip would follow his mysterious departure?

Madge need not have troubled herself on Phil's account. That young woman took the report of Lieutenant Jimmy's disappearance with perfect calmness. "He will be back very soon," she asserted to Madge. "Then he will be able to explain everything to everyone's satisfaction. Lieutenant Lawton is not a traitor. Just you wait and see!" So Phyllis continued to have faith in the young officer. She never reflected on what the box in her trunk contained, but she never left the trunk unlocked for a moment. Nor did she ever fail to wear a small brass key about her person.

On the evening appointed for the performance of "The Decision" all personal differences were apparently forgotten. Madge thought no more of her trouble with Flora Harris. She had tried to be as polite to her as possible and Flora had appeared to accept her apology. Flora Harris had determined that it was the wisest thing that she could do to appear to be friendly with Madge. It would make the revenge which she had planned against Madge the more complete. Then, if she let it be known that Miss Morton had withdrawn the accusation against herself and Alice, no one could possibly believe there had been any truth in it in the beginning. Her act would appear to be inspired only by her own chagrin over defeat in the race.

The day of the play Lillian and Madge were radiant over the prospect of the evening's gayety. Eleanor, Phil and Miss Jenny Ann were equally interested. The four girls sewed and talked the entire morning. They had not had such a good time together since the beginning of their second houseboat holiday. In a few days "The Merry Maid" would be sent up the bay to be looked after for the winter; the four comrades would return to Miss Tolliver's school; Miss Jenny Ann would be turned from chaperon to teacher. The girls were enthusiastic about their winter. Of course, they would study harder and accomplish more than they ever had before, they promised themselves.

The private ballroom in her hotel, which Mrs. Curtis had engaged for the performance of the little drama, was delightfully arranged. A small stage was erected at one end of it, and low-growing flowers and palms banked about it. There was little light in the back of the room, where the audience sat, but the miniature stage was brilliant with the glow of delicately shaded electric lights.

Mrs. Curtis had invited about fifty guests, her friends from the nearby hotels and cottages, and a number of Army and Navy officers with their families. The season was almost at an end. Mrs. Curtis, Madeleine and Tom would leave for New York in ten days. They wished their last entertainment to be a memorable one.

Miss Jenny Ann sat in one of the front row chairs with Eleanor and Phyllis. In their dressing room, Madge was trying to comfort Lillian, who had lost her courage at the eleventh hour. When the time came for her to go on, however, Lillian forgot her stage fright and made her first entrance with the air of a seasoned trouper. The heavy work of the play lay between Flora Harris and Madge, and in the enactment of the little drama that followed it was difficult to realize that neither of the two young women was a professional.

"Flora Harris's part is pretty well suited to her," Tom Curtis had confided to Madge at the dress rehearsal the day before. "I can imagine she would be quite likely to load the blame for her own misdeeds on the other girl's shoulders. She wouldn't experience a change of heart at the end of the stunt the way this girl did, either."

And Madge, being merely human, could not resist flashing him a glance which meant that she quite agreed with him.

It was in the final scene, where the secretary makes her appeal to the father of the girl, that Madge scored her greatest triumph. The rise and fall of her clear voice, that Madeleine always asserted had "tears" in it, coupled with the intense earnestness with which she made her plea, called forth ungrudging applause, and when, after the cast had taken several encores the audience still kept up a steady clamor, she was obliged to appear between the silken curtains and make a little speech. It was indeed Madge Morton's hour of triumph.

CHAPTER IX

MADGE MORTON'S SECRET

Mrs. Curtis had arranged that her younger guests should have refreshments served to them in the small private dining room as soon as their play was over. The older guests were to be served in another larger room which she had engaged for that purpose.

In the middle of the dining room was a table decorated with a model houseboat made of crystal candy. There were flowers, fruits and candies on the table, which was lighted with candles.

When Madge, Lillian, Tom Curtis and Harry Sears entered the room Eleanor and Phil were standing at one side of this table, talking to a group of their friends. Directly after they took their places the two Simrall boys and half a dozen other young people were ushered in, until the room was comfortably full.

Suddenly, as though drawn by a curious force, Madge lifted her eyes. She saw the dining room door open and Flora Harris enter. She was followed by Alfred Thornton, whose face was a dull red and whose eyes were lowered. Madge felt a premonition of disaster, an apprehensive shudder passed over her. Flora continued to walk the entire length of the room, speaking to no one. When she came to Madge she halted, staring at her through insolent, half-closed eyes.

Tom looked at Flora Harris in angry amazement. He knew she was about to make a disagreeable speech, but he wondered what had actuated her to do so. He frowned over the heads of the girls at Alfred Thornton. He tried to signal to him to steer Miss Harris in some safer direction, but Alfred would not return his glance.

"Miss Morton," began Flora, in an unusually high voice, "I wish to congratulate you on your success to-night. There is no doubt about your talent as an actress." Flora laid such stress on the word "actress" that Madge blushed hotly.

"Thank you," she answered, fighting back her temper.

Alfred Thornton leaned over to whisper to Flora, "Don't, Flora, please, don't."

Flora Harris tossed her head angrily. For some time she had been stealthily planning her revenge against Madge. Now that she had an unusually good opportunity to put her plan into action, she did not intend to allow the little captain to escape her unscathed.

"It is a matter of surprise to me, Miss Morton, that you could have the temerity to come here to Old Point Comfort, knowing it to be a military post," she continued.

Madge started slightly. The movement of her body was scarcely perceptible, yet Flora saw it.

"Oh, I see you understand me," she sneered, "but as it is very bad form to exchange confidences when others are present, let us have done with confidences. I am sure everyone here will be deeply interested in my story, which is this: Once upon a time there was an officer in the Navy whose name was Robert Morton. He proved himself unworthy to be a naval officer and was dismissed from the service in disgrace and disappeared. Miss Morton will tell you the rest of the story. As Robert Morton was her father, it is just possible that she can tell us something further about him." Flora's face shone with cruel triumph.

Madge looked at her tormentor with unseeing eyes. For the instant she was stunned by the blow. Then reason returned. White to the lips, she fixed Flora with the stern question, "Where did you hear this story?"

The others of the party sat staring in horrified silence.

Flora shrugged her shoulders. "Anything to oblige you," she retorted, "but don't attempt to say the story isn't true. I know it to be true because my grandfather was your father's superior officer at the time."

Madge gave one sharp cry that brought the company to their feet in alarm. "Your grandfather's name—tell me—I must know."

"Richard Foster Harris," replied Flora, gazing at Madge with a deep frown. What was the matter? Her vengeful announcement was having an entirely different effect upon the girl she disliked than that which she had anticipated. "My grandfather is an admiral now. He was in line for promotion when your father was dismissed in disgrace." Flora lingered over the word "disgrace."

"Your grandfather, Richard Foster Harris," repeated Madge brokenly. "Then he is—he is—oh, I am not so cruel as you. I can not speak against—"

"What do you mean?" almost screamed Flora. "How dare you even insinuate anything against my grandfather? He is an admiral, do you understand, an *admiral!*"

Madge glanced about her, meeting the anxious, sympathetic faces of her friends. They were for the moment completely taken aback by this sudden turn in affairs. Alfred Thornton's eyes was the only pair which refused to meet hers. He averted his head.

"I thought," she said, addressing Miss Harris with a gentle dignity that went straight to the hearts of her hearers, "that I could retaliate, that I could say to you words that would cut into your soul as deeply as your words have cut into mine, but there are strong reasons why I can't say them."

"And I insist that you explain your insinuation," flung back Flora. "Do so at once, or I will send for Mrs. Curtis and force you to do as I say."

"Send for Mrs. Curtis if you wish." Madge's face was a white mask lighted by the defiant gleam of eyes that seemed almost to flame. "Do not imagine, however, that I shall either explain or

retract what I have just said."

Letting her gaze wander from one to the other of her friends, she said with finality: "I can not even discuss the charge Miss Harris has made against my father. It is true that he was once in the Navy, and that I once believed him to be dead. More than that I can not tell you. It is, and must forever be, my secret."

Turning to Madeleine she said quietly, "Will you forgive me for having been the cause of this scene and allow me to go?"

For answer Madeleine drew Madge within the circle of her arm and kissed her tenderly.

"Good night." As one in a dream the little captain bowed to the company and walked to the door. Tom Curtis followed her, casting a wrathful glance at Flora Harris, who for once in her life could think of nothing to say.

There was the sound of a closing door, then Phil's voice rang out in tones of bitter denunciation:

"Miss Harris, you are the cruelest, most despicable girl I have ever known. Madge revered the memory of her father as something too sacred for discussion. I know that her greatest ambition in life was to find some one who had been his friend, some one who could tell her of him. Happily for Madge, I do not believe your accusation to be true. I am equally sure that her motive for silence is one you could never understand."

With a stiff little nod to the others Phil walked proudly to the door. She was followed by Lillian and Eleanor. Three minutes later Flora Harris and Alfred Thornton stood alone in the pretty banqueting room. Her revenge had cost her far more dearly than she had anticipated.

CHAPTER X

ADRIFT ON CHESAPEAKE BAY

"Alfred Thornton, you must do it." Flora Harris spoke under her breath. Half an hour had passed since she and Alfred Thornton had left the hotel.

The young man was about to say good night to her at her gate after having stubbornly refused to execute a certain commission for her.

"I can't do it," he protested. "If I were you, I'd let Madge Morton and her crowd alone. I did not believe to-night, until the last minute, that you would do as you had threatened. You didn't distinguish yourself by it."

Flora Harris shrugged her thin shoulders in the darkness. "Don't pretend to be shocked," she sneered, "and never mind lecturing me. Are you going to help me or are you going to play the coward at the last moment?"

"I have given you my answer. I'm not going to change it, either," repeated the youth sullenly, edging away from Miss Harris. "I think Miss Morton and her friends have had trouble enough. I don't wish to do anything that might possibly endanger their safety."

"Oh, very well," rejoined Flora angrily. "You know the alternative. If you won't do what I ask of you, I shall tell my father that you have been down here as a hired spy to find out about Jimmy Lawton's invention. I shall tell him that you offered Jimmy thousands of dollars for his patent, and advised him to sell out to you, and then to tell the Government that he had failed with his model. It would ruin not only your reputation, Alfred Thornton, for me to tell this story about you, it would probably do your father a great deal of harm. It would be a serious thing for your father if certain persons were to find out that he was trying to steal a valuable invention from his own country."

"You wouldn't tell, would you, Flora?" Alfred Thornton wiped his forehead nervously with his handkerchief, though it was a cool night. "Whew, if only I'd never let you find out what I was after!"

"You couldn't help yourself," retorted Flora airily. "You needed me. I would have done a great deal more for you, too, if you had not developed such a liking for Madge Morton. You thought you

were managing so cleverly that I would not notice. Of course, I am not angry with you, but I think you ought to do something to make amends for being so deceitful."

Alfred Thornton flushed and hesitated.

"You see, Alfred, it is like this," went on Flora, taking advantage of his hesitation. "You must help me get the 'Merry Maid' away from our neighborhood. I believe I told the truth about Madge Morton's father. But if my father or grandfather ever learn of what happened to-night, they will be furious with me. I overheard my grandfather telling the story to my father the other night. When he mentioned the name of Captain Robert Morton, I remembered hearing Miss Butler telling Mrs. Curtis when the 'Merry Maid' girls were here before that Miss Morton's father had been an officer in the Navy, and that his name was Captain Robert Morton. Miss Butler is Miss Morton's cousin, you know. They live in the same house. When I heard that I put two and two together and took a chance on saying what I did. Now that you know the whole story you can easily see why I am anxious to have the 'Merry Maid' anchored as far from me as possible. If you will cut the rope of the houseboat and let the silly old craft drift away somewhere, the girls will be so busy with getting it back here that by the time they have done that their vacation will be over, and in the hurry of packing they won't have much chance to make a scene. I think my scheme is very clever."

Alfred Thornton looked overhead. It was a dark night. The stars had disappeared. Black clouds were gathering in the east.

The young man realized that he could do as Flora Harris demanded of him with very little danger of detection. The houseboat was moored along the beach by means of a heavy anchor tied with a thick rope. As an additional safeguard the stern hawser had been hitched about a post several yards up the beach out of the line of the tide. It would take a very few minutes to cut these ropes. What took place afterward he would not wait to see. He therefore reluctantly gave Flora the desired promise.

When the houseboat party boarded Tom's motor launch for the ride to the "Merry Maid" after Madge's tragic scene in the dining room they were strangely silent. Even Miss Jenny Ann, who had not been with the girls, did not know what had happened. A glance at Madge's face was enough to reveal to her that it had been serious. The little captain sat white and cold as a statue. She looked like the ghost of the radiant girl who had crossed the bay a few hours before. She shed no tears, and seemed rather to resent any expression of sympathy. When Eleanor took her cousin's cold hand, Madge held it loosely for a minute, then allowed it slowly to slide from the grasp of her icy fingers.

When Tom Curtis helped her out of his launch he had the courage to whisper: "Of course, dear girl, we are all with you. Don't you worry. Just leave matters to me. I'll see that Flora Harris doesn't escape censure. I am going to inform her father of her conduct to-night."

Madge smiled a faint good night to Tom when he took her limp hand in his own.

Once the girls were on the deck of their own boat she turned quietly to their chaperon.

"Miss Jenny Ann," she murmured, "the girls will tell you what happened to-night. I can't talk of it now. May I lie down on the couch in the living room? Will every one please leave me alone?"

The three other girls and Miss Jenny Ann sat for a while on the deck of their pretty boat. Eleanor kept her head buried in her chaperon's lap. She cried a little, partly from sympathy with Madge and partly from amazement and horror at the story she had just heard.

Very quietly Lillian told what had happened.

"Madge is right," Miss Jenny Ann concluded at the end of Lillian's recital. "We must not talk to her of this insult to her father. It is enough to let her know we do not believe it."

The little party did not linger out on deck after the story had been told. It was midnight and chilly. The wind was blowing over the water, lashing the waves to a white foam. As Miss Jenny Ann retired to her cabin the thought came to her that they had lingered too long aboard their houseboat. It was getting late in September. Any day they might be overtaken by an equinoctial storm. She wished that they had brought more coal and fresh water aboard the houseboat, and that the provisions in the larder had not run so low. She wondered if the boy who attended to their marketing, and carried things to and from the shore, would come down to them in a heavy rain.

Miss Jenny Ann did not attempt to go to sleep. She put on her dressing gown and lay down in her berth to think over their situation and decide what had best be done.

The other girls were soon asleep. But in a little while Miss Jones heard a faint sound. It came from their sitting room. Some one called her name. It was Madge.

Miss Jenny Ann went softly in, to find Madge still lying on the sofa, a little leather book clasped in her hands.

"I wish to tell you a story, Miss Jenny Ann," began Madge solemnly. "I have never told it to any one else, but I have come to the place where I feel that I ought to talk things over with some one I can trust. I know of no one else, not even Phil, to whom I would rather tell it. Would you like to hear it?"

"My dear, my dear," said Miss Jenny Ann tremulously, "I know of no one else whose confidence I should so prize as yours. But are you sure that you wish to tell me?"

Madge nodded. The hands of the two met in a strong, steady clasp, then Madge began the story of her discovery in the attic of the secret drawer and its contents, and of how the vow she had made that day had been broken in what promised to be the hour of its fulfillment.

After she had finished she lay back on the couch, staring out the cabin window. Knowing Madge as she did, the chaperon still sat beside her in sympathetic silence. She recognized the nobility of Madge's sacrifice. The girl's words: "He is an old man. I can not bring this humiliation upon him. My father would not wish it," rang in her ears.

"I think you are right, Madge," Miss Jenny Ann said at last. "In fact, I am sure you are. But it is very bitter for you."

"But don't you believe my father would wish me to keep his secret?" asked Madge anxiously.

"Yes, I believe he would," responded the chaperon, after a brief hesitation.

"And I shall do it," vowed Madge. "But some day, Miss Jenny Ann, perhaps the man who is really to blame for all my father's suffering will come to a realization of his own unworthiness and clear my father's name. I can't believe that Father is dead. I always think of him as being alive, and that some day I shall see him."

"I hope with all my heart that you will," said Miss Jenny Ann fervently. "Now you mustn't grieve any more, dear. You must go to sleep. It is long after midnight."

The chaperon bent down to kiss Madge good night.

"Good night, Miss Jenny Ann," said Madge. "I shall go to see Mrs. Curtis in the morning and apologize to her for leaving the party so suddenly. I seem destined always to be making apologies."

But for reasons which she could not foresee, Madge's apology was to be delayed indefinitely.

The night had grown pitch dark when Alfred Thornton crossed the bay. He had engaged a fast-going sea launch for his use during the evening of their play, and as his boat rushed along through the sea, which was rapidly growing rougher, he debated in his mind as to whether he was acting wisely.

Alfred Thornton was not a high-minded youth. He was often dishonorable and unscrupulous in his dealings with men, but he thoroughly disliked the hateful task ahead of him. Yet he moved doggedly toward it. He must save his own and his father's reputation, perhaps his fortune! There was no reason for him to believe that Flora Harris would spare him unless he did what she had demanded. He had that evening seen how far the spirit of revenge could lead her.

While Alfred Thornton was on his way to the houseboat Tom Curtis lay awake on his camp cot thinking of Madge and of what he could do to disprove the cruel story that Flora Harris had told. Of course, it must be false. Yet the girl would hardly have dared to tell such a tale unless a grain of truth had been hidden in it somewhere. Poor Madge! Tom wondered how her proud, passionate spirit would bear up under the shadow of such a sorrow.

In the meantime Alfred Thornton brought his launch in to the shore. He landed about a mile below the houseboat. The "Merry Maid" was anchored near a point of land known as Wayside Point. Alfred left his shoes in his launch, walking up the beach in his stocking feet. He waded in the water the greater part of the time, so as not to leave the imprint of his feet in the sand. A storm was blowing in from the ocean. The singing sound of the wind came over the face of the waters. Alfred knew that the night was working with him. If he could accomplish his secret design without being discovered in the act, the houseboat party and their friends would believe that the houseboat had been torn from her moorings by the force of the September gale.

He reached the neighborhood of the boat without meeting any one. It was an ideal night for prowling along the beach. The "Merry Maid" lay quietly at anchor, although the waves were beginning to lash against her sides with more than their accustomed energy. The youth was

guided toward her by the golden lights that shone through the yellow lamps outside her cabin.

There was absolute silence aboard the little boat; not a sight or a sound of any one stirring inside the cabin. Alfred Thornton pulled a large clasp knife from his pocket, then sawed savagely at the heavy rope that secured the anchor. It was the work of a moment to sever it. Next he pulled the divided ends into strands, hoping that the rope would look as though it had broken apart. There still remained the second rope that was twisted around the stake. Alfred crept cautiously out of the water up the little stretch of beach. This was his moment of danger. Any one looking through one of the cabin windows might see his dark figure. Yet Thornton hesitated. The wind was blowing strongly. Surely the pretty houseboat would not drift out into dangerous waters. Surely she would come aground a few miles further down the shore. The minutes were precious. Alfred Thornton quickly cut the second rope. Then, without glancing behind him to see the result of his deed, he ran with all speed to his own motor launch.

"I know I am late," Thornton muttered to Tom Curtis as he crept into the cot alongside of Tom's. "I had to take that Harris girl home. She kept me talking on her porch for ages. A storm was coming up and it was hard to get across the bay. I shall be glad when this foolishness is over and we break camp and get back home again."

When the ropes of the "Merry Maid" were cut she did not drift at once from the shore and in adventurous fashion, make use of her new freedom. The way outside was strange and uncertain. The "Merry Maid" had never traveled from a safe anchorage except when she was under escort and protection. Now she lingered, drifting uncertainly, but keeping close to the shore and moving very slowly.

Half an hour after midnight the tide changed. The water ran away from the shore. The wind rose to a shrieking gale. But the "Merry Maid" was not unstable. The bottom of the boat was flat, she was broad and roomy. She did not pitch and roll, as a lighter craft would have done; she simply moved quietly away from the shore, borne by the wind and the tide.

The houseboat had been anchored for two weeks along the southwest shore of Cape Charles, not many miles from where the great Atlantic Ocean enters the Chesapeake Bay. Slowly but steadily the "Merry Maid" drifted down the Maryland coast. Once out on the deep waters the pretty toy boat moved on and on. In the cabin Miss Jenny Ann and the girls slept peacefully, unconscious of danger.

Soon the lights in the yellow-shaded lamps went out. The boat was in utter darkness.

If there had been lights aboard the "Merry Maid," if early in her perilous voyage cries for help had sounded from her deck, the little boat would soon have been rescued. But with no lights and no sounds aboard, the houseboat passed on her way, and purely by chance her course did not cross the line of another craft.

CHAPTER XI

THE AWAKENING

It was about an hour before dawn when Phyllis Alden awoke with an odd sensation. She had dreamed that she had been traveling in an airship and had grown seasick from the motion. She heard a sound of wind and pouring rain, and a far-off muffled roar of thunder. A storm had come up, of this Phyllis was sure. But why did she continue to feel seasick? How the wind and the waves were rocking the poor "Merry Maid"!

The boat lurched a little. Phil clutched at the side of her berth. By this time she was wider awake. "What a terrific storm!" she thought to herself. "I hope we won't be blown away." Phil turned over on her pillow. It was incredible that everybody else should be asleep when the wind made such a noise. Besides, the boat was moving; Phil felt sure of it.

She sat up in her berth. At this moment a heavy wave struck the "Merry Maid" on her port side. Phil rolled out of bed and ran to the tiny cabin window. The rain was coming down so hard and fast that, try as she might, she could not see the familiar line of the shore.

Once Phil's feet were on the floor she realized that their boat was actually moving. Seizing her dressing-gown, without calling to one of the other girls, she rushed out on the rain-swept deck. For a moment the rain filled her eyes and blinded her. Her breath left her. She clung to the

railing outside the cabin. Far off, back of them, a single, far-reaching light shone on the water. To the right a dimmer glow burned. But everything else was a blank waste of water. She stood, a white and terror-stricken figure, realizing in the instant their great disaster.

"Miss Jenny Ann! Madge!" she shouted, going back into the cabin. "Wake up, won't you? Put something warm around you and come out on the deck with me. I am afraid the houseboat has broken from her anchorage and drifted some distance from the shore."

Miss Jenny Ann sprang up at once. For some time she had been conscious of the storm. The peculiar sound of the lashing waves and the movement under her she had ascribed to the gale. Once on her feet, she, too, realized that the boat was rocking violently. They must be at the mercy of the heavy seas. It was unbelievable that they had not awakened when the houseboat had first slipped from her moorings.

Of course, Miss Jenny Ann and the girls still thought that they had floated out from Wayside Point only a short time before. The storm was so heavy—that must explain why they could see no land.

"Put on your heaviest clothes, girls, and your raincoats," Miss Jenny Ann ordered bravely, trying to keep her own consternation out of her voice. "We must light the lamps that should hang at the bow and stern of our boat, and any others that will not be blown out by the wind. To think that last night was the first time that we forgot to put out our signal lanterns! We forgot everything in the excitement of the play."

The four girls slipped quietly into their clothes. They followed their chaperon out on the deck. There they found her seated, flat on the deck so as not to be thrown off her feet by the wind. Beaten and buffeted by the storm, Madge and Phyllis finally managed to hang their lanterns in the prow and stern of the houseboat. Then the five of them sat down together.

"What do you think we had better do?" Phil asked, as cheerily as possible.

"There is nothing to do but to stay aboard until we are taken off by some other boat," answered Miss Jones. "We shall have to call out for help."

How black and deep the water looked, how unlike the quiet channels in which the houseboat had previously rested. "What time is it, Madge?" inquired their chaperon unexpectedly.

Madge fought her way into the cabin. "It is nearly five o'clock," she called. "The dawn will come within the hour."

It was difficult to keep a light burning, the wind blew so fiercely, the rain poured down in such heavy sheets. The houseboat party dared not go inside their cabin. They must stay on deck to watch for an approaching boat to tow them safely back to land.

They sat in a huddled group, their arms about each other. The gay Japanese parasols, the pretty decorations of the houseboat, had long since blown away. Half a dozen chairs romped and rioted about the deck, turning somersaults, now and then hurling themselves against the railing or the sides of the cabin. The girls could only faintly see one another's faces.

Phil had a small fog horn, through which she blew as long as her breath held out. Then she passed it to Lillian and so down the line. The five women sat with their backs to the cabin wall for the sake of the scanty shelter. Eleanor rang a large dinner bell, which she had used on other occasions to summon the houseboat party to their meals.

For an hour they waited, in silence save for sounds made by the bell and the horn. Now and then one of the girls cried out for help. But most of the time they stared out on the water, hoping, expecting every instant to see some other craft. The dawn was long in breaking because of the fury of the storm.

Miss Jenny Ann began to think that the houseboat had drifted a much longer time than she had at first supposed. They were certainly in dangerous waters. Never in her life had she seen the breakers roll so high. It was a marvel that the "Merry Maid" did not capsize. She and the girls fully realized their danger. Yet no one of them made any outcry.

The girls were growing very tired. Now and then one of them fell asleep for a brief instant.

Over and over again in Madge's head, as she sat among her friends, so pale and silent, came the sound of the congregation singing in the little stone church near "Forest House":

"Oh, hear us, when we call to Thee,

For those in peril on the sea!"

The words brought comfort to her now.

When dawn came the storm abated. But with the passing of the storm came another and a greater danger to the "Merry Maid." A heavy fog settled down on the water. It was hardly possible to see more than a few feet ahead. No ship's crew could discover the poorly lighted craft in such a thick, impenetrable fog.

Phyllis owned a small compass. She could tell that their boat was moving southeast. The wind was at their back. It was strange that they had been able to signal no other ships. It could not be possible that they had been blown out to sea!

It must have been nearly eight o'clock when Miss Jenny Ann went into the cabin, leaving the four girls to keep the watch. They were sick and faint. Presently the delicious aroma of boiling coffee floated out on the fog-laden atmosphere.

Miss Jenny Ann summoned the girls indoors, two at a time. The coffee, toast and bacon brought fresh courage. She made them change their wet clothing for that which was warm and dry. They kept the fire burning in the kitchen stove. After a while their fate did not seem so hopeless. The girls were frightened, of course. They wished a ship would hurry along to pick them up. But there was something deliciously thrilling in the idea that the "Merry Maid" was voyaging alone on a—to them—unknown sea, and that they were the first mariners who had ever drifted on such a boat.

All day long the lights were kept burning on the houseboat. There was nothing else to do, although there was the possibility that their oil might give out; they had not a large supply on board. But there was no other way to attract attention. The fog never lifted. If a large boat should bear down upon them, without seeing their lights, the "Merry Maid" would go to the bottom of the sea.

The houseboat no longer rocked violently. The water had become smoother, as is always the case in a fog.

Now and then, during the long day, one of the girls would attempt to go about some accustomed duty. Lillian and Eleanor made up the berths in the cabin. Madge and Phyllis rescued the chairs that were being blown about the deck and lashed them down securely. But after a time the little company would unconsciously creep together to continue their silent staring.

In the afternoon Miss Jenny stationed two girls at the forward watch. She stood in the stern. Madge and Lillian went on the upper deck of their little cabin for a further range of vision.

Far out on the water Madge saw two great, curling columns of smoke.

"Look, Lillian!" she cried hopelessly, "there goes an ocean liner. We must be far from shore. How can we signal her?"

Five tired voices took up a shrill call. Two white sheets fluttered dismally. But the great steamer, on her way to Baltimore, neither heard the sound nor saw the white signals of distress. It was ten times more dismal when the friendly smoke had dissolved in the heavy atmosphere!

Another two hours went by. Madge wondered if it could have been only last night when Flora Harris had so cruelly insulted her. Yet how little Madge had thought of her trouble to-day! How far away it seemed, like a sorrow that had come to her years before.

Just before sunset the fog lifted as though by magic. Madge and Phyllis were together on the cabin deck when a deep rose flush appeared in the western sky. Instead of a line of sea and sky, some distance ahead of the houseboat, just under the horizon, a faint, dark streak showed itself.

"Madge, what is that over there?" Phil asked sharply, pointing ahead.

Madge shook her head. "I am not sure," she answered.

Another fifteen minutes passed. The "Merry Maid" kept a straight course.

Phil clutched Madge by the sleeve. "If I am not mistaken, there is land over there. Our houseboat is being carried straight toward it."

The girls called down their discovery to Miss Jenny Ann, but the watchers below had also been conscious of a change in the horizon.

Miss Jenny Ann feared that she had seen a mirage, she had gazed so long at the water.

"I know it is land, Miss Jenny Ann," Phyllis insisted, with the assurance that made her such a comfort to her friends in times of difficulty.

But would the houseboat ever drift near enough to shore to allow them to be seen from the land? Very slowly the "Merry Maid" now glided on. She was in quieter water. There was little wind, but a surer force drew her toward the land. The tide was running in. After a time the

houseboat party realized this. There was nothing to do but to wait and see how far in their boat would drift. After a time they could see the outline of a sandy shore, with thick woods behind it. But there was no house, no human being in sight.

At twilight the "Merry Maid" was not more than a mile from land, and still creeping toward it.

Madge's fighting blood returned to her. The troubles of the past had vanished. What, after all, was the idle insult of a cruel girl? She must now do what she could to save her friends and herself. Madge felt she had not been as courageous as the others during the day's trial. She had thought too much of her own grievances.

"Miss Jenny Ann," she announced determinedly, "I can't bear this slowness and uncertainty any longer. It looks as though the 'Merry Maid' were going near enough to the shore for us to be able to attract some one's attention in a little while; but if night comes before we reach the shore, it will be much more difficult. The beach does not look as though there were many people about."

"What would you have us do?" asked the chaperon.

"There is our very long clothes line on board," suggested Madge. The girls gazed at her in astonishment. What had their clothes line to do with the situation? "I want you to knot it around my waist," she continued, "and let me swim in to the shore."

Miss Jones shook her head. The other girls protested. "You are tired, Madge, and the water is too cold. It wouldn't be safe."

"But, Miss Jenny Ann—girls," pleaded Madge, "has it ever struck you that we do not know the time of the tide? At any moment it may turn and we shall be carried out on the ocean beyond to spend another dreadful night."

At first the little party were silent. Madge was right, yet they could not bear to think of her risking her life for them.

Her persuasions finally won the day. The houseboat was now only a little more than a quarter of a mile from the beach. But they had not been observed. There were no boats in sight.

Phil insisted on swimming in with Madge. She was not quite as much at home in the water, but she was a strong, steady swimmer, and it seemed safer for the two girls to make the effort together.

The clothes line was knotted about Madge's waist. It was then tied to the cleat, from which a short end of rope dangled that had been cut the night before.

After the first plunge into the cold water the swim ashore was delicious. When the two girls finally got into the shallow water they tugged at the rope, Madge keeping it around her waist, so as to pull with greater force. They worked very carefully. Their rope was slender, but fairly strong. This helped them to draw their boat in closer, and they managed to get the "Merry Maid" half aground on a shelf of sand. It was now possible to wade from the boat to the land, with the water coming up no higher than the waist.

Miss Jenny Ann climbed off the boat and made her way to the shore, followed by Lillian and Eleanor.

At last the five women, wet but thankful, stood safe on land.

Blankly they surveyed each other and the empty beach. Then they gazed at their pretty toy boat, that had borne so staunchly the vicissitudes of its dangerous voyage. It was almost night. The shipwrecked mariners were very tired and the beach was curiously lonely. But the strain was over.

Madge began to laugh first. Her laugh was always infectious. The others followed suit.

"Here we are, the latest thing in 'Swiss Family Robinson'," she announced cheerfully. "Now, let us proceed to stir up some people and ask them to give us some dry clothes and a night's lodging. Come on. Let us explore our island."

CHAPTER XII

A DESERTED ISLAND

The houseboat party did not penetrate very far up the shore. All were too utterly worn out. They walked for a mile or more, and, when they found no sign of life, came back to their landing place.

"There is nothing for us, children, but to sleep here on the beach to-night, or go back to our houseboat," declared Miss Jenny Ann. "We are perfectly safe, as there are no other human beings anywhere about."

"No more houseboat for me," rejoined Eleanor firmly. "Think of the size of the rope that held our anchor and now the boat is secured by a clothes line! I'll walk up and down on the beach all night, but I'll not set foot on the 'Merry Maid'."

"But, Eleanor," protested Lillian, "we are so wet and cold. And it's so dark and lonely."

"I know," agreed Miss Jenny Ann, "yet I feel a good deal as Nellie does."

"We'll freeze to death, or have pneumonia, then," put in Lillian plaintively.

Phil and Madge were talking together in low tones. Madge nodded her head wisely.

"It's worth trying," declared Phil stoutly.

Turning to the chaperon, she said: "Miss Jenny Ann, Madge and I are going back to the boat. We will get our steamer blankets and some matches. If you and the girls will find some wood we will make a fire on the beach. We can dry ourselves, and our fire may be observed in this forsaken place."

"You'll get the blankets wet bringing them here, Madge," remonstrated Lillian. "If only we had not left the 'Water Witch' up at Tom's camp, what a help it would be now!"

"Don't worry," laughed Madge, "just wait and see what Phil and I are going to do."

A light soon shone on the houseboat. Strange sounds of hammering were heard. Miss Jenny Ann, Lillian and Eleanor would have grown impatient if it had not been such slow work to find wood in the forest at night. But they came back to the beach with their arms full several times before a halloo from the houseboat indicated the return of the excursionists.

A heavy something fell plunk! over the side of the houseboat. Two figures scrambled after it. In a minute or two it was possible to see Madge and Phyllis pushing a large barrel in to shore. The barrel had originally been filled with potatoes, which the girls had dumped on the kitchen floor of the houseboat.

The barrel held several steamer blankets, dry shoes and stockings all around, matches, and a few pieces of kindling wood. Madge and Phil made several trips before they concluded their work for the night. Besides covering, they brought to the shore their cherished coffee pot and provisions for breakfast in the morning.

In the meantime their chaperon and the other two girls had made a glorious fire. By ten o'clock the entire party was sound asleep.

Miss Jenny Ann had not meant to sleep. She had intended to watch the fire all night. But such an overpowering drowsiness crept over her that she rose and piled all the wood they had left with them on the fire at once. Then she, too, gave herself up to slumber.

Madge awoke first in the morning. She leaned over to see if her cousin, Nellie, were all right. Nellie's brown eyes smiled back at her. The two girls rose softly and ran lightly back into the forest for more wood for their fire, of which a few faint embers were still burning.

The forest was very dense. There were no paths through it from the side at which the girls penetrated. There were oak, walnut and beech trees growing in primeval beauty. Great clusters of wild grape vines, loaded with ripe fruit, climbed the trunks of the trees and swung from their branches. The bittersweet black haws were ripe. They were easy to gather from the low limbs of the small trees.

Madge and Eleanor found quantities of twigs and small logs. When they had piled up the wood near their sleeping friends they went back to the forest and returned with plenty of grape leaves for plates, and as much of the wild fruit as they could carry.

It added greatly to their breakfast, and immediately after the houseboat party started on an exploring expedition. They must surely find some one to help them. At first the little clan of girls kept near to the beach, expecting to find a fisherman's cottage or a boat. They were afraid to go too far back in the woods on account of the danger of losing their way. They had had no fresh water since the day before, except the small amount that Madge and Phil brought from the houseboat for use in their coffee. All were growing very thirsty, and apparently there was no one to aid them on the beach.

Miss Jenny Ann began to think that they had landed on an island. It was altogether uninhabited and so could not be any part of a main shore.

Madge led the way when they entered the woods. She traveled slowly ahead, forcing her path through the tangled underbrush. They must surely find a house on the other side of the woodland. Now they listened eagerly for the sound of a stream of running water.

They had walked until afternoon before they came to a clearing in the forest. They had dropped down to rest, when Phil heard a longed-for murmur. It tinkled and splashed and gurgled. Phil was on her feet again in an instant, running toward the noise, her companions close after her.

There, in an open space, lay a pool of clear water, fed by a little stream that ran down a small embankment. At least it was a place of hope and refreshment, and they drank their fill of the clear, cold water. Somewhere near they must come across a house. Surely the island was not uninhabited.

Here the party divided, continuing the search in four directions. It was Lillian's call that brought them together again.

She stood in front of a small house. It was built of shingles, and the roof was made of cedar boughs. About a hundred feet off was another house of exactly the same kind. There was no sign of life anywhere about them. The paths in front of the doors were overgrown with weeds.

The five women knocked timidly on the first door. No sound came from behind it. They knocked again, then crossed over to the second house. It, too, was deserted. There was nothing to do but push open the doors.

The first rusty latch yielded easily. The house contained a single dirty room. There was no furniture, except one or two old chairs. The four corners of the room were filled with hemlock branches, which must once have served as beds. A rusty rifle leaned against the wall. Beside it lay a box half filled with cartridges. An old iron pot rested on some burned-out ashes. The place did not appear to have been occupied for some time. The other lodge was furnished in much the same way.

"What does it mean?" inquired Miss Jenny Ann faintly, feeling her courage about to give out. "It can't be possible that we have come ashore on an untenanted island?"

Phyllis clapped her hands. "Never you mind, Miss Jenny Ann; here is our home in these little houses until some one comes to find us," she declared undaunted.

"Hurrah for Phil!" cried Madge, catching her chum's spirit. Then, seeing the chaperon's expression, she went up to her and put her arms about her. "See here, Miss Jenny Ann, you are not to worry over us. We are going to have a good time. As long as we have got into this scrape, let's make the best of it. Don't you see it is rather a lark. Of course, I am sorry that our families and friends will be so dreadfully worried about us. But some one is sure to rescue us in a few days. We can keep our signals of distress fastened on to the houseboat and move up here to live. I am beginning to believe that this is a small island that is used for duck shooting. We have run across two hunting lodges. The duck shooting begins the first week in November."

"November!" cried Miss Jenny Ann in horror. "Why, children, we will starve to death unless we are rescued before that time."

Madge and Eleanor laughed.

"Miss Jenny Ann does not know the woods at this time of the year, does she?" protested Eleanor. "We can play at being squirrels and live on nuts as soon as a frost comes."

"There are as many fish in the sea as ever were caught'," quoted Lillian gayly.

"And crabs," added Phil. "And rabbits and birds and goodness knows what-all in the woods. Why, it is a perfectly wonderful adventure! Suppose we are alone on this island? I'll wager you no American girls ever had an experience like this before."

It was a weary trip back to the houseboat, but there were so many plans to be made for this pioneer existence. The girls decided that they intended to play at being their own great-great grandmothers. They were settlers who had just landed on the shores of a new country. They must prove that they had the old fighting blood of their ancestors.

At the edge of the wood Madge gallantly seized hold of a good-sized log, dragging it toward the shore in the direction of the houseboat.

"What ho, my hearty?" questioned Phil, coming to her assistance. "What do you intend to do with this tree?"

"Kindly refer to your 'Robinson Crusoe' and your 'Swiss Family Robinson' and you will know.

We must make a kind of raft, so that we can go back and forth to the houseboat without getting wet every time we go aboard."

Miss Jones, Lillian and Eleanor managed to haul another log of nearly equal size. On the shore the girls lashed the two logs together with short ends of their precious clothes line.

Madge took off her shoes and stockings, pinned up her skirts, and, getting down on her knees, with a stick for a paddle, started forth on her raft. She claimed the honor of the first trip, since the idea had first been hers.

The raft reached the "Merry Maid" in safety. She rose to wave her hands in triumph, but she rested too much of her weight at one end of the logs. The raft tipped gently and she plunged head first into the sea.

"Splendid way to keep from getting wet, Madge!" sang out Phil.

However, after a time, the raft did help. There were a hatchet, a hammer and some nails on the houseboat; a few odd lengths of rope and heavy twine, as well as the straps from the trunks. By nightfall the girls had made a raft of some pretensions. It served to bring more of their grocery supplies to the land. By wading on either side of it to keep it from tipping, Madge and Phil managed to steer one of their trunks to the shore.

At Eleanor's suggestion a few extra sheets were carried off the houseboat. Then Miss Jenny Ann and Nellie set themselves seriously to work to make a cable for the "Merry Maid." They divided their sheets into good, broad strips; using six, instead of three strands, they plaited them into a fairly strong rope. They must run no risk of losing the houseboat. It must not be allowed to drift away for the second time.

The girls were tired and hungry at bedtime, though not one whit discouraged. It would take some time to move what they needed from the houseboat to the lodge in the wood. But they were equal to the task, and found it good sport.

Miss Jenny Ann continued to worry over the prospect ahead of them. Would they be forced to spend the winter on this deserted island? How could they? They would perish from hunger and cold. Would their families give them up for lost? How would Miss Tolliver ever open her school at Harborpoint without her four favorite pupils and one of her teachers?

For a few days these dreadful ideas continued to haunt Miss Jones. The girls may have thought of them, but they did not talk of them. Indeed, they were far too busy. Pioneer life was strenuous. They found little time for fretting.

CHAPTER XIII

LIFE IN THE WOODS

It was wonderful how quickly they adapted themselves to their new mode of life. A few days later Phyllis, with a rifle slung over one shoulder and a dead rabbit over the other, was striding along through a dense thicket of trees. Her face was tanned, her cheeks were crimson. She was whistling cheerily.

"Won't Madge be proud of me?" she murmured half aloud. "Ten days ago I had never fired a gun in my life. Now I have killed this poor little bunny. Beg your pardon, bunny, I never would have shot you, but we really had to have something to eat for dinner to-night. It was your life or ours."

The woods were brown and gold. A heavy frost had fallen early in the autumn. The little spot of earth through which Phyllis Alden wandered was empty of other human beings; it looked as though it might have been created for her alone.

A sudden sound in the underbrush startled Phyllis. She clutched her rifle and brought it to position. There was no further movement.

"I ought not to have come so deep into the woods alone," she thought. "I believe I am beginning to suppose that we are living in the Garden of Eden, and that there is no one alive in the world except Miss Jenny Ann and we four girls."

Phil moved on. Something stirred again. Phil felt her gaze drawn by a pair of big, soft, brown eyes that surveyed her with a fixed stare of horror. It was a wistful, penetrating gaze. Phil had never seen anything like it before.

"Who's there?" called Phil. There was no answer, and no movement in the underbrush. Phil moved cautiously toward the pair of eyes, that never ceased to stare at her. Still the figure back of them made no movement.

The underbrush was so thick that Phyllis could not possibly see what she was approaching. When she was within a short distance of it the little creature collapsed and dropped with a soft flop on the ground at her feet. It was a tiny baby fawn.

"You poor, pretty thing!" exclaimed Phil impulsively, stooping to look more closely at the fawn, which was shivering with terror and hunger. Then Phil, in spite of her lately acquired skill with the rifle, looked fearfully about her.

The girls in their long rambles through the woods had observed several times, from afar, the antlers of a red deer, with her hind grazing quietly beside her. They had never gone near enough to be in any danger. And they had seen no other animals in the woods in the daytime except the wild hare and the squirrels. Only at night the screech of the wildcats in the forests had penetrated behind the closed doors of their sleeping lodge.

Phyllis knew that a deer will seldom risk an attack, but that it will make a tremendous fight in defence of its young. Phil had no idea of being sacrificed, so she edged carefully away, gazing in every direction through the trees. There was no sign of any other deer.

By some chance the mother deer must have wandered off in the forest after food and died. Nothing else could have made her leave her fawn long enough to cause it so nearly to perish from cold and hunger.

What could Phil do? She was afraid to pick the fawn up for fear she had been mistaken in her surmise. Yet it seemed too cruel to leave the beautiful little creature to perish. If Phil wished to save it, how could she manage it? She already carried their beloved rifle, which, with a supply of ammunition, had been their lucky discovery in the hunting lodge. Bunny was not to be thrown away. He meant dinner for the houseboat party. The deer was small and thin, yet it was a good armful. Phil might have shot the tiny fawn and so spared it the misery of slowly starving to death. Hunters, who care little for the lives of the creatures in the woods, declare that it is difficult to shoot a deer, once it has gazed with its wistful, trusting look into one's eyes. What chance had tender-hearted Phil, with her dread of having anything in the world suffer, against the appeal of the forsaken creature?

"Oh, me, oh, my! I suppose I must take you home to our lodge to take care of," relented Phil, "though I am sure that Miss Jenny Ann will not rejoice at another mouth to feed."

Phil carefully emptied the barrels of her rifle so as not to endanger her own life. She took some stout twine out of her pocket and swung her rabbit around her neck. She fastened her gun to her side in awkward fashion with another piece of cord, so as to leave both arms almost free.

Then Phil stooped and picked up the poor little fawn. It struggled at first and kicked its feeble legs. But after a little it was too weak and feeble for further resistance. It lay quite still.

In spite of this, Phil's return home began to grow difficult. She had never carried such an uncomfortable baby before. Yet she had often shouldered the twins at home, and had borne them both, kicking and wriggling with delight, about the garden. But this burden was such an odd and unaccustomed shape!

Phyllis sat down on a log under a chestnut tree and regaled herself with chestnuts while she rested. She was beginning to be afraid she would be late for luncheon at their lodge and she was ravenously hungry. Perhaps one of the girls would come out to look for her.

Miss Jenny Ann and her girls had been living an enchanted life for the past fortnight. Not a single human being had they seen since their strange arrival on the unknown island. They had been deep into the woods on both sides of their lodges. They had wandered up and down the shore that sheltered their deserted "Merry Maid." But they had not yet crossed to the opposite side of the island. The way was jungle-like and untrodden. Miss Jenny Ann feared that, once lost, they would never find their way back to their shelter again. So far she hoped for rescue from a ship that must some day pass within range of the island. She believed the other shore to be as deserted as the one on which the "Merry Maid" had landed.

"Madge and Lillian must have finished with their fishing hours ago," reflected Phil. "I must not be so lazy; I must hurry along home."

Phyllis had placed her burden on the ground. She leaned over to pick it up. A sound of human voices smote her ear. The voices were not those of any member of the houseboat party. They

were the voices of men.

Phil was startled—the sound was so unexpected and surprising. Without an instant's hesitation she slipped behind the giant chestnut tree and crouched low on the ground. The men were coming nearer. She had not been dreaming. It occurred to Phyllis at once that these men must be game-keepers, who had been sent to explore the island to see if any one had been shooting the game before the hunting season opened. And here was Phyllis Alden with a dead rabbit swung over one shoulder and a live fawn in her arms!

Had Phil stopped to consider she might have known that she could easily explain her presence to the men. But she did not stop to think, for she was much too frightened.

One of the men had a dark, uncompromising face. The other Phil did not see distinctly.

The men evidently believed the island as deserted as Phyllis had thought it before their appearance.

"It's a forsaken hole," one of the men said to the other. "For my part, I'll be glad when we are through with this business. I've no taste for it. I wish it were finished."

"Oh, the job's easy, if it is slow," the other man answered. "You ain't used to the things I am."

The men tramped on without dreaming of Phil or of her hiding place.

Once they were out of sight, Phyllis realized how foolish she had been. She called after them, but they were now out of hearing. Phil felt ashamed of herself. Why had she been afraid of these two men? Could she go to the lodge and say to Miss Jenny Ann that she had let a possible chance of rescue pass by them?

Phil decided to linger in the woods no longer. No matter if her arms and her back did ache she must hurry back to tell Madge of the apparition she had seen.

"Phil Alden! Phil Alden!" Phyllis heard a clear voice calling to her. Then she heard the violent ringing of their cherished dinner-bell.

"Here I am to the left," she shouted back. "Come here and help me carry these things."

Madge pushed her way through the bushes, radiant and glowing with health.

"For mercy's sake, Phil Alden, what have you there?" she demanded, taking Phil's rifle and the dead rabbit, but looking askance at her live offering.

"I am ashamed of myself," apologized Phil, "but I found this beautiful little thing starving to death, in the woods. Do you think Miss Jenny Ann will mind if I take care of it and feed it until it is old enough to look after itself?"

"Of course not, Phil. But what do you expect to feed your adopted deer on? It seems to me that a little fawn like that must prefer milk as an article of diet, and we have found no cows on the island—up to the present." Madge patted the top of the fawn's soft head while she teased her chum.

Phil was thrown into consternation. "Gracious, Madge, you are right!" she agreed. "I never thought of it. But you know we are still having oatmeal for our breakfast. I'll ask Miss Jenny Ann to let me give my share to the fawn. Before the porridge gives out I expect we shall be rescued, or my baby will be grown-up enough to take care of itself."

Phil pronounced the word "rescued" in such fashion that Madge stopped in her forward march to question her.

"Out with it, Phil! You have something on your mind," she declared. "You might as well tell me."

After Phil had finished her story of seeing the men the two girls agreed not to mention Phil's encounter in the woods to Miss Jenny Ann or to the other two girls until they had had more time to think things over.

"I love our woods and sometimes I think I would like to live here always, Phil," returned Madge, "but it is our duty to get away when we can. It may be best for you and me to search over this whole island until we find those two men again."

The door of one of the hunting lodges stood wide open. Phil put down her fawn on a mound of soft grass and flashed cheerfully in. "Here I am at last, hungry as a bear!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad to be at home again."

Eleanor and Miss Jenny Ann were bending over the fireplace, stirring something savory in a

big iron pot.

Lillian was putting the finishing touches to the small kitchen table, which had been transferred from the houseboat to the center of one of the cabin rooms. In the middle she had placed a great bunch of scarlet berries and wild sumach leaves. At one end was a dish of roasted chestnuts, cracked hickory nuts and walnuts. On the other, piled on a plate of leaves, were a few wild fruits that Eleanor had been able to find that morning.

The single dirty room which the houseboat party discovered had now been transformed. This lodge was now used for the living quarters of the houseboat derelicts, the other little house for their sleeping apartment. The hemlock beds had been swept away, and the whole place scrubbed as clean as possible.

The room was bright with the October sunlight. The walls were hung with trophies of the woods, branches of scarlet leaves and vines of wild clematis. In one corner of the room the big wood basket was filled with nuts of every kind, gathered after the first frost, the girls' sole provision against the winter. A string of fresh fish, Madge's and Lillian's morning catch, was floating about in a bucket of fresh water.

The girls gathered around the table. Miss Jenny Ann lifted up the great iron pot and poured a savory stew into a great bowl.

"Guess what it is, Phil?" cried Madge. The dish was filled with potatoes, brought over from the houseboat larder, and big pieces of a dark, rich looking meat.

Phil shook her head. "I can't guess. I'd rather eat," she replied.

"It's old 'Marse Terrapin.' Don't you remember him in the story of Uncle Remus? Lillian and I found him strolling along the shore. Who says we are not full-fledged Crusoes?"

CHAPTER XIV

CAUGHT IN A STAMPEDE

"Good-bye, Madge, dear!" sighed Eleanor mournfully.

"Say 'au revoir,' but not 'good-bye,' sweet Coz," sang Madge lightly.

She was strapping her school satchel across her back like a knapsack. The girls were attired in their shortest, darkest gowns, and ready for the road.

Miss Jenny Ann hovered near, her face very white and her eyes swollen. "I feel I am very wrong in letting you girls attempt it alone," she protested. "To think that I should have been overtaken with an attack of influenza just as we were about to cross the island is too awful! Don't you think you had better wait until I am well enough to go with you?"

Madge shook her bronze head firmly; Phil's black head followed suit.

"My dear Miss Jenny Ann," protested Madge, "the men Phil saw may have come onto this island simply to stay only a day or so. Unless we go in search of them at once, they may escape us altogether."

"Don't let anybody worry about us," Phil urged. "Madge and I will be as right as right can be. Suppose we find the island so large that we can not get to the other side and back in one day, what's the difference? We will hang our hammock in a tree and sleep like the birds of the air."

With a solemn face, that she tried to make smiling, Eleanor extracted a pale blue ribbon from her pocket and tied it around Madge's arm.

Lillian, with set lips, performed the same service for Phil, except that her ribbon was red.

When the two girls had finished their tasks Madge and Phil dropped to their knees and kissed the hands of their ladies.

"Behold, Miss Jenny Ann, two true knights!" laughed Madge. "Phil and I are going out in search of assistance for our ladies, who are held prisoners by the waves on the shores of a desert island."

Don't you mind; we are going to have a perfectly lovely time."

Madge and Phil were enchanted over the prospect of their adventure. They had had a long talk with Miss Jenny Ann about the two men whom Phil had seen in the woods. The houseboat party had reached a united decision. The men must be found. They must be asked to help the girls and their chaperon to find their way home again; or, at least, to tell them how they could manage to communicate with their friends.

Madge, Phil and Miss Jenny Ann decided to make the trip together.

Miss Jenny Ann felt as though she would have liked to be twins. One of her could then have stayed at home with Lillian and Eleanor, to help them guard their little home; the other could have gone forth on the expedition through the woods with the two more venturesome girls.

The five young women presumed that the men whom Phil had seen must have come ashore within a short time, or else that they lived on the other side of the island. It was possible that there might be a small settlement of people somewhere near the farther shore. In any case the houseboat crew must find out. They must try to get away from their island before winter came.

Madge and Phyllis had a glorious morning in the woods, one that neither of them would ever forget.



**Madge and Phil Set Forth
on Their Expedition.**

The girls set out to travel directly south, guided by Phil's small compass. They turned aside only when the underbrush was too thick to allow them to pass through it. Madge had stuck her soft felt hat in her pocket. She had crowned herself with a wreath of red-brown leaves and sprays of goldenrod. She looked like a figure from the canvas of a great artist.

Phil, who was darker than Madge, might easily have passed for a gypsy. She was deeply tanned by her outdoor life, and her lips were stained with the nuts and berries that she had eaten in their journey through the woods.

Madge had not spoken of the scene with Flora Harris in Mrs. Curtis's dining room since she had landed on the island. Phyllis sometimes wondered if the cruel impression had faded from her friend's mind, but she never mentioned the subject to Madge.

That morning, after the two friends had chatted of many things, all at once Madge grew strangely silent.

"Phil!" she queried abruptly, "do you remember what Flora Harris said to me the night before our shipwreck?"

"Why, of course," answered Phil in surprise, "I could not forget. But I hope you have not been letting your mind dwell on such foolishness."

"I have never stopped thinking of it a minute, day or night," returned Madge quietly. "I don't mean that I have just thought about the insult to my father. Flora Harris told me that after my father was dismissed from the Navy in disgrace he went somewhere. She did not speak as though he had died. Do you know, Phil"—Madge spoke in low, hushed tones, though there was no one in the woods to hear her—"I have always thought of my father as dead. I know that Aunt Sue has always led me, perhaps unconsciously, to think so. But now I can not recall that she has ever really told me that he was dead. Phil, dear, do you think it possible that my father is alive?"

Phil was silent. What could she say? If she should agree, saying that Madge's father might be alive, it was to confess that Captain Morton had really suffered disgrace. Else why would he have disappeared and deserted his baby daughter?

"I don't know," was all she managed to falter.

Madge walked on quietly, with her proud little head held high. "If my father is alive, Phil, I don't care where he is, I shall find him, even if I have to look the wide world over. I know that he is innocent, but I can't tell you how I came by the knowledge. It is my secret."

Phil reached for her friend's hand, giving it a warm, firm pressure, then they walked on in silence.

All morning they had been tramping through woodlands. At noon they came to the edge of one wood. A clearing stretched ahead of them.

On the edge of this clearing they sat down to their luncheon. While the two chums were eating they heard the strangest and most peculiar noise either of them had ever listened to in their lives. It was the tramping and rushing of many feet, like a charge of cavalry. Once or twice before, since they had taken up their abode on the island, the girls had caught a faint, far-off echo of just such a sound. To-day it sounded much nearer.

"What was that?" demanded Phil quickly, raising her hand.

"It sounds like a cavalry charge," returned Madge, trying to smile, though feeling vaguely alarmed.

The noise swept nearer, like the rush of the wind. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Neither girl offered to stir from under the tree where they had halted in order to go on with their pilgrimage. The mystery of the noise that they had just heard made their adventure seem far more perilous. What on earth was it? What did it mean?

The atmosphere was clear. The travelers guessed they must have come to about the center of the island. It was a broad, open plateau, covered with grasses and wild flowers. Neither of the girls thought of how curious it was to find the grass cropped as close to its roots as though it had been cut down by a mowing machine.

Phil was walking slowly ahead. There was an opening through a double avenue of trees, and Phil wanted to find out whether they could get through the woods by this cut. For the moment Madge's back was turned to Phil. She was reaching up for a particularly splendid bunch of Virginia creeper that clung to a branch over her head.

Like a roll of thunder from a clear sky, or the rumble of heavy artillery, came the noise that they had heard before. It was indeed the rushing of many feet and it was coming nearer.

Phil ran toward a low-branched tree. "Climb the tree, Madge!" she cried.

But Madge only stared intently ahead of her.

Some distance ahead a single dark object made its appearance. It walked on four feet, had a thick, shaggy mane, and its long black tail swept the ground in a proud arch. Its coat was rough
—

Madge clapped her hands. To Phil's horror her chum started to run forward, instead of taking refuge in a tree.

"It's only a strange-looking horse!" she cried in relief. Madge had never in her life seen a horse of which she felt afraid.

At almost the same instant, back of the single horse, which was plainly the leader of a drove, appeared another, then a dozen, twenty or thirty more horses. The entire drove was galloping recklessly ahead. It was the noise of their charge that had indeed sounded like a rush of cavalry.

The leader of the horses caught sight of Madge. What must it have thought? A human being had appeared out of nowhere in the midst of its haunts. The wild horse stopped short for an instant, then gave a long neigh to its companions. The other horses ceased their charge; they, too, sniffed the air with the same attitude of surprise and hesitation. Some of them pawed the ground in front of them.

Phil, from her position in the tree, could see everything that happened. She thought she was experiencing a nightmare, or else that she had beheld an apparition which had come out of the pages of her ancient mythology.

To Phil's amazement, Madge stood still during the brief instant when the horses hesitated. It was then she might have saved herself, but she lingered for an instant, then turned to run.

The leader of the drove of horses had made up his mind that he had nothing to fear from the wood-nymph that had tried to block his path. He tossed his shaggy head, giving the signal to his company. The entire troop started on a wild gallop through the avenue of trees. Madge was directly in front of their charge.

Blind fear overtook her. She ran without seeing where she was going. She knew she was about to be run down by a stampede of wild horses, and in her terror she stumbled, then fell headlong. She could hear the horses galloping straight on. There was no time for her to struggle to her feet. She lay face downward, expecting each moment to be trampled to death.

Phyllis took in the whole situation. From her safe vantage in the tree, even more certainly than

Madge, she realized the fate that must soon overtake her chum.

Phil's tree was only a few yards from the place where Madge had fallen. Without an instant's hesitation Phyllis Alden dropped to the ground. She must have made one flying leap, for she landed in front of the little captain's prostrate body. If Madge were to be trampled to death, that fate should not come to her alone.

Phil had marvelous presence of mind. What she did she must have done by instinct. There was no time to think. She saw the flecks of white foam between the teeth of the horse that was leading the charge. As it bore down upon her Phyllis lifted up both arms. She gave a wild and unexpected shout, waving both arms frantically before the horse's face.

The horse paused for the fraction of a moment. Phil waved more violently than ever, shouting hoarsely and in more commanding tones. The horse was startled. He looked at Phil with his ears erect and his eyes restless. Then he deliberately swerved from the path that would have led straight over the bodies of the two girls, made a sweep to the right, and thundered on, followed by his drove of wild horses.

From her position, face downward on the ground, Madge had been acutely conscious of everything that had occurred. She seemed to have seen with her ears rather than her eyes. She knew that Phil had risked her own life to save hers, and that Phil's presence of mind had saved them both.

"It's all right, dear," remarked Phil coolly, when the horses had passed out of sight. But the hand she reached out to Madge to help lift her from the ground was trembling.

Once she was on her feet the little captain caught tight hold of Phil's arm.

"It was real, wasn't it, Phil? We *did* see a drove of wild horses dash by us?"

Phil nodded calmly. "It was much too real for a few seconds," she rejoined. "Now I understand the far-off noise of the tramping of many feet that we have heard before. These horses must always stay herded together. When they are weary of grazing they make these wild rushes. How do you suppose they ever came on this island?"

Madge shook her head. She had no possible guess that she dared to make.

There is a story, which the girls heard long afterward, about this drove of wild horses, that even at the present time lives on an island not far from the Chesapeake Bay. Many years ago a Spanish family had their estate on this now deserted island. When they moved away they left their horses alone on the island. Forsaken by man, these horses returned to the wild, free state in which they lived before they were haltered, harnessed and trained by human beings to become their beasts of burden.

CHAPTER XV

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

It was late afternoon of the same day. The two girls had made their way across the greater part of the island without finding a human habitation or seeing another human being. What had become of the men that Phil had seen in the woods?

How far the girls had traveled they did not know. The way may have seemed long, because there were no paths and they were entirely unfamiliar with the country. But Madge and Phil had made up their minds that there was nothing else for them to do. They must spend the night in the woods. It was out of the question for them to attempt to recross the island before daylight. Perhaps on their way home the next day they might have better luck in discovering the aid they sought.

Though neither of them would have cared to confess it to the other, they were tired. They had been walking steadily since early morning, and they had carried what were, to them, heavy packs.

Phil had a light woven-grass hammock in her bundle that had once been swung across the deck of the "Merry Maid." Madge carried a light, rubber-proof blanket, which was their sole protection against rain. Of course, the girls divided the burden of the food supply for their two days' march.

At last, out of sheer weariness, they dropped their packs under a tree and sat down to rest. They had hoped to have the satisfaction of reaching the opposite side of the island before nightfall. They longed to know if land could be seen from that side, or if passing ships could be hailed from the beach.

Madge's head was resting in Phil's lap when she heard a peculiar buzzing in her ears, which she thought must come from weariness. She sat up with a jerk.

"Don't stir," begged Phil. "You and I are too tired to move on now. I am sure I hear the noise of the ocean. We can't be very far from a beach. Surely, surely, we will find something, or somebody, on this shore."

Madge lay down again and for a few minutes neither girl spoke.

Phyllis was thinking of home. She was also wondering what young Lieutenant Lawton must have thought of her disappearance with his box.

The mysterious box was in the bottom of her trunk in their lodge in the woods. What a time she had had, dragging the trunk ashore, and then, piece by piece, carrying its contents to the lodge! Phil laughed. If Jimmy Lawton wanted his box kept safe, he had certainly given it to the right person. But if he happened to need the contents on land, at the present time, he would have to cry for it.

Phil gave Madge a little shake. "Come on," she commanded. "I have an idea that we had better go to the beach. I can't wait another second. I somehow feel as though we would find friends there. I can't believe that we are the only persons on this island."

Phil's hopefulness was inspiring. Madge sprang to her feet and the two girls hurried ahead, leaving their bundles under the tree.

The booming of the surf soon smote their ears, then the welcome splash and murmur of the waves. Like two little girls, Madge and Phil joined hands and ran down to the open shore.

Far and wide was a waste of water and a pebbly beach. It was lonely, far lonelier than their own shore. The "Merry Maid," riding out on the waves near the spot where they had first found refuge, had given their shore almost a homelikeness.

This beach was dreadful! Besides, it was getting so late. Phil's black eyes suddenly brimmed with tears of disappointment. Madge slipped her arm in Phil's and the two forlorn girls walked up and down the shore, looking in every possible direction for some sign of life.

A fish-hawk rose suddenly from the waves and wheeled over their heads. It uttered a hoarse cry of fright and dropped a good sized fish at the girls' feet. The fish had been too large for the bird to carry.

Madge picked up the fish, which had just been freshly caught out of the sea. "Phil," she said, smiling bravely, "if we are deserted by human beings, we are being fed from Heaven. Let us cook this for our supper. Come, let us go back to the woods, swing our hammock and prepare to make a night of it."

"Let's look just a little farther along," Phyllis begged.

The girls went a quarter of a mile farther up the silent shore, then turned into the woods.

Madge, who was a few rods in advance, gave a sharp cry of surprise.

There, ahead of her, appeared most unexpectedly a small house, not a great deal larger than their own lodge. But it was very differently built. The door of this house had great bars across it; the windows were securely fastened. The walls were fortified with heavy beams of wood. The house looked deserted. Yet in front of the barred door stood a bucket of fresh water and an ax lay on the ground, with some chips of freshly hewn wood near it. Also the girls noticed that the way up to the door had lately been trodden by heavy feet.

Without asking anybody's permission the girls drank long and deeply of the fresh water. Then they knocked on the fast-locked door. There was no answer. They banged again. Madge tried to shake the door. A heavy chain rattled on the inside.

"The house must be empty, Phil," she suggested. "The men you saw must have been here and gone away again. Perhaps they will be back soon. We had better return in the morning to see."

Phil gave a farewell shake to the door.

A voice called out unexpectedly: "Stop shaking that door and come in. What is the use of your trifling with me? Have you lost the key, so that you can't get in? It would be good of you to leave me here to starve."

Madge and Phil felt their knees shaking in sudden terror.

"We are strangers; we haven't the key to your house," answered Phil. "We wished to ask you for help."

A dreary laugh answered the girls. "You must be joking," the voice said. "But if you are human, you will help me get out of this hole. I have been imprisoned for I don't know how long. Oh, it is a long story. Once I am out, I can explain everything to you. I promise not to harm you."

"Why do you wish to get out?" demanded Madge, trying to gain time until she could master her amazement.

The voice inside laughed less hoarsely. "Oh, I want to get out to breathe, to get away from this beastly hole and to attend to my own affairs. I could go on giving you reasons all night. But please hurry. Batter down the door! I don't see how the house has ever happened to be left unguarded so long. You are young boys, I suppose. Your voices sound like it. If you'll let me out, I'll do anything in the world for you," continued the prisoner, "only, make haste!"

"What shall we do?" whispered Phil.

"I don't know," returned Madge. "I am afraid there is a crazy person shut up in this house. Perhaps the men you saw were his keepers."

"But he talks as though he were sane," argued Phil.

"Crazy people often do," retorted Madge. "I've read *that!*"

"Madge, let's open the door," entreated Phil. "The voice doesn't sound as if the man were crazy. Think how dreadful if some one is really shut up here on this deserted island against his will!"

Madge hesitated. "It will be dreadfully foolish of us, Phil, to open the door. There is no telling what trouble we may bring on ourselves."

"For the love of Heaven, please open the door. I swear to you that there is no reason in the world why I should be kept imprisoned here. If you will only help me to get away, I can prove it to you." This time the voice pleaded desperately.

Phil seized the ax. "We can run for our lives once the door is open. I believe we have been sent to save this person."

"All right, Phil. I won't turn coward unless you do." Madge picked up a sharp stick to pry under the door.

Phil had struck her first blow when Madge, whose ears were open to every sound, cried sharply: "Stop! There is some one coming. Do let's run!"

Phil dropped her axe as softly as possible. Then she and Madge took to their heels. They ran through the thicket of trees, back behind a dense growth of underbrush. They had never run so fleetly or so silently before. A single glance had revealed the figures of two men approaching the prison-house from the beach. Not for worlds would the girls have been discovered hammering at their door. They had crossed the island to ask for succor. They needed friends. Suppose these men had seen them trying to break into their house? They might have been taken for common thieves. Madge and Phil were quick to repent of their foolishness. They had not come forth on their long pilgrimage to save a man locked up in a hut; they had come to find aid for Miss Jenny Ann and the other girls.

It was almost dark when they made their way back to their packs, which they had left under a tree. They made a fire, fried their fish, and ate their supper.

Then they swung their hammock in the branches of a great, low-armed sycamore tree. Neither was afraid, though the night was dark and they were far from their lodge, which to-night seemed like home. They were too weary to lie awake. By the time the stars were out they had crawled into their hammock together and covered themselves with their blanket. All night long they slept serenely, the good fairies keeping watch over them.

THE DISAPPOINTED KNIGHTS

Not long after daylight the two girls were out of their hammock bed. But they waited until a reasonable hour before they approached the house in the woods to ask for assistance. Then they walked back to the place cautiously and quietly. To their relief they saw an old gypsy woman stirring something in a pot by an open fire. A young boy was busily cleaning some fish.

The explorers walked directly up to the boy, who did not turn or take the slightest interest in their approach. But when Phyllis touched him on the arm he whirled about, dropped his fishing knife, and gave a queer, guttural call.

The old gypsy woman came toward Madge and Phil, looking alarmed, but brandishing a long stick.

"I don't wonder you are surprised," apologized Phil. "But, really, we are not ghosts; we are human beings. We have been shipwrecked on this island for two weeks and you are the first human beings we have seen. Can you tell us how we can get away?"

Still the boy stared and the gypsy woman made menacing gestures. The boy was about sixteen. He had handsome features and wavy black hair, but a strange, half-stupid expression.

"Why don't one of you speak?" demanded Madge in her impatient fashion. "We wish to know who lives in that house over there? Go and tell them we wish to speak to them."

The boy put his fingers on his lips, moving his hand curiously in the air. Then the girls understood. The gypsy boy was deaf and dumb.

It was vexatious to have struggled across the whole island, to have been nearly trampled to death by a drove of wild horses, only to discover a crazy person shut up in an old house, a deaf and dumb boy and a stupid old woman keeping guard.

Madge's sense of humor came to their rescue. She threw back her head and laughed. As her merry laugh rang out the back door of the house was burst suddenly open. A savage-looking man dashed out. "Who's there?" he demanded angrily. "I thought I heard strange voices."

The man ran down the few steps that led to the yard, staring at the newcomers as though he had seen an apparition.

Phyllis bowed to the man politely. Madge smiled at him with engaging frankness. But he paid no attention to their friendly overtures. He raged, stormed and talked to himself. Neither would he listen to Madge's explanation of their appearance.

"Won't you please be good enough to tell us how we can get away from this island?" Madge finally demanded in desperation. "We are very anxious to get back to the mainland, so that we can let our friends know where we are."

"I'll tell you how you can get away from this house in double-quick time. Be off with you!" roared the man. "What do you mean by turning up here and scaring a man out of his wits? We thought this island didn't have a soul on it but us."

"What are you doing here?" asked Phil quietly.

The man turned red and stammered. He was too stupid to think of a prompt answer.

At this moment a man who had all the appearance of a gentleman appeared at one side of the house. He bowed pleasantly to Madge and Phil, but did not try to conceal his amazement at seeing them.

The girls were equally nonplussed. They certainly had not been prepared to meet a gentleman in this oddly assorted company.

"I overheard your story," he remarked pleasantly. "You will forgive the surprise of my servants at your unexpected presence. We presumed we were alone on the island. It is supposed to be entirely uninhabited, except in the hunting season. The place is so desolate that I brought this gypsy lad and his mother over to look after my man and me. I am sorry that I can not offer you any assistance in returning to your homes at present. My boat brought me to this island and left me, as I wish to be entirely alone."

"How funny!" exclaimed matter-of-fact Phil. "I should think you would be awfully lonely."

"I am—I am recovering from an attack of the nerves, due to overwork," replied the stranger suavely.

"And are you all alone in the house, except for your servants?" questioned Madge, with her

most innocent, far-away expression.

"Yes," replied the man in the same moment, fixing his cold, blue eyes on Madge and Phil. "I am entirely alone in the house except for my man. The gypsy woman and her boy Jeff live in a tent a little distance off. I am sorry you have had your long journey across the island for nothing. The boy will show you a shorter way back. Rest assured that as soon as my boat comes for me, I will communicate with you. Until then it is wisest for you not to return to this side of the island."

The stranger spoke to them with perfect courtesy, but they knew that he would admit of no trifling. If they had heard a sound in the house that was not meant for their ears, they must pretend to be deaf.

The man summoned the deaf and dumb lad by a gesture. He talked to him on his fingers for a few minutes. The boy grinned and nodded, as though he thoroughly understood.

"I have told this fellow to show you a short cut across the island," the stranger said politely, turning to the girls. "He is ready to start—at once."

The man's eyes narrowed. There was no mistaking his meaning.

It was in vain that Madge and Phil insisted that they could find their way home without assistance. The obstinate man declared that they would be safer with an escort. What could the girls do? Nothing but make a foolish scene, and they were too wise for that.

Before Phyllis turned to leave the place she took one long, intense stare at the house ahead of her, which, she was now convinced, imprisoned some innocent person. She said nothing to the man in charge of it. But, in Phil-fashion, she set her lips firmly together. If the man had known Phyllis Alden better, he would not have smiled in such a relieved fashion when his unwelcome visitors disappeared.

With their backs to the ill-omened house, and their faces set toward the lodge, Madge and Phil felt their hearts lighten. So far they had failed miserably in their quest for help, but now these pretended knights were to return to their ladies and make their report. What bliss to be in their own little snug harbor again! "Snug harbor" was Phil's name for their lodge in the woods.

The girls walked on happily. They could talk as they chose, with a deaf and dumb boy for a guide.

"Who do you suppose is hidden in that house?" asked Phil nervously. She could not get the subject off her mind.

Madge was far less interested, so she smiled. "You have always thought that I had an excellent imagination," she teased, "but, really, this is asking too much of me! Perhaps the man in the house is crazy; perhaps he is heir to a large fortune, and the other wretch is trying to keep him out of it. There may be a thousand reasons for his being there. Oh, dear me, I am tired! If only this boy weren't deaf and dumb we might get some information out of him. I am glad that we are going home by a shorter route."

"I hope it is shorter," interrupted Phil. "Certainly it is entirely different from the direction we took yesterday. We have not passed a single familiar object since we started."

So far the girls had meekly and unquestioningly followed their guide. Now a doubt assailed both of them at the same time. Could it be possible that the lad had been sent to lead them out of their way? It dawned on Phil that the boy had probably been told to take them home by some route that would confuse them in case they ever desired to return to the secluded house.

But it was perfectly hopeless to try to argue with a deaf and dumb boy. The lad traveled at such a pace through the woods that the two girls had difficulty in keeping up with him. Madge now ran ahead, catching the boy by the sleeve. She tried to spell the word, "Home," on her fingers. Then she shouted at the top of her lungs, "Are you taking us home the right way?"

The boy grinned and bowed his head. He shot his fingers in the air and began a rapid-fire conversation. Madge and Phil watched him, feeling utterly helpless. The sign language had not been included in their education. There was nothing for them to do but continue to follow their leader.

Two hours more of travel and the wayfarers did not seem to be any nearer home. Not a solitary familiar tree or bush appeared to welcome them.

The knights were weary and disappointed. With what high hopes they had set out on their travels! With what low spirits they returned home! They were too tired to see where they were going, and they stumbled blindly on, over tangled roots, around clumps of trees, through open bits of woodland, too fatigued to protest or to ask questions.

Phil stole a look at her compass. It pointed southeast. Phil recalled that she and Madge had traveled almost due south the day before in order to reach the opposite side of the island. They should now be going north. There was now no possible doubt. They had been led astray. Phil would have liked to burst out crying. Instead, she declared miserably, without the least attempt at cheerfulness: "We are lost Madge! We have been fooled and tricked. The boy is not taking us across the island. He has been leading us on a wild-goose chase all day. I am not going to follow him another step."

"I am afraid we are too tired, now, Phil, to find our way home by ourselves. Yet think how terrified Miss Jenny Ann and the girls will be if another night passes and we do not return!"

Madge happened to glance up. The deaf and dumb boy was grinning at them with an expression of utter derision. He stuck out his tongue.

The little captain's cheeks flamed. As usual, anger inspired her to action. She sprang to her feet. "Don't you worry, Phil Alden," blazed Madge. "This wretch of a boy is going to lead us home by the very quickest route—and don't you forget it."

"What are you going to do?" queried Phil languidly.

Madge marched directly over to the boy; seizing him by both shoulders, she shook him with all her might. The boy submitted. But when Madge had finished he refused to stir. He picked up a stick from the ground and began to whittle it calmly, emitting a guttural, choking laugh.

Madge struck the lad sharply with a little stick she had picked up. At least he would understand what she meant by that kind of conversation. Still the youth whittled serenely. Then she put her hand in her back coat pocket, taking out a small, dark object. It was a small pistol. Very quietly she opened and loaded it. Then, with her pistol primed, she pointed it at the obstinate boy. "Forward, march!" she commanded.

The lad's glance shifted. He started to run. Madge shot into the air. The boy hesitated. Then he raised both hands. He had given up. A minute later he set off, beckoning to Madge and Phyllis to follow him. He had decided to take them home by the right path.

"I did not know you had your pistol, Madge," gasped Phil, as the two friends journeyed on together again.

Madge nodded. "Oh, yes," she explained. "We could not very well have come on such a journey without it. Miss Jenny Ann knew that I carried it."

For twenty-four hours, at odd intervals of time, Miss Jenny Ann, Lillian and Eleanor had walked up and down in front of their lodge, hoping and praying for the return of the wanderers. What did it matter if they stayed all the rest of their lives on the deserted island, if only Madge and Phyllis were with them!

About eight o'clock in the evening Miss Jenny Ann, who was patrolling the woods near by, heard a faint halloo. A few minutes later two homesick and footsore girls stumbled into her arms.

CHAPTER XVII

CAN WE GO TO THE RESCUE?

Several days had passed since Madge and Phil had returned. A big fire roared up the chimney. Madge lay on a blanket spread over some hemlock boughs in one corner of the room. Phil sat near her, feeding the fawn from a cup with a spoon.

Miss Jenny Ann had an open book in her lap, while Eleanor peered over her shoulder. A single candle burned near them. Lillian sat by the fire. Every now and then she threw an armful of pine cones on the fire to make more light in the room.

Miss Jenny Ann was trying to instruct four of her pupils from "Miss Tolliver's Select School for Girls" in the intricacies of algebraical problems.

Since the disappointing trip to the opposite shore of the island Madge had not been well. The sunshine had faded. The cold autumn rains had begun. The food in the larder, supplied from the houseboat, had grown perilously low. It was hard work to spend many hours in hunting or in

fishing in such weather. Nuts had commenced to pall as an article of daily diet. Fight as they might, the spirit of the houseboat party had begun to sink toward zero.

Suppose, after all, thought they, that they should not be rescued, even by the first Monday in November, when Madge assured them the duck shooting began? Perhaps there would not be any ducks this year, or else no one would come to shoot them? There was nothing too dreadful to imagine!

Instead of being comforted by Madge's and Phil's report that they were not alone on the island, Miss Jenny Ann was the more uneasy. She did not believe that such a man as the girls had seen would help them to leave this island.

Miss Jenny Ann had been trying to beguile the tedium of the stormy days by interesting the girls in the lessons they would even now have been studying at Miss Tolliver's school if their houseboat had not sailed away from her anchorage. All the old school books had been brought up from the "Merry Maid." At first the girls were much pleased with Miss Jenny Ann's idea. Eleanor declared that it would be splendid not to be behind their classes when they returned to school that fall.

To-night, however, it was quite impossible to take a proper interest in algebraical problems, when each member of the little group had such a serious individual problem staring her in the face. It did not look as though they were likely to return to Miss Tolliver's in the immediate future.

"A penny for your thoughts, girls," remarked Miss Jenny Ann suddenly. "Eleanor, dear, I am going to begin with you. We are all in the dumps to-night. Perhaps it will cheer us up to tell one another our thoughts."

Eleanor shook her head. She had been pretending to look over Miss Jones's shoulder, but her eyes were really full of tears.

"Don't begin with me," she pleaded. "My thoughts wouldn't cheer anybody up."

But the girls were firm. Eleanor must tell them.

"Oh, very well," she agreed. "I was thinking of 'Forest House' and Mother and Father. I could smell Aunt Dinah's light rolls browning in the kitchen oven, and the ham broiling, and——"

"Oh, please stop, Nellie!" begged Madge huskily.

But Eleanor would not stop. "I was wondering if Mother and Father believed now that Madge and I were drowned!"

Eleanor dropped her head. There was a dreadful silence in the room that made Miss Jenny Ann realize that the girls were near to breaking down. "What were you thinking of, Madge?" she demanded in desperation. Madge could usually be depended on to cheer the other girls.

The little captain shook her head despondently. "I was thinking of my father," she answered, almost under her breath. "I was wishing that I could find him, and that he would take me home."

"Lillian, what are you dreaming about to-night?" Miss Jones questioned next.

Lillian glanced plaintively into the fire. She popped a particularly fat kernel of a walnut in her mouth and chewed it thoughtfully before she replied. Then, still picking at her nuts with a hairpin, she confessed: "I was thinking, Miss Jenny Ann, that, if once I got back home, I would never, never eat another nut, not even at Christmas."

The girls forgot their woes and shouted with laughter.

Phil stroked her little fawn gently. She glanced up and surveyed her four friends squarely. Her face wore its most serious and determined expression.

"I have been thinking, Miss Jenny Ann, that it is about time for us to leave the island," she announced.

"My dear Phil, how original you are!" broke in Eleanor, with a pettish gesture.

But Miss Jenny Ann looked straight at Phyllis. She knew that Phil meant something more than mere idle talk by her speech. Evidently she had been considering the situation.

"You see, we have had a wonderful time. Except for our worry about our families we have had the very jolliest lark of our lives. But now we must go back home."

Phil clasped her hands together and closed her lips. "I mean that we must spend every single minute of our time and thought in arranging to get away from here."

"What are we to do, Phil?" asked Madge. "We have already tried every method."

"For one thing, we must find some better way to signal passing ships at sea. They must be going by this island constantly, only they do not come near enough to see us. Sometimes I believe we will just have to go aboard the 'Merry Maid' again and drift out from shore," concluded Phil.

Eleanor shivered. "We would be taking too great a chance."

"I wasn't advising it, Nellie. I was just thinking that we might have to do it, if we can't get away by any other means. We would be almost sure to meet a ship. Of course, we could never be on the water as long a time as we were before without being seen. The other time it was just a strange accident, due to the storm and the fog, I suppose."

The girls and Miss Jenny Ann frowned thoughtfully. Somehow Phil's idea did not seem to be very pleasing.

It was just such a night as the one on which the pretty houseboat had been cut adrift. The room was still, except for the crackling of the fire. The noises were all on the outside. The owls hooted dismally in the near-by trees. Farther off in the forest sounded the screech of a wildcat. The rain poured down.

A sudden, violent knocking began on the front door of the lodge. It was uncanny—terrifying. Not a single time since the houseboat party came to the lodge in the woods had a hand knocked at their door. To-night, in the heart of a storm, the sound of the blows upon the door filled them with dread.

Miss Jenny Ann rose with shaking knees. Instead of opening the door she quietly pushed her chair against it. It was a feeble barrier. The door was closed only by a wooden latch, which Phil had made.

The banging continued. "Who's there?" Miss Jenny Ann demanded.

There was no reply. Phil came over and stood by her chaperon's side.

"Tell us who it is at the door and we will open to you. We can not open to a stranger," she declared.

Still the stupid beating on the door with no response to the questioning.

Phyllis stood close to the door. "Come here, Madge," she whispered. "Now listen." The two girls were quiet as mice. One nodded to the other. They had each heard a curious guttural sound outside their lodge door.

"It's the deaf and dumb boy, Miss Jenny Ann. Shall we let him come in?" asked Madge.

Miss Jones nodded, and Phil unlatched the door. In the same instant Madge slipped her revolver into her hand, but she kept it hidden behind her skirts.

The boy came slowly into the room, blinking at the light after the darkness of the woods outside. He was wet to the skin and shaking with cold. He gave a grunt of delight at the sight of the fire, then crossed and stood before it, warming his outstretched hands. As though frightened, the lad looked furtively from one young woman to the other.

Five minutes passed. The deaf and dumb lad made no explanation of his surprising visit. It was impossible to ask him why he had come. The houseboat party stared at him in perplexity. The boy stared back again. He was completely fascinated by the beauty of the room and the circle of pretty girls. He had apparently forgotten his errand.

Finally Madge grew tired of waiting for him to make a sign. Surely this wild gypsy boy had not come to their lodge on such a night just to make them a social call. How could she get any information out of him?

With a sudden inspiration she handed the lad a pencil and a piece of paper. Perhaps the boy had some education. Madge printed in large letters the simple words, "WHAT DO YOU WANT?" She handed the slip to the youth.

He puzzled over it for a moment. Then his face lit up happily. He pulled out of his pocket a crumpled piece of paper and handed it to Madge.

Madge surveyed it gingerly, turning the paper first on one side, then on the other. "The boy is an idiot," she announced positively. "Else why should he have come over here on such a night with this dirty scrap of paper? It hasn't a word written on it." Madge tossed the paper to the ground contemptuously.

The lad made a rush for it. This time he passed it to Phil. He ran his finger along some

smudges on the paper.

"Wait, Phil," Miss Jenny Ann suggested, coming toward her with the candle. Phil held up the paper and Miss Jenny Ann put the candle close to it. Five pairs of eyes surveyed it at different ranges.

Written apparently with the finger, in coffee, was the solitary word, "HELP." Below were some indefinite initials, a J, and an N, and a T.

This call out of the darkness was uncanny. From whom could it have come? Madge and Phyllis knew that it must have been sent by the man who was shut up in the house on the farther side of the island.

The girls looked at one another questioningly. "What can we do, Miss Jenny Ann?" asked Phil anxiously.

"Nothing," Miss Jenny Ann responded in a tone that was final.

"Please allow us to write a note, then, and send it back by this boy?" pleaded Madge. "Think how dreadful to be shut up somewhere without a sign from the outside world. I'll just say that we are sorry we can not come to rescue this person, as we have no way of helping him, and that we don't know who he is. It wouldn't be any harm to say that we hope some one else will come to save him, would it, Phil?"

Miss Jenny Ann smiled over Madge's letter, but offered no objection to it.

The boy seemed quite satisfied. Just as he turned to leave, Phyllis called him back.

It occurred to her that she might ask the lad some questions about the mysterious prisoner whom he was trying to befriend, probably at the risk of his own life.

Phil wrote the word, "MAN?" The boy nodded. Then she put down, "OLD?" The youth shook his head violently.

"Ask the boy if the man is crazy, Phil."

Phil printed the word, "crazy," but the boy did not understand. The word was too large to be included in his vocabulary. She tried, "mad," and he bowed his head repeatedly. He frowned, walked up and down the room and stamped his foot.

Even Miss Jenny Ann smiled. "I am afraid we do not know whether the prisoner is insane or just very angry," she said. "But, whoever he is, we certainly have no concern with him. I don't wish to be unkind, but, children, it seems to me that at present we have troubles enough of our own."

And so the strange messenger was sent back to the unknown prisoner with nothing save the regrets of the houseboat party.

CHAPTER XVIII

A NEW USE FOR A KITE

A few days afterward Miss Jenny Ann concluded that she must pay a visit to the men who had been so disagreeable to Phyllis and Madge. She was an older woman, and one not to be trifled with. The man whom the two girls imagined to be in authority over the group of people whom they had seen had promised to come to them as soon as he could help them. He had not come. Miss Jones wished to know why.

Miss Jenny Ann Jones was growing into a very determined character. You would never have known her for the once pale, awkward, embarrassed teacher at Miss Tolliver's school. Her shoulders had broadened, her cheeks were ruddy, her sandy hair was burned to gold. Miss Jenny's muscles were hard and her step vigorous. She had become a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. Pioneer life had certainly agreed with her. She could walk as far and endure as much as Phyllis Alden herself, who was the hardiest of the four girls.

Phyllis and Madge were enraptured with their chaperon's suggestion that they make a second

trip across the island. They had never ceased to think and to talk of the poor fellow who had sent out his cry for help to them.

Lillian and Eleanor stayed at home to take care of the lodge. Madge, Phil and their chaperon crossed the island without any special difficulty, and found the secluded house as before; the deaf and dumb boy sat outside on guard. A few rods off the gypsy woman worked near her tent.

Miss Jenny Ann went directly up to her and inquired for her master.

The gypsy woman made no answer, except to shake her fist and utter unintelligible threats. She commanded her son to drive the intruders away, but Jeff, the gypsy lad, never stirred.

"I insist on knowing if your master is in his house, or, if he has gone away, when he will return," demanded Miss Jones.

The gypsy's answer was to pick up a huge stone and hurl it at Madge's head.

At this Miss Jenny Ann, a few weeks before the most timid of women, seized the gypsy by the shoulders and pushed her inside her tent.

"Don't come out again," ordered Miss Jenny. "We intend to wait here until your master comes to speak to us. I don't suppose he will be absent any length of time."

"He ain't going to be back until just before night," the gypsy muttered. But she made no effort, at first, to come out of her tent.

Miss Jenny Ann took up her position on a log half-way between the house and the tent. She insisted that her companions rest near her. It was early afternoon. Now that they knew their way, the trip across the island had occupied only half the length of time that it had taken when Madge and Phil crossed.

Madge and Phil craned their necks and stared at the house.

The deaf and dumb boy grinned cheerfully at them. Except for his presence the house looked silent and deserted. Perhaps the prisoner had been taken away.

"Miss Jenny Ann, do you remember the story of Richard, the Lion-Hearted, and Blondel?" asked Phil plaintively.

Miss Jones was thinking of something else. "What was it, Phyllis?" she asked abstractedly.

"Once when Richard Cœur de Leon was on his way home to England from one of his crusades in the Holy Land, he was cast into prison. There he stayed a long, long time," narrated Phil mournfully, as though the story of the unfortunate king weighed on her mind. "Blondel, Richard's faithful servant and friend, wandered all over the world looking for his master. One day he came outside the very prison that held his king. He began to sing an old song that he and King Richard had sung together many times. Richard Cœur de Leon recognized the song and knew that Blondel waited outside the fortress to save him. He managed to let Blondel know where he was, and the loyal servant helped his friend and king to make his escape."

Madge guessed what Phil's story meant, but Miss Jenny Ann refused to see it.

"Do you think, Miss Jenny Ann," Phil inquired after a pause, "that it would do any harm if Madge and I were to sing outside this prison house to-day? Surely it would be a comfort to the poor man inside to hear the sound of friendly voices!"

Miss Jones frowned. "Perhaps it would not do any harm, Phil, but it certainly would not do the prisoner any good. You have promised me not to try to interfere with this stranger's troubles." Then Miss Jenny Ann's soft heart relented. "Sing, if you like, Phil. I shall be glad to hear you. It will help make the time pass more quickly."

"What shall we sing, Phil?" demanded Madge.

Phil thought for a while. "'America'," she suggested. "If I were put in prison unfairly, I would like to think that I was an American and should some day have my liberty again."

"All right," agreed Madge. "Let's begin."

Sitting on the ground at Miss Jenny Ann's feet the girls sang the splendid song. They forgot the story that had suggested their music. Their voices rang true and sweet. Madge sang the soprano part and Phil the alto. The tune inspired the two girls and gave Miss Jenny Ann fresh courage for the unpleasant interview which she thought lay ahead of her.

It was good for the lost travelers to believe that they were still under the protection of the American Flag. The "Merry Maid" had certainly not drifted away from the Stars and Stripes.

Phil wanted a drink of water at the close of the song. She went up near the house to get it. The bucket stood under a tree a little to one side of the house, out of the vision of Madge and Miss Jenny Ann. Phil was a long time in drinking the water. Distinctly she heard some one inside the house. He was pacing up and down like a frenzied creature.

Phyllis was disobedient. As she passed by the deaf and dumb boy, whose name was Jeff, who still sat at his post of duty, she whisked out a paper and pencil and handed them to him. She pointed to the barred door, and indicated that she wished the paper and pencil carried to the man imprisoned in the house.

Jeff took the things, but he shook his head and made many gestures. He wished Phyllis to understand that he had no way of breaking into the prison house when his master was away. He was left to guard the outside of the dwelling. His master carried the key.

Phyllis went back to her seat near Madge and Miss Jenny Ann. Her face was flushed. She looked miserable and uncomfortable.

A few minutes later Phil saw Jeff leave his position in front of the place he was set to guard. He jumped up and ran to the tent, where he and his mother slept. A short time after he danced out of the tent, carrying a kite with a long tail made of strips of cloth. The boy closed the opening to the tent securely. He hoped to keep his gypsy parent inside. As Jeff ran by the girls, letting his kite fly high in the air, he gave the two girls a significant wink.

"What is the boy going to do?" asked Miss Jenny Ann. "He is just like a child! I wish he could tell us when those two tiresome men intend to return to this spot."

Jeff disappeared around the back of the wooden house. In a few moments the lad reappeared on top of the sloping roof. He had his kite tied to one of the buttons of his coat. He climbed cautiously up the roof until he came to the ledge. Then he sat astride it, with his feet nearly touching the chimney that rose out of the roof. He looked furtively about.

The girls watched the lad in fascination. What was he about to do? The boy deliberately waved to them. Next he took out the paper and pencil Phil had presented to him. He unwound the kite string from his button, got a small stone out of his pocket and placed it inside the paper. Then he tied the pencil and the paper, with the weight in it, to the end of his kite string.

What the boy was going to do Phil was beginning to guess. She was gratified at the success of her ruse, but she felt very guilty and ashamed of herself. Madge and Miss Jenny Ann were wholly unaware that Phil had had anything to do with the deaf and dumb boy's peculiar actions.

But Phil could stand it no longer. Suddenly she broke out: "Miss Jenny Ann, Madge! I have a confession to make to you!"

Phil's face was red with embarrassment. "I gave Jeff a paper and pencil to take to the man inside that house," she went on bravely. "I suppose I ought not to have done it."

Miss Jenny Ann looked worried. "I am sorry, Phil," she answered quietly.

Of course, Phil was more unhappy at her chaperon's quiet speech than she would have been if Miss Jones had scolded her. Not once before, in their two houseboat holidays, had Phil given their teacher and friend any kind of trouble. It had been a point of honor with Phil to help Miss Jenny Ann all she could. Now she had truly fallen from grace.

But Madge and Miss Jenny Ann were so interested in watching the boy on the roof that they said nothing more. Jeff had slid down the roof, and had twined his legs around the small brick chimney. He looked like a monkey as he sat there staring out across the landscape, to see if by any chance the men he feared could be returning. At last he rose to his feet, leaned against the brick chimney and dropped the tail of his kite straight down it. It had occurred to the boy that this chimney connected with the prisoner's room, and that the kite string would carry the paper and pencil down to him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

The girls and their chaperon continued their staring. Jeff calmly waited on the roof, with his

kite held in his hand.

"I don't suppose there is any danger if the man inside the house simply writes to tell us why he is imprisoned there," protested Madge, trying to help the situation for her chum.

"I hope not," faltered Miss Jenny Ann, "but you know it is very unfortunate for us to make enemies of the men whom we intend to ask to help us by interfering with their prisoner. What possible business have we with the misfortunes of this total stranger?"

"I know, Miss Jenny Ann," agreed Phil, "but if the man tells us who he is, and why he is imprisoned in this place, we can tell his friends of his sad fate after we get away from the island."

Jeff was seen drawing up the tail of his kite with excited jerks. He slid off the roof and came hurrying toward the three women. He motioned to Phil to come away with him to receive the message he had for her. But Phil pointed to their chaperon and signified that she had been taken into the secret. Then Phil untied the piece of paper from the tail of the deaf and dumb boy's kite.

The most impossible things in this world are the things that actually happen. Nothing in fiction is so strange as the facts that take place every day before our eyes. Miracles occur every hour and moment.

Phil opened the note slowly. She passed it to Miss Jenny Ann, but her chaperon insisted that Phil read it first.

The note was written in a firm, bold hand.

"Boys, can't you help a fellow in distress?" the note began. "You must mean to try to aid me, or you would not have sung outside my prison house, or sent me this paper and pencil. I am afraid you are very young. Your voices sounded so. I don't wish to get you into trouble, but if you can think of any way to get me out of this hole, I will defend you with my life against the men who are keeping me a prisoner. I have done no wrong. I am perfectly sane. The people who have imprisoned me wish to keep me out of the world until they have a chance to steal my work. I have been kept here so long that I have been growing desperate. But to know that there is some one interested in my fate has cheered me. I will stick it out now. Can you let me know your names, and where on the face of the earth I am kept a prisoner? If you are not strong enough to get me out of this place, will you, in Heaven's name, telegraph to the Navy Department in Washington for me? Say that Lieutenant James Lawton is being held as a prisoner. Say that he is not a traitor and that he has not run away from his country to sell his invention to a foreign government. Tell the authorities to send troops, or a battleship, if it is necessary, to get me away from this place. Yours truly, Lieutenant James M. Lawton, U.S.N."

Phil turned white. She was sick and faint with surprise. One look at her friend was enough. Madge ran for a dipper of cold water. Phil had just handed her note to Miss Jenny Ann when Madge flung the water in her face. Phil gasped and sputtered indignantly. But she could not speak on the instant.

When Miss Jenny Ann read the note Madge wished she had saved half her dipper of water for her chaperon. Miss Jenny Ann turned as red as Phil did white. "It's quite impossible!" she ejaculated. "I can not believe it is true."

"Have you both gone crazy?" demanded Madge excitedly. "Please let me see the letter that has affected you both so dreadfully." Madge took the note from her chaperon's limp hand. Then she dropped down on the ground.

"Jimmy Lawton!" she muttered in confusion. "Is it the same young man we met at Fortress Monroe? He simply can't be imprisoned on this ridiculous out-of-the-world island with us!"

The three dazed women said nothing more for a few seconds. They gazed stupidly ahead of them.

"What ought we to do?" asked Phil finally.

"Get Lieutenant Lawton out," answered Madge promptly.

"But, children, we shall be murdered if we make the attempt," faltered Miss Jones.

"Not if we can manage to get Lieutenant Lawton out of that place before his jailers return," declared Madge calmly.

Miss Jenny Ann Jones felt the situation slipping out of her fingers. She was ardently anxious to help Jimmy Lawton, if it were possible to aid him without bringing trouble on her girls. She felt suddenly drawn toward Jimmy. Here was a friend on the deserted island. She felt a curious intimacy and sympathy for him. She knew the young officer would help them to make their escape if only he were free.

"How can we ever get into that house?" questioned Phil. "The front and back doors are strengthened with heavy beams. We can't beat them down."

Madge shook her head. "Even if we make our way through one of those doors, we would still not have found the prisoner. He must be locked in an inside room."

The three young women sat in gloomy silence.

The gypsy woman peered out of her tent. The intruders seemed to be in no mischief. She could safely leave her master to attend to them. Jeff, the deaf and dumb boy, had taken up his position as guard outside the front door of the house. He gave the impression of a sentry who had never left his post.

Could any situation be more hopelessly difficult? Phyllis, Madge and Miss Jenny Ann were within a few yards of their friend, whom they had every disposition in the world to help out of his prison house. But how were three girls, without a single tool of any kind, to break open a house that had been strongly fortified with heavy beams to resist any attack from the inside or outside.

"Phil," breathed Madge at last, "I believe I have thought of a scheme to rescue Jimmy Lawton. You and Miss Jenny Ann may think it a perfectly mad one. It is pretty daring, and Lieutenant Lawton will run the risk of losing his life. But if he has the courage——"

"Lieutenant Lawton is a sailor. I don't believe he will be afraid of anything," declared Phil. "But what do you mean? I can't think of any plan by which we can get him out of that place before those wicked men return to stop us."

Madge slipped her hand inside the pocket of her sweater. She brought out a box of safety matches. "I thought we could set fire to the house and burn down the outside door," she proposed. "I suppose I am silly to speak of it."

She read blank disapproval in the face of Miss Jenny Ann. Phil did not wait to discuss the idea with either of them, but leaped to her feet. She rushed around the far side of the house. The biggest stone she could lift, she hurled into the side of the house.

"Lieutenant Lawton!" she shouted. "We are your friends. Your jailers are away. We are going to try to help you out now if we can. We shall set fire to the house and batter in the front door. You may run the risk of being burned up inside the house, but are you willing to take the chance?"

Phil's voice sounded as though it came from a great distance off. Still, the young man inside the house heard her words. The house that kept him prisoner was built of wood, but iron bars had been put up across the windows, and heavy logs were jammed against the doors. It had been utterly impossible for Lieutenant Lawton to make his escape without help from the outside. He had made a friend of the deaf and dumb boy, but the latter had neither the courage nor the skill to get the young man out alone.

At Phil's words Lieutenant Lawton cried out in rapture: "Willing to take a chance? I should say I am! Make your fire in a hurry. But I say, boys, if you see my jailers coming while you are at work, take to the woods. Hide there. Once you get this beastly place afire, I will manage to make my way out. All I ask is a fighting chance."

Madge came up with her precious matches. Miss Jenny Ann stationed herself to watch for the return of the two men they feared.

Phil, Madge and Jeff gathered a pile of light, dry wood and placed it just in front of the heavy log door. Jeff brought the ax which he used for his wood-chopping and laid it at Phil's feet.

It was difficult work to get the wood ablaze without paper. Finally a few tiny sticks caught and blazed up. A moment later they died down into a little heap of embers, without even faintly scorching the wooden door that they were expecting to set on fire. A few moments of hope, then nothing but burnt-out ashes.

The situation looked desperate. The girls had plenty of matches, yet they could not start a blaze without paper. It would take so long to coax the great logs to kindle from the bits of trash. And Jeff dared not go inside the tent for paper and kindling, for fear his mother would discover what they were doing.

Miss Jenny Ann was growing more nervous every minute. "Hurry!" she cried every few seconds. "I am sure those men will return before you ever get the wretched place afire. What is taking you so long?"

"We have no paper to make the fire burn, Miss Jenny Ann," cried Phyllis in desperation.

"Paper!" returned their chaperon in disgust. "Have you children lived for two weeks on a desert island without learning to make what you have serve for what you desire?"

Miss Jenny Ann slipped out of her white cotton petticoat and ran to the house to present it to Phil. "Here, use this for paper," she insisted. "I have on a heavy serge skirt and shall not miss it."

Cotton is almost as inflammable as paper. Carefully, Madge, Phil and the deaf and dumb boy made another pile of little and big sticks just outside the door they desired to burn down. Miss Jenny Ann's petticoat lay, as a sacrifice, underneath the pyre. The skirt started a splendid blaze. Madge and Phil fanned the flames gently toward the front door. The chips caught, then the larger sticks, at last one of the logs of the door smouldered and flamed.

It took only a short time to get a fair fire started. But it seemed a long time to the workers—and a century to the man who waited inside.

He said nothing, gave no directions. He only walked up and down the small room that held him fast like a caged lion.

Half of the lower log of the door burned away. Phyllis seized the ax. It was easy to cut through the half burnt log. She made a hole large enough to crawl through. The flame was only flickering about its outside edges when she crept inside the house with her lap full of sticks, and Madge's box of matches in her hand.

Madge saw her chum disappear into the house with horror. There was no danger at the time. The front of the wooden house was burning slowly. But if the entire front should blaze up, Phil, as well as Lieutenant Lawton, might be imprisoned inside.

Phil was not in the least alarmed. Once inside the dark house she found herself in a square room. A hall led out of it with a room on each side. There was no question about which room was Jimmy Lawton's prison. Heavy logs were braced against this door and a big, iron chain fastened it on the outside. It was indeed a prison cell.

Phyllis dropped down in front of this door and made her second pyre. This time her own petticoat was used as a burnt offering.

"The front of the house has begun to burn," she explained quietly to Lieutenant Lawton. She did not mention that a friend had come to his aid. This was no time for unnecessary explanations.

"All right," the young man answered briefly. "Don't you think you had better get out pretty soon? The fire will be creeping toward you."

Phil made no reply. She now saw that her second fire was beginning to catch. She must burn away this inside door, or else Jimmy Lawton would be caught in a trap. The door was chained and would not be easy to break down.

Phyllis Alden had acquired one habit of a boy during her brief life in the woods. She always carried her pocket knife with her. To-day she was grateful for the habit. There was a small crack between two of the thick boards of the door. While she waited for her fire to burn Phil whittled at this slit, until the opening was large enough to slip the knife through.

"Make the opening as large as you can," she suggested to the prisoner.

For the first time during his weeks of imprisonment Jimmy Lawton had something with which to work for his freedom. He cut furiously at the door, while Phil continued to fan the fire toward it with her skirt. Both of them forgot, for the moment, what might be taking place on the outside of the house. They were intent only on demolishing the hateful door behind which Lieutenant Lawton had been forced to remain so long.

CHAPTER XX

THE RECOGNITION

Madge had kept guard before the flaming door, with Jeff dancing about her, making frenzied gestures of excitement. Miss Jenny Ann had been torn between the necessity for watching for the approach of their foes, and at the same time seeing what Phyllis was doing inside the burning building. She darted from one place to the other, fairly beside herself with anxiety.

But there was little work for Madge to do now, except to watch and wait for Phyllis. The little captain was growing worried. The flames, that had been so long in catching, were now spreading

across the entire front of the house.

"Come out, Phil!" she called. "You must not stay in the house any longer, you have done all you possibly can." She crept as near to the house as she could. The heat was scorching. She could just catch a glimpse of her chum at work on the inside.

The wind was blowing so that the smoke poured into the house. The danger was not so much from the fire as that Phil and Lieutenant Lawton would be stifled by the thick smoke.

Jimmy Lawton could feel the waves of heat entering the house.

"Please clear out, young fellow," he urged Phyllis. The idea that she was a girl had never dawned on him. In their few words of conversation he had been too excited to think of the girlish tones of her voice. "I am afraid you will be burnt in this place. You have done all you can for me. Once this room is in flames I will fight my way out."

Phil's answer was to pick up the ax, which she had dragged into the house with her. Lieutenant Lawton had made a hole in the door large enough to thrust his hand through. Phil handed him the ax. The young man pulled it through the door and gave a shout of triumph. "Now run for your life, boy!" he commanded. "I'll be after you in a minute. We haven't a minute to lose."

Jimmy Lawton's inside prison door was smoking; one end of it was in flames. Phyllis recognized that there was no reason for her to wait any longer. She realized that she was nearly choked with the smoke. Phyllis turned to fight her way to the hole through which she had come into the house.

A solid wall of smoke met her gaze. The small room at the front of the house might have been any size or shape. It was impossible to see anything in it except the leaping tongues of flame in front.

Outside, Madge called in terror, "Phil! Phil!"

Guided by the sound of her friend's voice, Phil groped her way. She struck a chair in the way and fell on her knees.

There was a noise behind her, and Phyllis felt a man's hand grope for hers. He pulled her quickly to her feet. "Close your eyes and keep your mouth shut," he ordered. "We will both be out of this in a moment."

In one place the smoke was less dense and a faint breath of air penetrated the room. Phil felt herself lifted off her feet and thrust through this opening almost into Madge's arms. Her skirt was on fire, but Madge had beaten out the flames before Jimmy Lawton joined them.

Even now the young man did not recognize his rescuers. He was dazed, weak from his long confinement, and only anxious to be off.

"Let's get away from this place!" he cried. Blindly he reached out for Phil's hand the second time. Madge seized hold of Miss Jenny Ann. They started toward the thick woods on a run, forgetting their friend, Jeff. So far they had not been interrupted by the men they feared.

"Look ahead!" called out Madge sharply under her breath. Her quick ears had caught the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Hide in the thicket," Jimmy commanded. He pulled Phil down behind a fallen log. Madge and Miss Jenny Ann crouched behind some thick bushes. They waited in absolute silence.

Now, for the first time, Lieutenant James Mandeville Lawton opened his eyes and surveyed his deliverer!

He stared and blinked, and stared and blinked again, until Phil wanted to laugh aloud in spite of their danger, the young man's expression was so ludicrous.

"Great Scott!" he muttered. "I never dreamed my rescuers were girls."

Phil put a warning finger on her lips.

They waited until the noise they had heard had completely died away. Then Lieutenant Lawton sprang to his feet, ran to Miss Jenny Ann and took both her hands. "Your appearing on this island is like a miracle!" he exclaimed. "Tell me how you happen to be here? I would never, never have let you run the risk of trying to save me if I had known you were girls instead of boys."

Madge laughed. "Mr. Lawton, girls are equal, nowadays, to any situation that a boy can master."

The little party had not gone on much farther before they heard the noise of swift feet in

pursuit. Instead of walking, as our party of friends had lately done, in order to rest, they broke into a run. Still their pursuer gained on them.

Lieutenant Lawton thrust the three women behind him. He stood at bay with a stick in his hand as his only weapon.

A wild figure burst upon them. It was Jeff, whom they had forgotten! The poor lad's clothes were torn, as though he had received a severe beating.

Jimmy Lawton dropped his stick. He turned red with shame. "Poor old Jeff!" he cried. "We ought never to have run off without you. Of course, you would get the blame of my escape."

In the days of his imprisonment Jimmy Lawton had learned to understand a few words that the boy could spell on his fingers.

Jeff now managed to explain to them that Lieutenant Lawton's jailers had returned to the house a little while after they made their escape.

They found the prison house in flames and their prisoner gone! The gypsy woman told the story of the appearance of the two girls and their chaperon, and the aid they had given to the prisoner. She made no accusation against her son. But the boy's master demanded to know in what direction his prisoner and the women had run. Jeff would not tell. He had managed to escape from the angry men and, guided by some instinct, he had found his friends in the woods.

"Jeff declares he will show us a way through the island that no one will be able to follow," announced Lieutenant Lawton to Miss Jenny Ann. "Will you allow him to go on with us? The boy has been so good to me that I am going to look after him for the rest of my days."

"Have the men started after us?" inquired Madge.

It took Lieutenant Lawton some time to find out. At last Jeff made him understand. The men had absolutely no idea of any difficulty in overtaking their prisoner and bringing him back to his late jail. They believed that he had no way of escaping from the island, no weapons and no friends except a company of young girls, who would be more of a hindrance to him than a help if he meant to resist recapture.

Jeff announced that he had left the men fighting the flames in the prison house. They meant to put out the fire before they followed the fugitives.

It was now almost dark. The woods were thick with shadows. The party stumbled on. Had it not been for Jeff, they must have spent the night in the forest. But the deaf and dumb boy had the gift of remarkable sight. He could see almost as well by night as by day. No other mortal man could have traced the route by which he led his friends home. Jeff was a creature of the out-doors. He knew his deserted island thoroughly.

It was only a little after ten o'clock when the party of three women and two men arrived at the lodge.

Before they got inside the door they caught a whiff of a grateful odor. Lillian and Eleanor had put a great part of their last rations into a big kettle of soup. The last can of tomatoes had been sacrificed, the last half dozen potatoes. Nothing remained but some musty corn meal, a few teaspoons of tea and a little sugar. Unless relief came soon the houseboat party would truly have to be fed from Heaven.

CHAPTER XXI

BACK TO THE "MERRY MAID"

"Rather than put you in this position I would have stayed ten years in that hole," groaned Jimmy Lawton.

The group of young people were huddled close about their wood fire. It was a little past midnight. Each moment they expected to hear a sound at the door that would mean a fight or else the surrender of their captive. The two men would come to the lodge when they found no sign of them in the woods.

"I don't see how you can say you have got us into a scrape, Lieutenant Lawton," argued Phyllis. "What did you have to do with cutting our houseboat adrift? It was Fate that brought us to these shores. And jolly glad we were to get here! If the men come after you, there are only two of them and seven of us."

"But you have no weapons," protested the young officer. "Those fellows will be desperate. None of you must get hurt. If Jeff and I find we can't settle the two men without bringing you into our trouble, you must let me pretend to go back with them. I'll finish my fight after we get away from the lodge."

"Here is something to help you out, Lieutenant Lawton," offered Madge, bringing the young officer the small revolver that belonged to her and to her cousin Eleanor.

Phil produced their cherished rifle. Jeff seized hold of it with one of his queer grunts. The boy lay with his body across the door, like a faithful dog.

The waiting grew very dull. No one came to disturb them.

"Ask Lieutenant Jimmy what happened to him after he left Old Point, Phil?" whispered Eleanor. "I am just dying to know."

In the flickering light of the fire the young officer told his curious story. He had left for Washington, carrying with him the finished model of his famous torpedo-boat destroyer, the little boat that was to bring him fame and glory. On the train, while he was eating his luncheon, two men took seats opposite him at the same table and, ordering their luncheon, fell into conversation with him. Lieutenant Jimmy remembered that when he rose to leave the dining car his head was swimming strangely. His food had in some mysterious way been drugged. He knew nothing more until he woke up some time later. He was on a small boat, bound hand and foot, the model of his invention had disappeared, his pockets were stripped and he was being carried he knew not where. Twelve hours may have passed, or twenty-four. Then Lieutenant Lawton was brought on land and placed in the small fortified house where the girls discovered him. This was all the young officer knew. But he had guessed a number of other things.

There was a moment of sympathetic silence when the young man finished his story. Then Madge turned on him, with her eyes flashing indignantly. "Have you any idea who stole your invention, and why they should wish to keep you locked up?" she demanded.

Lieutenant Lawton nodded. "I have my suspicions. I can be sure of nothing until I get back home. I am afraid I may be too late then. But the firm of ship-builders, of whom Alfred Thornton's father is a member, offered me two hundred thousand dollars to sell the secret of my torpedo-boat destroyer to them, instead of giving it to my government. A short time before I left Old Point I refused their offer, made through Alfred Thornton. I am sure that the men on the train drugged me, assured the conductor that they were my friends and that I had been taken ill. They were allowed to take me off the train. Of course, the rest of their work was easy."

"But I don't see what good the little model of your boat could do any one," said Madge.

Jimmy smiled rather grimly. "It is hard to understand, I know," he agreed. "You are awfully good to let me tell you my troubles. But don't you see that the ship-building firm might, by fraud, get out a patent on my little boat and build dozens of them before I am heard from. Once they have patented my invention it would be difficult, indeed, to get it away from them. Even with the government to back me it would take years of fighting. And I don't know how long it may take me to build another model."

Eleanor felt dreadfully sorry. She did not understand the Lieutenant's explanation. But patents and inventions and any other kind of business discussion were a mystery to her.

Madge and Miss Jenny Ann tried to look very wise. Phil slipped quietly over to a far corner of the room. Lillian was half asleep.

"If you could get to Washington in time, with another model of your boat, before that wicked business firm gets out its patent on the stolen model, you might be able to prevent their securing the patent after all, Lieutenant Jimmy?" questioned Madge earnestly, bringing her brows together in a serious frown.

"Yes, if I were on the spot with the model, and the description of my beautiful little boat, I think I could make things hum for the other fellows," Jimmy agreed mournfully.

Phil came out of the dark corner that held her cherished trunk. She had a box in her arms about a foot and a half long. It looked like a huge box of candy, although it must have been very heavy from the way Phil held it.

She put the box down before Lieutenant Jimmy. "Here is the box you gave me to keep for you," she announced gravely. "I am still willing to take care of it for you, but I wished you to know I still

have it."

"Great Scott!" cried Jimmy Lawton for the second time that evening. "Do you mean you have kept this box for me through shipwreck and every other kind of disaster? What a girl you are, Miss Alden! I never meant to speak of it to you."

With shaking hands the young man opened the box. Inside the pasteboard box was a wooden one. Lieutenant Jimmy lifted out as perfect a little toy boat as ever was seen. It was complete in every detail. Lieutenant Jimmy was not ashamed of the fact that his eyes were full of tears as he looked gratefully at Phil.

"It is the exact copy of the model of the torpedo-boat destroyer that was stolen from me," he explained to the girls. "I gave it to Miss Alden to keep for me, because I feared foul play."

Jimmy hugged his tiny boat as though it were his baby. Then he replaced it carefully in its accustomed box. For a time the little party had forgotten that they were waiting to be attacked by two angry men. When Jimmy put his boat away the thought rushed over them again: if only the men would hurry on! Anything was better than this waiting.

Lillian must have been half asleep. She started from her chair with a little cry. Miss Jenny Ann touched her gently. "I thought some one knocked on the door, Miss Jenny Ann," faltered Lillian. "It frightened me. I wish we were at home. Doesn't every one of us in this little lodge to-night wish we were safely away from here?"

"Yes, Lillian," answered Miss Jones gently.

"Don't we wish that we never had seen those wicked men who held Lieutenant Lawton a prisoner?" she went on. The other girls were now gazing at Lillian as though they suspected that she had suddenly lost her mind.

"Lieutenant Lawton, wouldn't you give most anything, run nearly any chance, if you could get back to Washington in a few days?" she persisted.

Jimmy nodded, feeling sure that Lillian was less clever than her friends.

"Very well," continued Lillian, "then I, for one, vote that we follow Phil's idea, and leave this place the first thing in the morning."

"But how, child," demanded Madge impatiently. She had completely forgotten Phil's suggestion of a few evenings before.

"Why, embark on the 'Merry Maid' again, drift out to sea and trust to a ship's picking us up. The tide goes out at five. We had better go out with it. We shall starve to death if we stay here much longer. We have not even enough to eat for breakfast."

Lieutenant Lawton gazed at Phil, without making any effort to conceal his admiration for her idea.

Put to vote, every one of the little islanders voted to trust their fates once more to the "Merry Maid." They would sink or swim with her.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STARS AND STRIPES FOREVER

Through the darkness until early dawn a strange procession wended its way from the lodge in the woods to the decks of the long-deserted houseboat.

Jeff stood at the door of their house, like a faithful sentry, to warn them if danger approached. But the men who had been Jimmy's jailers must have concluded to wait until dawn before coming for their prisoner. They were so sure that he could not escape them.

All the most cherished possessions of the houseboat that had been transferred to the little lodge were now transported to the "Merry Maid" again. A few of their larger articles of furniture were left behind as a thank-offering to the little lodge for the shelter it had afforded them.

Not long before daylight seven wanderers crept down the path that had been worn by the passing of the feet of the stranded girls. They marched out into the shallow water and climbed up the side of the houseboat. Phyllis Alden brought up the rear. She was half-leading, half-pulling along the little fawn she had rescued in the woods. At the last moment Phil had not been able to make up her mind to leave her pet behind. The little creature had grown so used to her care that she was afraid it would die without her.

Madge watched Phil's struggle, her eyes dancing with amusement. At the edge of the water the deer stood stock still. Phyllis and Jimmy had to drag the animal on to the boat.

"Phyllis had a little lamb, little lamb," sang Madge derisively.

When the first rosy streak of dawn shone in the sky the "Merry Maid" was well away from land again. Again the tide bore her on its breast. But how different the time and conditions!

Soon the sun rose gloriously, the blue waters danced and sparkled. The atmosphere was clear as crystal.

The little band of voyagers watched the slowly receding shores of their isle. They threw kisses across the water. As the land faded from sight all their difficulties faded with it. The weeks on the deserted island became the jolliest lark of their lives. It took its place at the top of their list of happy memories.

No one on board the "Merry Maid" seemed to feel any fear for their adventurous voyage. The morning spelled hope and good-luck. A returning ship would bear them shoreward soon.

"Isn't the world lovely, Nellie?" asked Madge almost wistfully, as the two cousins watched the sun change from a golden ball to an all-enveloping light. "I feel that we will soon be home again and our experiences will fade from us like a dream. I wonder if Mrs. Curtis and Tom are still at Old Point Comfort? How they must have searched for us! As for Uncle and Aunt, I can't bear to think of them."

Lieutenant Jimmy, Phil, Miss Jenny Ann, Lillian and Jeff were eagerly scanning the water. If a ship should appear, it could be seen many miles off on such a gloriously bright morning.

Lieutenant Jimmy had the precious rifle in his hand. In his pocket were their last few rounds of ammunition. Lieutenant Lawton's face was as radiant as though he were aboard one of Uncle Sam's own battleships. He was free! The blue waters rolled beneath his feet. What did it matter to a sailor the kind of a ship he sailed?

Phyllis Alden stood next to him. Her black eyes were bright with courage and enthusiasm.

Together they saw first a great, gray cloud of smoke. It was too dark and too low to be a part of the sky on such a morning. Then, moving slowly toward them, still many miles away, appeared the dim outline of a magnificent gray bulk of a ship.

Jimmy Lawton's face, which was white and thin from its long imprisonment, flushed deeply. His voice shook when he turned to Phil.

"Miss Alden," he whispered quietly, "I am afraid to say so, but I believe I see a man-of-war coming this way. It must be going in to Hampton Roads. If it only comes near enough to hear us, I mean to fire a signal of distress with this rifle."

The next quarter of an hour was a strenuous one for every passenger on board the "Merry Maid."

Slowly the majestic, gray craft drew nearer to the little houseboat.

The party crowded forward. No one spoke.

Nailed to their flagstaff, two torn and ragged sheets that had so long appealed in vain for rescue flapped and rustled in the wind.

The women and Jeff saw Lieutenant Lawton raise the rifle to position. Still he waited five, ten minutes. All this time the beautiful battleship steamed nearer. Now her prow was just across the line of the stern of the houseboat. The houseboat party could see the Stars and Stripes floating gloriously in the breeze.

While it was easy for the passengers of the "Merry Maid" to behold an immense battleship it was another matter for the crew on the man-of-war to discover the small pleasure craft adrift on the waters.

Jimmy Lawton fired his rifle. The signal of distress rang sharp and true. The clear air carried the sound magnificently.

At first there was no response from the battleship.

"She has not heard us!" exclaimed impatient Madge in despair.

"Wait!" commanded the young lieutenant.

A splendid boom broke on the air. It was the answering salute from the war vessel. She had heeded the call of the "Merry Maid."

Jimmy repeated his signal of distress. A few moments after the great battleship slowed down. A small boat was dropped over her side. A boat's crew in their blue uniforms rowed swiftly out to the houseboat.

A voice called up: "Who's there, and what can we do for you?"

"Lieutenant James M. Lawton, U.S.N., with six friends, five of them women," returned Jimmy Lawton. "We have drifted from land in a houseboat and ask you to take us aboard."

Soon after Miss Jenny Ann and the girls were safe on board a battleship belonging to the American Navy. The officer in command gave them his hand of welcome. A group of sailors, their faces beaming with curiosity and kindness, crowded as near them as discipline would permit.

The man-of-war took on headway again. Her engines thumped. The superb ship began to move. The houseboat party knew that their peril was over. Home and friends lay safe ahead of them.

Yet neither Miss Jenny Ann nor one of her four girls looked perfectly happy.

"Won't you let me show you to your cabins?" one of the officers suggested.

Reluctantly the five women turned away. But they could not help letting their glances linger with mournful affection on the departing ghost of the poor "Merry Maid." The little boat rocked forlornly on the waves, once more deserted by her friends and owners.

Lieutenant Lawton whispered to Madge and Phyllis: "As soon as we get into Hampton Roads I promise you to send out a schooner to search these waters until she finds your houseboat. The 'Merry Maid' will be lonely without her passengers, I've no doubt. But I do not believe that any harm will come to her."

The man-of-war was expected to enter the harbor of Hampton Roads some time during the afternoon. The girls sat on deck with the captain, who showed them the distant lightship on Cape Charles, and finally the point of land along the Virginia coast where the first English settlers landed in America, on April 26, 1607.

Captain Moore was tremendously interested in the girls and their adventures and experiences. When the ramparts of Fortress Monroe lay off the quarter he reluctantly said good-bye. But he beckoned Madge away from the other chums and walked with her slowly to the prow of his great ship.

"Miss Morton," he said kindly, "I want to talk to you alone. Your chaperon has told me something of your history. Your father was a classmate of mine at Annapolis, and one of the best friends I ever had."

Madge choked and was silent. She did not know what to say, what questions to ask.

"I know that in after years your father got into serious trouble. He was court-martialed because of cruelty to a subordinate," Captain Moore went on. He shook his head gravely. "I never understood it. Robert Morton was one of the kindest and tenderest of men. He was rash and quick-tempered, but he never did a cruel trick as a boy, and a lad shows the stuff the man is made of."

"Captain Moore!" Madge's voice shook, she was obliged to keep a tight hold on the railing of the ship to steady herself, but she looked her new friend squarely in the face, her own white with pain, "do you know if my father is alive?"

Captain Moore was startled. "It can't be that you don't know that, child?" he protested.



The Battleship Drew Nearer.

"But I don't," she said bravely. "I have always just taken it for granted that he died when I was a baby, because I never saw him nor heard from him. Lately I have had reason to think that he may just have disappeared after his trouble. It has been so long that perhaps he may have died since."

Captain Moore took her hand in his. He looked at her earnestly. She was like the boy he remembered in the olden days, the same deep-toned auburn hair, the same clear blue eyes and skin that flushed and paled so readily, the same proud spirit.

"I do not know whether your father is dead or alive, child. I, too, took it for granted that he was out of the world, as we saw him no more. But I want to promise you one thing. From now on I will look for him whether I am on land or on sea. Some day, somewhere, I shall hear news of him. I wish you to remember that if ever you need a friend, you have only to let me know. I am ashamed to think that I have let this strange freak of circumstance find Robert Morton's daughter for me. I should have looked you up years ago. Do you know what a fellow's chum means to him when he is a boy at school?" Captain Moore queried, less seriously. "Don't you think a man ought to wish to do something for that fellow's little girl?"

Madge smiled. She knew that men hated tears. "Perhaps I shall ask you to help me some day," she said. "I thank you for your interest and for the splendid things you have said of my father. It is good to know that some of his brother officers believe in him, and because you have had faith in him I will tell you this much: my father was not guilty of the charges laid at his door. In being true to his own code of honor he lost his good name. There is only one person in the world who can give it back to him, and because I respect my father's wishes my lips are also sealed. But, alive or dead, Captain Robert Morton was or is innocent."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SURPRISE

Up and down, up and down the old wharf, with his eyes turned ever toward the sea, a young man walked. His face was tanned, but it had a haggard look under the sun-burn. Tom Curtis, alone among all the friends and relatives, believed that news might yet be heard of the lost girls. That day he had crossed over to Portsmouth to receive the report from a boat that had been specially sent out with a dredging machine to drag the bottom of the bay near the spot where the houseboat had been anchored. The report received was—no news! No news was good news—from such a source.

The houseboat party had hardly realized the tremendous anxiety and excitement that their mysterious disappearance off the face of the waters had caused. Mr. and Mrs. Butler had come from their home to devote every hour of the day and night to searching for the lost girls. Mr. and Mrs. Seldon had only gone back to Philadelphia the day before, as Tom had promised to telegraph them the moment that any news was received. Dr. Alden had left his patients to take care of themselves while he endeavored to trace the whereabouts of his beloved Phil. Even Miss Matilda Tolliver, principal and proprietor of the Select Seminary for Girls at Harborpoint, Maryland, had departed from her school for the space of forty-eight hours to make the proper personal investigations for her four lost pupils and her teacher. Until she appeared on the scene herself, she felt sure no really intelligent effort had been made to find them.

Mrs. Curtis was still at Old Point Comfort with Tom. Madeleine had gone back to New York. Mrs. Curtis felt herself to be responsible for the whole disaster of the lost houseboat. If she had not invited the girls to anchor in such dangerous waters, their boat would never have torn loose from its moorings.

Tom was idling on the dock, simply because there was nothing else to do, no place to go, except to return to his mother with the report from the dredging crew. He took no special interest in the slow approach of another great battleship from the waters of Hampton Roads. Although it was usually good fun to watch the sailors come ashore after they had been away on a long cruise, to-day nothing was worth while. His thoughts were on the lost girls.

Just before the boat got in he concluded that he was bored with fooling around the wharf; he would take a walk through the town. He turned his back on his friends and deliberately strolled away from the water.

Once Tom Curtis did turn his head. He had heard an unusual stir behind him. The sailors, who

were lined up preparatory to going ashore, had given the houseboat party a rousing cheer as they left the ship. But even with this chance for discovering his friends, Tom was blind. The crowd hid the little party of women from view, and Tom strode on faster than ever up the river bank toward one of the narrow streets of the town.

"O Miss Jenny Ann!" pleaded Madge as soon as her feet touched land, "I saw Tom Curtis leave the pier just a second ago. He can't be very far away. Won't you let me run after him? I will find him and bring him back in a minute."

Without waiting to hear her chaperon's reply Madge darted up the street at full speed.

Run as hard as she would, Madge could not catch up with Tom. Every time she arrived at one end of a street Tom was about in the act of crossing over to the next one. She could keep him in sight, but she could not reach him. She forgot that Miss Jenny Ann and the rest of her party were waiting for her, and that she really ought to have given up her chase, remembered nothing but the fact that she must see Tom. As she plunged recklessly across a side street, an automobile whirled into it.

At the opposite end of the square Tom Curtis's attention was arrested sharply. He heard the shrill, harsh protest from an automobile horn, then a cry of terror from a girl's throat. Her cry was taken up by half a dozen voices. There was no need to ask questions. He knew what had happened. An automobile had run down a young girl.

It took but a minute for Tom to run back the entire length of the block. But before he got to the spot where the accident had occurred a crowd had risen up as though by magic. It was impossible to see at once who had been hurt. Tom pushed his way through the outer fringe of the crowd. There was a woman in tears, offering her bottle of smelling salts to a girl. A flushed man was bending over the same girl, entreating her forgiveness. A fat policeman was demanding everybody's name.

Tom heard the girl say: "I am not hurt a bit, thank you. I was frightened; that was why I screamed. The front of your car just grazed me, but you stopped it in time. No, policeman, I don't wish to have anybody arrested. Please let me go. I was trying to catch up with a friend. He will be out of sight if I don't hurry."

And it was thus that Tom beheld Madge, whom, a minute before, in his gloomy reverie, he had given up for lost!

"O Tom!" she cried joyously as he hurried toward her, "I did make you look around, after all. We were not drowned. Aren't you glad to see me?"

Tom held Madge's small brown hands in his. "Madge!" was all he found words for.

Tom Curtis was not ashamed of the tears in his eyes as he looked at Madge. The first moment he had feared that she was an apparition that might vanish while he gazed upon it.

"I'm real, Tom; please don't look at me like that," faltered Madge, feeling her own eyes fill with tears. "We have been lost on a desert island, and a battleship brought us home to-day. Why did you run away from me when I tried so hard to catch up with you? I am sure it does not become a young woman to go dashing through the streets after a man who won't even glance back her way."

Madge spoke in this flippant fashion to hide the real emotion she felt in seeing her friend again.

"But, Tom, we must hurry back to the wharf. Miss Jenny Ann and the girls promised to wait on the dock for me until I brought you back. I am afraid they will think I have been gone an awfully long time. Let's go at once."

Madge was amazed to discover how far she had followed Tom when they turned back. She tried to make Tom understand the story as they hurried along. But Tom simply couldn't take in all the facts. He knew that Madge and the houseboat party were alive and well, and, for the time being, this was news enough.

It took them nearly twenty minutes to get back to the spot where Madge had told Miss Jenny Ann to wait for her. When they reached the end of the pier there was no chaperon, no Lieutenant Lawton, no Jeff! The place was almost entirely deserted. Madge's chase through the street, her automobile accident, her conversation with Tom, and their return had occupied nearly three-quarters of an hour.

When first they came ashore, Phil, Lillian and Eleanor had waited patiently for the return of their companion. Five minutes passed, then ten, soon fifteen. The girls were thinking of their fathers and mothers and the telegrams that should be sent.

At last Phil turned to Lieutenant Lawton. "Lieutenant Jimmy, won't you take me to the nearest telegraph station?" she demanded. "I am sorry not to wait for Madge and Tom, but I must telegraph to my father."

Lillian and Eleanor were in the same state of mind. They also went along with Lieutenant Lawton. It was arranged that Miss Jenny Ann and Jeff should wait for the truant. They would then bring Madge and Tom to the hotel at Portsmouth where they arranged to have dinner.

Miss Jones and Jeff lingered in the same place for half an hour. Miss Jenny Ann then concluded to walk up the river bank to the square to inquire if an accident had happened to the run-away. She must have been in the square when Madge and Tom passed without seeing her. A few minutes later Miss Jenny Ann concluded to go on up to the hotel, where the other girls were expecting her. She thought that Tom and Madge must have met the rest of the party and gone on to the hotel with them. She would find them there.

Tom and Madge searched everywhere along the wharf. They stopped half a dozen people to inquire for a party of four women and two men. No one had seen any such group.

"Does everyone in the houseboat crowd look as well as you do?" asked Tom, as they hurried along the street. "If they do, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Here we have been grieving ourselves to death, believing you were lost, and you have been having the jolliest kind of a lark on a little Robinson Crusoe island. You watch me go duck shooting there some day."

But after half an hour of vain inquiry for her friends Madge grew impatient.

"I don't see why the girls didn't wait for me. They went away without letting me know where they were going," she scolded. "Won't you please take me to your mother, Tom? I suppose Miss Jenny Ann will come to Old Point some time to-night."

There had been no plan made, before Madge went away, for spending the night in Portsmouth.

Tom was only too happy to be the little captain's escort. He liked to think of his mother's joy at seeing her. They had a jolly supper on the big, comfortable steamer that travels between Portsmouth and Fortress Monroe, arriving at Old Point a little after dusk.

The streets were almost deserted. It was cool enough for fires, and there was little lingering outdoors. Madge sat down on a bench in a small park, while Tom went to the nearest drug-store to telephone to his mother. He thought it wise to break the news of the discovery of the houseboat party by degrees. Also he wished to know if his mother had yet heard from Miss Jenny Ann and knew where she was.

Madge felt a grateful sense of happiness steal over her as she waited for Tom's return. It was, indeed, pleasant to be with her old friends who cared so much for her. To-day Fortress Monroe did not frown down upon the little home-comer from its stern battlements. The old fort seemed to offer her protection against her enemies.

A few soldiers on leave of absence from their barracks passed her in groups of twos and threes. But no one else appeared for several minutes. Tom was taking some time with his telephoning.

Finally an old man and a young girl came down the street in Madge's direction. The old man leaned heavily on the girl's arm. In the half light she could see that they were talking very earnestly and not looking about them. When they were close to her Madge Morton discovered them to be Flora Harris and her grandfather, Admiral Gifford.

Madge turned away her head. She hoped that she would not be observed. A few minutes before she had been so happy and so content. Why should the first person she saw at Old Point Comfort be the only person in the world who would take some of the pleasure away from her home-coming?

If only they would pass without seeing her! It was almost dark, and she was not even supposed to be in the land of the living, so she sat absolutely still, hardly daring to breathe.

Neither the old admiral, whose eyes were dimmed with age, nor his grand-daughter, saw the little figure on the bench as they walked toward it. They passed close by her. Some unseen force must have made Flora Harris turn her head as she came directly opposite Madge.

Flora gave one terrified scream, then began shaking as though with a chill.

"What is it, Flora?" her grandfather demanded. "Are you ill?"

Flora pointed a trembling finger at the other girl.

The old gentleman turned in confusion to glance at Madge. He saw only a young girl sitting quietly on a bench. He could not connect her with Flora's unexpected outcry. The admiral was

not familiar with Madge's appearance. He had seen her only a few times, and he had not remembered her face.

Flora was now crying bitterly. She did not cease to stare at Madge, yet she did not speak.

The little captain sprang to her feet. "Don't be frightened, Miss Harris," she said quietly. "I am sorry I startled you. I hope you don't take me for a ghost. We have been shipwrecked for several weeks and only got in this afternoon——"

"Then I haven't murdered you!" Flora sobbed, running forward and flinging her arms about the other girl's neck. "I know that I am hateful and snobbish, and that I like to make other people uncomfortable, but I didn't mean any real harm to come to the houseboat when I asked Alfred Thornton to cut her loose from her moorings. I just wanted you not to come back here again. And I have not let Alfred Thornton confess that he cut your boat away from the anchor, because I was afraid we would both be put in jail."

Tom Curtis had come upon the little scene and stood listening in silence to Flora's surprising confession. He put his arm through Madge's and drew her quietly away from Flora's embrace. "It is too late to confess this dreadful story to-night, Miss Harris," he declared coolly. "Miss Morton has just arrived, and I am taking her to my mother. Her friends are spending the night at Portsmouth. My mother has just told me they have telegraphed her that they will be here tomorrow. If you will come to see us in the morning we can talk matters over more quietly; the street is not the place for this discussion."

Flora bowed humbly to Tom's verdict. "I'll come at eleven," she answered. The girl seemed so happy to know that the girls had not been drowned that she did not seem to care what punishment or disgrace might be in store for her.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TELLING OF THE SECRET

"Must we see Flora Harris and her grandfather, Tom?" asked Madge the next morning. "We are having such a jolly time together. They will spoil everything."

The little captain was standing with her arm about Mrs. Curtis, her curly head close to her friend's beautiful white one. The room was filled with the re-united houseboat party, Miss Jenny Ann, Lillian, Phil and Eleanor, also Lieutenant Jimmy Lawton and his shadow, Jeff, the deaf and dumb boy. A little table in the center of the sitting room was piled with happy telegrams from fathers, mothers, sisters, cousins and aunts. The news that the houseboat party was really safe had spread everywhere.

"I think we had better let them come in and have it over with," Tom replied to Madge's questioning. "An act such as Flora Harris confessed ought not to go unpunished." Tom spoke like a man. Even his mother accepted his judgment without hesitation.

When Flora entered the room, her hand in her grandfather's, she was pale but self-possessed. She told almost exactly the same story that she had revealed to Tom and Madge the evening before. Flora brought with her a telegram from Alfred Thornton, confessing his part in the houseboat crime. He made no reference to Lieutenant Lawton. Indeed, Alfred Thornton did not know that the young officer was at Fortress Monroe.

When Flora finished there was an absolute silence in the room. What was there to be said? The five girls looked at Miss Jenny Ann, who appealed to Mrs. Curtis.

"I am willing to make any reparation I can," added Flora. "You can do anything you like to me, I'm so glad you are safe."

Still no one spoke.

"Grandfather?" Flora turned appealingly to the old admiral, who seemed white and shaken. He was plainly suffering more than was his granddaughter. The young people were quiet for his sake. "Won't you let me tell Miss Morton what you told father and me. I think you and I both owe it to her."

The old man bowed his head. "You tell them, child; I can't," he said.

Flora grew very white, but her voice never faltered.

"Madge Morton," she began, "you remember that one night before a group of Mrs. Curtis's friends I insulted the memory of your father. I told you that he had been disgraced and turned out of the Navy, and you asked me my grandfather's name, and said you could not speak against him. I did not in the least understand what you meant, but I knew that you were deeply in earnest and I felt afraid of you.

"Afterward, when I went home, my grandfather learned of what I had said to you. At first he was very angry. He said that I had no right to revive an old trouble. Later on he confessed to my father and to me that your father was dismissed from the Navy for doing an act that my grandfather, as his superior officer, had commanded him to do." Flora looked at the old admiral.

"Go on," he remarked quietly.

"You see," Flora explained, "by the code of the Navy, Captain Morton felt that he could not accuse his superior officer. He bore the disgrace and went away, disappearing soon afterward. If your father had not disappeared, my grandfather would not have continued to let Captain Morton suffer for his superior's fault. But later he heard that your father was dead, so he lost the courage to bring up the old story and clear your father's name.

"Then"—for the first time Flora faltered—"I tried to disgrace you by bringing up the past, and I am punished for it instead of you. Grandfather now says he is willing to take the blame of your father's disgrace upon himself and confess everything to the naval authorities. Whether your father is alive or dead, he will clear his name and yours."

The tears of age were streaming down the old man's face. He was seventy-five years old and had already been retired from the Navy.

There was a brief instant of hesitation on Madge's part, then she marched straight to Admiral Gifford and took his hand.

"Thank you," she simply said to him and to Flora. "It is wonderful for you to tell this, after all these years, for my father's and my sake. I can see why you never told of your command to my father when he disappeared and you believed that no one would be hurt by your silence. Admiral Gifford, in these last few weeks since I have been here near Fortress Monroe I have come to know what an officer's reputation means to him. If my father is dead, I shall ask you never to tell what you have just told us, but, if he is alive and we find him, Admiral Gifford, you will have to do as your conscience dictates. On the night when Miss Harris denounced my father I declared that I could retaliate. I knew at that time what you have just told me. A few days before we came to Old Point I was going through my mother's trunk. In a secret compartment of her jewel box I found a letter in my father's handwriting addressed to her, and a little black log book. The book told the story of my father's dark hour, the letter to my mother was the out-pouring of his tortured heart. Through it I learned the name of the man whose reputation he saved at the cost of his own honor. I made a vow, then, that I would find this man and force him to clear my father's name, but when I learned on that bitter night that it was an old man, who had been considered worthy of an admiralship, I weakened. I felt that my father would not wish such retaliation even to bring back his good name. That was my secret. I am glad I did not tell. Now everything has worked out beautifully. Oh, yes, there is just one thing more. We will never tell just how the houseboat happened to break away from her moorings."

"Right you are, Little Captain," said Phyllis, saluting.

The others echoed Phyllis's sentiments. Flora Harris was deeply touched; as for her grandfather, he placed his hands on Madge's shoulders and, looking down into her eyes of true blue, kissed the loyal little captain almost reverently on her white forehead.

"God bless you, my dear," he said solemnly. "You are Robert Morton's own daughter."

After Flora and her grandfather had gone the girls spent the time until luncheon relating their further island adventures to Mrs. Curtis and Tom. It had been decided that they take the train for Miss Tolliver's the following afternoon, and after remaining to luncheon with the Curtises they were to go down to the wharf to find out whether their houseboat had been picked up and towed to a landing near them.

When they reached the dock at a little after two o'clock it was to find the "Merry Maid" bobbing listlessly at the end of a strong rope cable. Tom Curtis had sent out a swift sea-going launch which had sighted her and picked her up within a few hours after it had started out.

"Hurrah for the 'Merry Maid!'" sang out Madge. "You can't lose her."

"Hurrah for the little captain!" cried Phyllis. "We can't get along without her."

"Hurrah for a hard afternoon's work," reminded Lillian. "Fall to, my hearties."

"Aye, aye, sir," sounded the chorus, and the crew of the "Merry Maid" "fell to."

"Miss Phyllis Alden, Miss Madge Morton, Miss Lillian Seldon and Miss Eleanor Butler, there is an express package downstairs for you as big as I don't know what!" announced the little maid at Miss Tolliver's Select Seminary for Girls in breathless excitement. "I saw it marked quite plain underneath your name. 'For the Captain and Mates of the "Merry Maid.'""

The little maid ran down the steps as quickly as she had traveled up.

"It is study hour and we are not supposed to leave our rooms. Do you think we dare go down to the library?" inquired the obedient Eleanor.

But the other three girls were already disappearing from the room and were making for the library.

Just outside the library door Phil paused. "I'll go and find Miss Tolliver," she said.

"Do come and see us open a big box that has just come for us, Miss Tolliver," she begged a moment later, happening to meet the principal in the hall. Nellie had already run off to find Miss Jenny Ann.

The express package was long and quite narrow, and Miss Tolliver insisted that a sheet be spread out to protect the library floor. Joseph, the houseman, was sent for to open the box. He hammered and pried out a dozen or more nails. Inside the wooden box was a pasteboard one of exactly the same shape. Phyllis lifted the lid and gave a sharp cry. She and Miss Matilda Tolliver were standing nearest to the box. Miss Tolliver repeated Phil's cry in shriller and more terrified tones. "Be calm, girls, be calm," she commanded the next moment as she dropped into a chair. "Joseph, go for the police. Some one has sent us a bomb to blow up the school."

Madge could not help peeping over into the box. Phyllis was shaking with laughter. She had seen a white card sticking out of the funnel of an odd boat-shaped box. The card bore the name of Lieutenant James Mandeville Lawton.

"It isn't a bomb, Miss Matilda, it is only a pasteboard model of our friend Lieutenant Jimmy Lawton's torpedo-boat destroyer. Lieutenant Lawton promised to let us hear if he were successful in preventing some people from stealing the patent on his boat. He has just taken this way to let us know he has won. It's awfully jolly!" explained Phil. "I am so glad he remembered us."

She picked up the miniature torpedo-boat destroyer and a shower of bonbons fell to the floor.

Every one laughed, including Miss Matilda Tolliver.

In the top of the box were two flags. One was a little silk flag of the United States Navy. The other one was in blue and white. On it was inscribed: "Long Life to the 'Merry Maid' and Her Merry Maidens."

Madge waved the blue flag triumphantly over her head. "Them's my sentiments!" she announced. "Aren't we glad that our little houseboat was found unharmed? Sure and she is only waiting for us to take her into new waters."

"It won't be very long till next summer," comforted Phil.

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