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**Title:** Madge Morton's Trust

**Author:** Amy D. V. Chalmers

**Release Date:** March 21, 2010 [EBook #31719]

**Language:** English

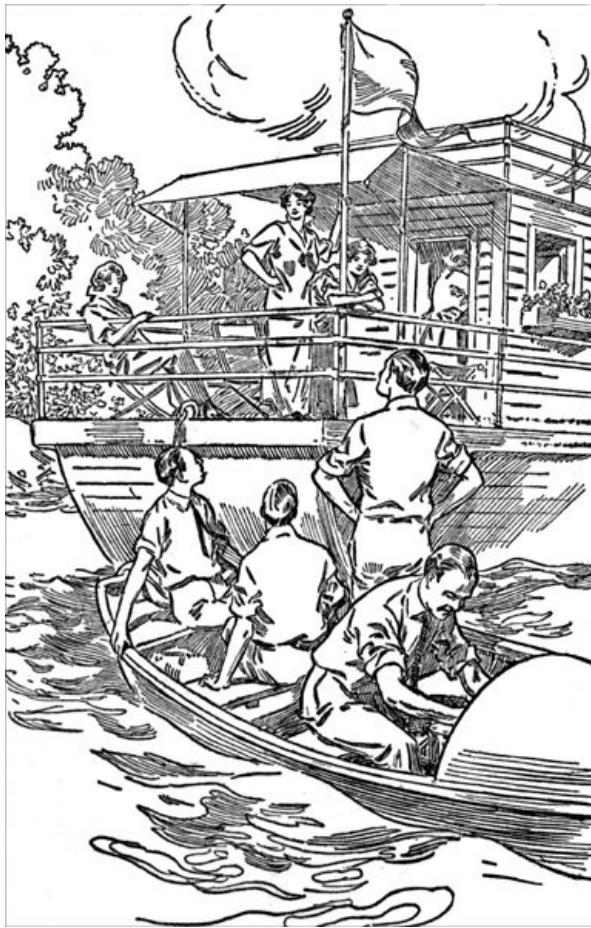
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## Madge Morton's Trust





The "Sea Gull" and the "Merry Maid" Began their Voyage.  
*Frontispiece.*

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# Madge Morton's Trust

By

AMY D. V. CHALMERS

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

P H I L A D E L P H I A  
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## Madge Morton's Trust

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### CHAPTER I

#### A LATE ARRIVAL

**I**T was a particularly hot day in early July. A girl came out on the back porch of an old-fashioned New England house and dropped into a hammock. She looked tired, but her big black eyes were eager with interest.

She held a fat letter in her hand which contained many pages. At the top of the letter was a pen-and-ink drawing of a miniature houseboat with five girls running about on the deck, their hair blowing, their skirts awry. One of them held a broom in her hand; she was the domestic Eleanor! Another waved a frying pan; Miss Jenny Ann Jones, Chief Cook and Chaperon! The third girl was drying her long, blonde hair in the sun; Miss Lillian Seldon, the beauty of the houseboat party!

The girl in the hammock recognized herself: she was feeding a weird-looking animal on four legs with a spoon. And standing among the others, apparently talking as fast as she possibly could, and doing no work of any kind, was a young woman whom the artist had carefully labeled "Madge."

Phyllis Alden laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks. She could not recall having laughed in two months, and she was sure she would keep on giggling as long as she read her letter.

"Miss Alden"—a woman in the uniform of a professional nurse appeared at the door—"your mother says do you know where the twins are? She is restless about them. I promised her I would come to you. I am sorry to disturb you; I know you are tired."

"Not a bit of it, Miss Brazier," insisted Phil stoutly. "Those dreadful babies! I had forgotten I had not seen them in the last half hour. Of course, they are in mischief. I will look for them right away."

[9] Phil thrust her precious letter into her blouse. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and her letter from her chum had arrived in the morning post. These were busy days for Phyllis Alden. Early in May she had been called home from school by the illness of her mother. Since that time the care of her father's house and looking after the irrepressible twins had been Phyllis's work. Her mother was better now, on the sure road to convalescence, and Phil had begun to confess to herself that she was tired.

At one side of the house there was a rain-barrel. It was strictly forbidden territory, so Phil knew at once where to look for the twins. Hanging over the edge of the barrel were two fat little girls with tight black curls. They were bent double and were fishing for queer, bobbing things that floated on the surface of the rainwater. A firm hand caught Daisy by one leg. Dot, terrified by her big sister's sudden appearance, tumbled into the barrel with a gasp and a splash.

Phil felt half-vexed; still, she was obliged to laugh at the little ones, they looked so utterly roguish.

"Frog in the middle, can't get out," she teased the small girl in the center of the barrel. Then she fished Dot out and started with both little maids for the house to make them presentable before dinner. Phyllis knew that they must both be washed and dressed before she would have another chance to peep at her precious letter. Still, it comforted her to think how amused her Madge would be by her funny little four-year-old twin sisters and their mischievous ways.

[10] It was just before dinner time when Phyllis firmly locked her bedroom door and took her precious letter from her blouse. She would read it now, or die in the effort. It began:

"DEAR OLD PHIL:

"I am not writing you from 'Forest House,' but from no other place than the famous old city of Boston, Massachusetts. I came here the other day because I believed I would find news of my father, but I was disappointed and am going back home in a few days.

"But I don't want to write about myself; I want to write about you, dear old Phil! I am so glad your mother is better. When she is quite well, can't you come to visit Nellie and me at 'Forest House'? We have missed you so. The Commencement exercises at Miss Tolliver's were no fun at all this year. When Miss Matilda got up and announced that Miss Phyllis Alden had been called home before the final spring examination because of the illness of her mother, and would, therefore, be passed on to the senior class of her preparatory school on account of her high standing in her classes, I cheered for all I was worth, and so did every one else.

[11] "Ah, Phil, dear, it has been ages since last I saw you! I would give all my curls, and my hair really makes a long braid nowadays, if I could only see you. How I wish we could spend the rest of this summer on our beautiful houseboat! The poor little 'Merry Maid'! How lonely she must be without us. Tom Curtis and Jack Bolling wrote and asked me to let them tow us up the Rappahannock River this summer. They are going on a motor trip. But, alas and alack! we haven't any money to pay our expenses, so I fear there will be no houseboat party this summer. It's dreadfully sad, but, more than anything else, I regret not seeing you, Phil. With my dearest love. Write soon. Your devoted

MADGE."

Phyllis finished her letter with a warm feeling around her heart but a sigh on her lips. No "Merry Maid" this summer! Well, Phyllis had not expected it, yet it seemed cruel to think of the four girls and Miss Jones being separated for another year from their "Ship of Dreams," where they had spent two wonderful holidays.

The story of how Madge Morton, Phyllis Alden, Lillian Seldon and Eleanor Butler came into possession of a houseboat is fully set forth in the first volume of this series, entitled "MADGE MORTON, CAPTAIN OF THE 'MERRY MAID.'" The happy summer spent by the four young women on board the "Merry Maid," chaperoned by Miss Jenny Ann Jones, one of the teachers in the boarding school which they attended, was one long to be remembered.

[12] While anchored in a quiet bit of water, a part of the great Chesapeake Bay, they made many friends, chief among whom were Mrs. Curtis, a wealthy widow, and her son Tom. Mrs. Curtis's instant liking for Madge, her subsequent offer to adopt her, and the remarkable manner in which Madge and Phyllis were instrumental in discovering their friend's own daughter, who had been lost at sea years before, in a poor fisher girl whom they rescued from her cruel foster father, formed a lively narrative.

"MADGE MORTON'S SECRET" told of the girls' second sojourn on their houseboat, which was anchored near Old Point Comfort. There the girls saw much of the social life of the Army and Navy, and it was while there that Madge incurred the enmity of a young woman named Flora Harris, who made the little captain's life very unpleasant for a time.

The mysterious cutting of the "Merry Maid's" cable on a stormy night, the voyaging of the little boat out into the bay, and the island shore to which she drifted in the gray dawn, and how, after living the life of young Crusoes for many weeks, they were rescued and returned to their sorrowing friends, made absorbing reading for those interested in following the fortunes of Madge Morton.

[13] But to go back to the subject of Phyllis Alden: She and her father, Dr. Alden, were firm friends. Every evening since her mother's illness they had taken a walk together after the twins were safely tucked in bed. It was a pleasure to which they both looked forward all day. To-night they were late in getting away from the house, and, as they strolled along through the quiet streets, Phyllis was unusually silent. She had told her father of Madge's letter, but she had not mentioned her invitation to visit Madge and Nellie at their home in Virginia. Phil did not think she could be spared from home and did not wish to worry her father. Yet all the time that Phil was so silent Dr. Alden was wondering where he could send Phyllis to spend a well-earned holiday. He did not have much money to spare, but his beloved daughter must somehow be given a rest.

Phyllis and her father were almost home again when the girl thought she heard some one running behind them. She turned with apprehensive suddenness. The night was dark and the streets were narrow; only at the corners the electric lamps made bright, open spaces. Under one of these lights Phyllis looked back fearfully. She could barely discern a figure. It was walking close to the fence and seemed to be carrying something. Phil could not discover what it was, and Dr. Alden, who was slightly deaf, heard nothing.

[14] Suddenly a watchdog set up a furious barking and rushed out into the street. Phil felt more secure. If any one were lurking in the shadow with the thought of attacking her father, the dog would surely come to their rescue. Yet now she could hear six feet pattering after them instead of two. The dog must have been won over by their enemy.

"Father"—Phil put her hand nervously on her father's arm; she was not herself to-night; she was tired and full of unexpressed longings for her friends—"wait!" Phil ended her sentence abruptly. Some one distinctly called her name, "Phil!" it echoed down the empty street.

Dr. Alden and his daughter both turned. Yet it was impossible to see any great distance beyond them. They were in the light, while the shadows down the sidewalk were densely black. Some one was coming toward them, though it was difficult to know if it were a man or a woman.

Straight into Phil's arms whirled a breathless girl, her hat on one side, her curly hair tumbling down and her eyes as bright as the fireflies that flickered through the dark streets. The girl carried a heavy suit case, and a large dog walked protectingly at her side.

It was Madge Morton. She had arrived alone and unannounced in the city of Hartford at a perfectly incredible hour of the night!

[15] Dr. Alden was overcome with surprise. He had heard Phil give a cry of rapture, saw a suit case drop to the ground, then two girls meet in a joyful embrace.

"I might have known you would come when I needed you most, Madge," cried Phil rapturously. Phil was not really surprised by her chum's appearance. She knew that the most astonishing things in the world were just the things that Madge Morton would do as though they were the most natural.

"Is your mother better?" whispered Madge. "For goodness' sake, Phil, dear girl, let me tell your father who I am and how I happened to appear at this unearthly hour." Madge put her hand into the doctor's. "Please forgive me, Dr. Alden," she began. "I wrote Phil I was in Boston and about to start for home. I was on the way to the depot to buy my ticket when suddenly I remembered that I wasn't so far from dear Phil. I have been wanting to see her so dreadfully. So I just telegraphed Uncle and Aunt that I was going to stop over in Hartford a few hours.

[16] "Of course, we had a wreck on the train, so here I am, only six hours late. When I came in at the station to-night I just inquired what car I should take to bring me to your address. And wasn't it funny? I saw you and Phil cross the street at the corner, so I jumped off the car and ran after you. I thought this old dog was going to eat me up, but the dear old fellow has adopted me instead."

Madge patted the strange dog affectionately with her left hand. Phil had never let go of her right one.

"I hope you will forgive my dropping in on you like this. I am ashamed of myself, but I just had to have a look at Phil."

"You've dropped from heaven! You are an angel unawares, Madge Morton," vowed practical Phil Alden in devout tones. "I was never so glad to see anybody in my life. Now, if you leave me to-morrow, I shall surely die."

Madge laughed happily. How good it seemed to be with dear old Phil once more. Dr. Alden picked up her suit case and looked at her with earnest, kindly eyes.

"Daughter," he said kindly, "I am almost as pleased to see you as Phil is. Come home with us. You must be worn out from your journey."

For the first time Madge realized that she was a little tired and that she had been a little

frightened at arriving alone in a strange city at night. But then she was with Phil.

[17]

## CHAPTER II

### THE DOCTOR'S SUGGESTION

**M**ADGE fitted marvelously into Dr. Alden's troubled household. She read to Mrs. Alden when the nurse was away, cheered her with funny stories and really helped her to grow well and strong.

As for the twins, Dot and Daisy, they were never absent from the little captain's side, except when Phil positively commanded it. Madge used to take long walks with one of them clinging to either side of her skirt. Where she found her patience when they tumbled down, lagged behind and begged for more fairy tales every minute was a marvel. But Madge had been shocked at her beloved Phil's careworn appearance and came gallantly to her rescue. She might have little consideration for strangers, she could do wonders for the people she loved and one long look into her friend's tired face made her resolve to do her best for Phil.

[18]

The next morning after Madge's unceremonious arrival Dr. Alden wrote a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Butler, asking them to allow Madge to make Phyllis a visit. Madge also wrote a note, but it was not in the nature of a request. Instead, she dashed off the following letter to her Virginia relatives:

"DEAREST AUNT AND UNCLE:

"Don't worry about me. I am at Phil's and having the best kind of a time. I am going to stay with her for a few days, as she needs me. Do I hear any dissenting voices? I hope not! Tell Nellie we miss her terribly. With lots of love to all of you. Don't bother to write. I'll take the will for the deed.

"Lovingly,  
"MADGE."

"There," declared Madge as she skipped up the steps after handing her letter to the postman, "that will stifle all Virginia objections. Now, I am going to enjoy myself while I am with dear Phil."

In the days that followed Madge's declaration she helped Phil keep house with a will. Dr. Alden used to call her "The Second Daughter," and Madge derived untold pleasure from the drives she took with him over the country roads to see his patients.

[19]

One afternoon, however, as they jogged along toward the home of a patient who lived several miles from town, Madge was unusually silent. Though the air was sweet with the perfume of honeysuckle, and their road ran through a particularly beautiful bit of country, she was dreamy and abstracted.

From time to time Dr. Alden gazed at her humorously. His fellow-passenger was in a deep reverie and had forgotten his presence.

"Thinking of your houseboat, eh, Madge?" he inquired.

"Yes, Doctor Man," answered Madge quickly, "of the houseboat and Phil." She sat very straight in the buggy, and, drawing her level brows into a frown, said slowly: "I was saying over to myself that when five nice, capable young women wish a very special thing very much they ought to be able to obtain it. You see, we wish to spend the beginning of the summer on the houseboat. It would be splendid for Phil. But we haven't the money, so I am trying to find out how to get it."

The physician's eyes twinkled. "That is not a new occupation, Madge. Most of us spend our time in trying to get hold of that same mighty dollar. But we have to work for it as well as to think about it. I wonder if you girls wish the holiday on your boat badly enough to work for it? If only I could give you the money!"

[20]

Madge looked earnestly at the doctor, then said slowly: "That's just it. Of course, we are willing to work for the money. But I must find out what we can do in a hurry. You see, we need the money at once."

After they reached their destination, the doctor stayed a long while at his call on his country patient, and Madge, left alone in the buggy, had plenty of time to devise a thousand schemes for acquiring riches and to dismiss them all as impracticable. The physician had driven his old horse inside the trim yard of his patient, and the road lay near the big front porch door. The little garden was as pretty and tidy as the pictures in Kate Greenaway books. It grew tall hollyhocks, neatly cut hedges, and a riot of old rose bushes. Madge might well have spent her time in gazing at it, as it was a typical New England garden on a small scale. But it seemed too tiny and

conventional to the little captain, whose inner vision conjured up the sight of the great, oak-shaded lawn at "Forest House." Just then she had more practical problems to occupy her attention. She let the reins fall loosely on the horse's neck, for he was in the habit of standing without being hitched. To-day old Prince grew tired with waiting and began to nibble at the short grass. Madge, lost in her daydreams, paid no heed to him. The horse moved on. Ahead there was a particularly delicious bunch of tall, feathery grass, which had been allowed to grow unaccountably high. It was a rare shrub, but the old horse was not aware of it. The wheel of the buggy that held the heedless driver passed over the high porch step. The girl inside felt herself let gently down on the ground and a high, black canopy covered her. Then, at last, Madge became alive to the situation.

But it was too late! Old Prince was frightened. The noise of the overturned buggy had upset his nerves. He began to run—not very fast, but fast enough so that Madge found herself being dragged along the ground over the smooth grass lawn. She couldn't crawl out from under the buggy and she certainly did not wish to remain under it. She raised her voice in one long cry of terror.

A boy had been working back of the house. He was in his shirt sleeves and had an old, torn, straw hat pulled down over his eyes. An ugly scowl was the only attention he had paid to the doctor and Madge as they drove into the yard. His face was flushed, not so much from the sun as from the anger that was raging within him. It was hard enough to work like a slave for a cranky old maid, without being constantly "pecked at." David believed that he hated every one in the world. Yet at Madge's shrill cry for help he dropped his rake and ran toward the front lawn. He saw the overturned buggy, heard the noise that came from underneath it, but he could see no sign of Madge. Dr. Alden had also dashed from the house onto the front porch. He was followed by a woman of about sixty years. Her hair was parted in the middle and she wore little bunches of corkscrew curls over each ear, in the fashion of half a century ago. "Oh, my! Oh, my!" she cried, wringing her hands. "How can I bear it? how can I bear it?" One might have supposed that she were frightened over Madge.

Dr. Alden started in pursuit of the horse. But at his approach old Prince quickened his pace. "Stand still!" a peremptory voice called to him sharply. "Stop crying out!" the same voice ordered Madge.

Dr. Alden gazed in bewilderment at the speaker. Madge at the same instant realized that she must be frightening the horse with the noise she was making.

The boy with the torn hat advanced quietly toward the horse, showing no special interest in him. He called gently to the animal, holding out a bunch of grass. Prince was only frightened at the strange turn his affairs had taken. He now stopped for a minute. Immediately a firm hand seized his head.

Dr. Alden made a move toward his buggy. "Unhitch the horse," commanded the boy.

Once the horse was free from the buggy Dr. Alden and the young man lifted it on one side. Out crawled Madge, a most inglorious figure. She was covered with dust, her face grimy. Her hair had tumbled down and hung in a loose bunch of curls over her shoulders.

"I am not a bit hurt, Doctor," she announced bravely, as soon as she got her breath. "It was all my fault. I let old Prince get away from me. I am so afraid I have broken the buggy."

"What a nice girl!" thought David. "She isn't a bit fussy. I wonder how she will take the old lady?"

While the physician assured Madge that his vehicle was not injured in the least, and that he would not have minded its being smashed into bits so long as she was unhurt, a woman walked across the yard and glared angrily at Madge.

"Young woman," she said in a thin, high voice, "look—look at what you and that wretched horse have done."

Madge blinked some of the dirt from her eyes, then tried to twist her hair back into some kind of order. "I am sorry," she answered in bewilderment. "But what have we done?"

David swallowed a malicious grin of satisfaction.

The woman fairly gasped at Madge's question. "You've torn up my lawn, trampled down my prize rose-bush, and—and—please take the young woman away, doctor. My nerves won't endure anything more after the night I have spent. I am sure I would never dare trust my life to any one who goes about turning over buggies and ruining people's gardens."

Trust her life? Of what was the woman talking? Madge thought she could not have heard aright.

"Never mind your lawn, Miss Betsey," answered Dr. Alden severely. "Be grateful that the child isn't hurt. Thank you, David." The doctor began fumbling in his pocket for his money.

Madge saw her rescuer's face turn scarlet. He was a manly looking fellow of perhaps eighteen.

With a muttered, "I'm not a beggar," he turned and walked away from them.

After exchanging a little further conversation with Miss Betsey, the doctor and Madge drove

away. Outside the yard Madge began to laugh. She could still see the old maid wringing her hands and gazing in anguish at her cherished garden.

"Scat!" grumbled Madge.

The doctor smiled. "Miss Betsey is a bit of an old cat, child. But I don't wish you to be prejudiced against her, poor old soul."

[25]

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of her being like a cat, Doctor Man," apologized Madge. "I am very fond of cats. I was thinking of Miss Betsey in 'David Copperfield.' Don't you remember how she used to rush out and cry 'Scat!' all the time at the donkeys that she feared were going to ruin her lawn? Old Prince and I were the 'donkeys' this afternoon. Who is that boy named David? He is very good looking, isn't he?"

"David? Oh, he is a poor boy who works around Miss Taylor's place—a distant cousin of hers, I believe. His mother was a gentlewoman, but she married a man who turned out badly and her family disowned her. This youngster has a bad disposition and Miss Betsey says he is not faithful to his work. He steals off every now and then and hides for hours up in a loft. No one knows what he is doing up there."

"Well, I don't think I would like to work for Miss Betsey," returned Madge thoughtfully. "Somehow I feel sorry for this David." She remembered the boy's quick flush of resentment at the doctor's offer of money. She wished that she had been able to thank him herself for his share in her rescue.

[26]

"I am sorry you think you would not like to work for Miss Betsey," returned the doctor unexpectedly, "because I had a suggestion to make to you and Phil. But after to-day I am afraid it will be of no use. Miss Taylor is a rich old maid patient of mine. I have looked after her since Phyllis was a little girl. She has no relatives and no interest in life except in her little estate, which has been in her family for several generations. She makes herself ill by imagining that she has a variety of diseases. All she needs is fresh air and young companionship. I wonder if there is any way that she can manage to get it?"

Madge felt a shiver creep up and down her spine. She had a premonition of what Dr. Alden was going to propose to her and to Phil. Surely they could not be expected to Jonah their pretty houseboat by taking aboard such a fellow-passenger as this dreadful old maid! How could they ever have any fun with her on board? Instead of calling their pretty craft the "Merry Maid," she would have to be re-christened "Old Maid," Madge thought resentfully.

Dr. Alden did not return to the subject of Miss Betsey during the long ride home. He was too wise for that. Nevertheless, he had given Madge something to think about.

[27]

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## CHAPTER III

### DAVID FINDS A FRIEND

"IT'S all right, Phyllis! Tom Curtis is a dear. David is to go with us." Madge breathed a sigh of satisfaction over the success of her scheme.

Phyllis Alden laughed. She was buttoning the twins into clean pinafores. "I am not surprised. I knew Tom would find a place for David if you asked him to do so. Tom Curtis is quite likely to do Madge Morton's will."

Madge flushed. "Don't be a goose, please, Phil," she begged. "You know that as long as we are to take Miss Betsey Taylor on board our houseboat, in order to be able to pay the expenses of our trip this summer," Madge made a wry face, "that we ought not to leave poor David high and dry without any work to do. I was awfully sorry for the boy when he came here the other day and heard what Miss Betsey thought of doing. He turned quite white, and when I asked him if he was sorry to be thrown out of work, he said 'Yes,' and then he wouldn't talk any more."

[28]

Phyllis looked serious. "I hope it will turn out for the best, but it is asking a good deal of Tom to take this strange boy way down to Virginia with him. David hasn't a good reputation. Miss Taylor employs him only because he is a distant cousin of hers. No one else will have anything to do with him, he is so surly and unfriendly. He was turned out of the district school, and——"

Madge pretended to put her fingers in her ears. "Don't tell me any more mean things about that poor fellow, please, dear," she pleaded. "I suppose it is because I have never heard a good word about him that I, being an obstinate person, don't think he can be as bad as he is painted. I am a black sheep myself, sometimes, when my horrid temper gets the better of me, and I know how dreadful it is not to be trusted."

"You a black sheep! O Madge! how absurd you are," protested Phil.



But Madge was in earnest and would not be interrupted. "Tom really did need some one on his motor boat, Phil. He wrote me that he meant to hire some one to come along with him. Tom wishes to run his own engine, but he doesn't yearn for the task of cleaning it or to do the very hard work. Of course, that is all right. He has plenty of money and can do as he chooses. But it's different with David."

[29] "How many boys will Tom have on his motor boat while he has us in tow?" inquired Phil. She realized that Madge had been seized with one of her sudden fits of enthusiasm over Miss Betsey Taylor's "hired boy" and that there was no sense in opposing her. The little captain would find out later whether her enthusiasm had been right or wrong.

"Four or five," answered Madge absently. "Do stand still, Daisy Alden, while I tie your sunbonnet, or I'll eat you alive!" she scolded kissing one of the twin babies on her fat pink cheek. "Come on, Phil. Hold tight to Dot. If we are going to drive out to Miss Betsey Taylor's to see whether she still desires to pay us sixty dollars a month for food, lodging and the pleasure of our delightful society aboard our precious houseboat, we had better start at once."

Phil, Madge and the twins waved good-bye to Mrs. Alden, who was well enough now to be about her house, as they piled themselves into the physician's old buggy, which he had left for their use during the day.

[30] The doctor's suggestion looked as though it were going to come true. At first Madge and Phil protested that they simply couldn't bear to take a fussy old maid on their houseboat excursion. But then, if they did not take Miss Betsey, there wouldn't be any excursion. The girls were between Scylla and Charybdis, like the ill-fated Ulysses on his journey back from Troy. Scylla, Miss Betsey, went with them, or Charybdis, the houseboat party, would have to decline Tom Curtis's offer to tow them up the Rappahannock River. So the girls decided to choose "Miss Scylla," as they nicknamed poor Miss Betsey.

[31] As for Miss Betsey Taylor, she had been even more horrified than the two houseboat girls when the doctor made the proposal to her. How was she to cure her nerves by trusting herself to a party of gay young people with a twenty-six-year-old chaperon as the only balance to the party. Absurd! Miss Betsey wrung her hands at the very idea. But after a while the allurements of the plan began to stir even her conventional old soul. The thought of being borne gently along a beautiful river dividing the Virginia shores wrought enchantment. There was something else that influenced Miss Betsey. Years before she had had a "near romance." A young Virginia officer had come to New York and had met Miss Betsey at the home of a friend. During one winter he saw her many times, and although he was too poor to speak of marriage, Miss Betsey was entitled to believe that he had cared for her. One day Miss Betsey had an argument with her admirer. It was a foolish argument, but the Virginia officer believed that Miss Betsey had insulted him. He went away and never saw her again. Afterward she learned that he had returned to his ruined estate in Virginia.

It was a poor shadow of a romance, but Miss Betsey had never had another. In late years she had begun to think of her past. It *did* add a flavor of romance to her trip in the houseboat to imagine that she might have been a happy matron, living on one of the old places that she would see in Virginia, instead of being Miss Betsey Taylor of Hartford, who had never ventured farther than New York City in the sixty years of her maiden life. To tell the truth, Miss Betsey was as enthusiastic over the prospect of a trip in a houseboat as were the members of the "Merry Maid's" crew.

When the two girls and the children drove into Miss Betsey's yard David helped Madge, Phil and the twins out of the doctor's buggy, looking more surly and impossible than ever. A secret bitterness was surging in him. Miss Betsey had promised to give him steady work at "Chestnut Cottage" all summer. Now she was going away on a trip with a lot of silly girls. Once again he was to be balked in the cherished desire of his life. In his bitterness of heart he pretended he had never seen Madge before.

[32] "I would like to talk to you, David, after we have seen Miss Taylor," said Madge in a friendly fashion to the scowling youth. "I won't take up much of your time."

David walked away without making any reply, which angered the girl, and as she walked into the house she began to feel rather sorry that she had tried to play Good Samaritan to such a churlish fellow.

To-day Miss Betsey really wished to make a good impression on Madge and Phil. She was as anxious that they should like her as the girls were to please the queer old lady. Miss Betsey was waiting for her guests in her prim, old-fashioned parlor. The dim light from the closed green blinds was grateful after the brilliant sunshine of the warm July day. On a little, spindle-legged mahogany table were tall glasses of fruit lemonade and a plate of assorted cakes.

[33] Miss Betsey surveyed Madge Morton with keen, curious eyes. She already knew Phil. But before she trusted her life to these girls she wished to take their measure. Madge's appearance as she emerged from under the overturned buggy had not been prepossessing. To-day Miss Betsey would be able to judge her better. As she scrutinized the little captain she was not altogether pleased with Madge's looks. She preferred Phil's dark, serious face. There was too much ardor, too much warmth, bright color about Madge in her deep-toned auburn hair and the healthy scarlet of her lips. Madge breathed a kind of radiant impulse toward a fullness of life that was opposed to Miss Betsey Taylor's theory of existence. Still, she could find no objection to the

young girl's manner. Madge was so shy and deprecating that Phil could hardly help laughing at her. What would Miss Betsey think later on, when the little captain had one of her attacks of high spirits?

Miss Taylor asked so many questions about the houseboat that Phil was kept busy answering her. Madge spoke only in monosyllables, her attention being devoted to the twins. The cake and lemonade having been disposed of, these two tiny persons kept wriggling about the drawing room in momentary peril of upsetting the tables and chairs.

"Miss Taylor," broke in Madge suddenly, in her usual, unexpected fashion, "if you don't mind, I think I will take the little girls out into your back garden. I wish to speak to your boy, David. I have asked our friend, Tom Curtis, to take David to help him with his motor boat during our trip. I hope you don't mind?"

[34]

Miss Betsey caught her breath. She was startled by the suddenness of Madge's suggestion, as she was to be many times during her acquaintance with that young woman. Then Miss Betsey looked dubious. "Take David with us?" she faltered. "I don't advise it. It was good of you, child, to think of it, and it would be a wonderful opportunity for the boy. But I am obliged to tell you that David is not trustworthy. He spends too many hours alone, and refuses to tell anybody what he is doing. Make him confide in you, or else do not take him away with us. I'll try to find something for the boy to do nearer home."

Madge thought she caught a gleam in Miss Betsey's eyes that revealed a goodly amount of curiosity about David's secret occupations, as much as it did interest in his welfare. She made up her mind that she would not pry into poor David's secrets simply because she had a chance to offer him the opportunity to make his living during the summer.

Holding Dot by one hand and Daisy by the other, Madge appeared at the half-open barn-door, her eyes shining with friendliness.

David was working fiercely. He hated the cleaning of the barn, so he chose to-day to do it as an outlet for his foolish feeling of injury.

[35]

"David," exclaimed Madge, "I must call you that, as I don't know your other name, I would like to speak to you." There was no hint of patronage in Madge's manner. She was too well-bred a young woman either to feel or to show it. She really felt no difference between herself and David, except that the boy had never had the opportunities that had been hers.

But David never turned around to answer her. "Speak ahead," he answered roughly. "I'm not deaf. I can hear what you've got to say to me in here all right."

Madge colored angrily. A sound temper had never been her strong point. She had almost forgotten how angry she could be in the two peaceful weeks she had spent with Phil. The hot blood surged to her cheeks at David's rude behavior. The boy had gone on raking the hay into one corner of the barn.

"I certainly shall not speak to you if you can't treat me courteously," she answered coldly. She took the little girls by the hands and walked quietly away from the barn. The babies protested. Their black eyes were wide with interest at the sight of "the big boy." They wished to stay and talk to him.

[36]

David put his hand to his throat when Madge was out of sight. He felt as though he were choking, and he knew it was from shame at his own uncivil behavior to the girl who had treated him in such a friendly, gentle fashion. David Brewster was a queer combination. He was enough of a gentleman to know he had treated Madge discourteously, but he did not know how to apologize to her. He glanced around the yard.

Madge had taken the twins and was seated with them under a big apple tree in the back yard. She was making them daisy and clover chains, and she seemed completely to have forgotten the rude boy.

David walked up behind the tree. If Madge saw or heard him, she gave no sign. She was putting a tiny wreath of daisies on Daisy Alden's head and crowning Dot with a wreath of clover.

"Miss," said a boy's embarrassed voice, "I know I was rude to you out in the barn. I am sorry. I was worried about something and it put me in a bad temper. Do you feel that you would be willing to speak to me now?" he asked humbly.

Madge's face cleared. Yet she hesitated. She was beginning to fear that she would be unwise to mention Tom's proposition to David. She knew that Tom Curtis, with his frank, open nature, would have little use for an ugly-tempered, surly youth on board his motor boat. Had she any right to burden Tom with a disagreeable helper?

[37]

But David seemed so miserable, so shy and awkward, that Madge's heart softened. Again she felt sorry for the boy, as she had done at her first meeting with him. Whether for good or evil, she made up her mind that David should accompany them on their houseboat excursion.

"Sit down, won't you, David?" she asked gently.

David sat down shyly, with his torn hat between the knees of his patched trousers while Madge explained the situation to him. She told him that she and Phil felt sorry that they were making

him lose his place by taking Miss Betsey away. She said that Tom Curtis needed some one to help him with his motor boat, and that he was willing to take David with him if he would be faithful and do the work that Tom required of him. "Mr. Curtis will give you five dollars a week and your expenses if you would care to make the trip with us," concluded Madge.

She was silent for a second. Her eyes were on the pretty twin babies, who were chasing golden-brown butterflies on the grass just in front of them, and screaming joyously at their own lack of success.

"Didn't you hear me, David?" inquired Madge a trifle impatiently.

The boy's face was working. His eyes were brimming with tears. He was bitterly ashamed of them and tried to rub them off with his rough coatsleeve. Then he said in a low voice:

[38] "You mean that you got your friend to consent to take a fellow he knew nothing about on a motor boat trip way down in Virginia, and just for the little work that I can do on his boat? I can't understand it. You see, I've never been twenty miles out of Hartford, and nobody thinks I am much good around here. I know you have done this for me just because you didn't want me to lose my job with Miss Betsey. I could see you were sorry for me the other night, when I couldn't help showing that I cared. Gee-whiz! I wonder how I will ever be able to pay you back?"

Madge laughed. She could see that David had forgotten her and was thinking and talking aloud.

"You've paid me back already," she declared, smiling. "Didn't you help pull me out from under the buggy the other day? You may have saved my life. If old Prince had really tried to run away I might have been killed. Please don't be grateful to me. You aren't obliged to be grateful to any one, though, if you must, why, you can thank Tom Curtis. It is his motor boat that is to tow our houseboat and take us on our new adventures. He is a splendid fellow and I know you will like him. I am sure you will get along nicely with him."

[39] "I'll do the best I can to be worth my keep. You won't be sorry you told your friend Mr. Curtis to take me along," he said huskily.

"It may not be easy for you all the time," added Madge, feeling that she ought to give David some good advice. "There will be four or five young men on board the motor boat, and they may all ask you to wait on them. But I must not preach. I am dreadfully afraid I shall never be able to get on with your cousin, Miss Taylor. You must tell me how to manage her; because, if she and I were to quarrel, it would spoil the whole houseboat trip. I have a very bad temper. I must go back to the house now. Phil and Miss Betsey will wonder what has become of me. But where are those children?" Madge sprang to her feet. The twins had been before her eyes only a few seconds before. Now they had completely disappeared!

David ran toward the barn. Madge searched the yard frantically. The children had not returned to the house.

[40]

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SEARCH

"**W**HERE can they be, David?" asked Madge anxiously. "Do you suppose they have run away?"

"Nothing can possibly have happened to the children in such a few moments. We will find them. They are probably hiding somewhere to tease you."

But though he made a systematic hunt about the yard, he did not find them.

"Dot! Daisy!" called Madge, "it's time to go home. If you'll only come here, I will tell you the nicest fairy story you ever heard."

Madge did not go into the house at once to tell Phil and Miss Betsey of the disappearance of the children. She would surely discover them and it was not worth while to worry Phil. But although she argued within herself that nothing serious could have happened to the babies, she had a premonition of disaster. Only a moment before they had been chasing butterflies. It would seem as though a wicked hobgoblin had come up out of the ground and carried them off.

[41] Next to Miss Taylor's back yard there was another field enclosed by a low stone wall. It would have been easy work for Dot and Daisy to crawl over it, and Madge knew their propensity for getting into mischief. David and Madge clambered hastily over the wall into the field. It was an open one, covered with low, waving grass, where the presence of even little four-year-old girls could be seen at a glance.

The conviction that the children had been mysteriously kidnapped began to grow upon Madge. Yet Miss Betsey Taylor's home was a quarter of a mile distant from any other house, and neither David nor Madge had seen any sign of a tramp. The little captain made up her mind that she *must* tell Phil. It was no longer fair to keep her chum in the dark. Phil must assist in the search for her sisters.

"Don't be frightened," consoled David, interpreting the look of fear in Madge's eyes. "I promise to find the children for you."

Madge went into the house with slow, dragging steps. She tried to hide her fright, but her face betrayed her. She was utterly wretched. She had come, uninvited, to visit her best friend, and Phil's father and mother had treated her as though she were another grown-up daughter. Now, as a reward, she had lost their beloved babies. For, if Madge had not been talking with David, Dot and Daisy would never have run away from her and disappeared.

[42]

Phyllis sprang to her feet when she caught sight of Madge. She had been wondering why her chum had not come in. One look at Madge's white face was enough to convince her that something serious had happened.

"Don't worry so, Madge," comforted Phil, when the girl had stammered out her story, "I'll find those children. Nobody has run off with them. Don't you know that getting themselves lost and frightening people nearly out of their wits is the thing that Dot and Daisy love best in the world?"

Phyllis and Madge ran out of the parlor together, followed more slowly by Miss Betsey, who was not at all sure that she relished so much excitement. Phyllis Alden did not realize how thoroughly Madge and David had looked for the lost babies before her friend had brought the news to her. If she had, Phil would have been more alarmed.

David determined to discover the missing children before Madge returned to the yard. But where else should he seek for them? With a swift feeling of horror, the boy thought of one more possible place. If his surmise should prove true! Poor Madge! David thought of her with a sudden flood of sympathy. Instinctively he realized, after his short acquaintance with her, that she was the type of person who would never recover from such a sorrow as the loss of these children would be.

[43]

While David thought he ran. He hoped to make his investigation before Madge and Phil could come into the yard.

Several rods back of the barn in Miss Taylor's back garden there was a disused well which had been closed for several years. A few days before Miss Betsey had sent for a man to have this well reopened. The man had not finished his work. He had gone away, leaving the well open with only a plank across it.

But David was not allowed to inspect the place undiscovered. Madge and Phyllis were not long in finding him. "Look in the barn, won't you?" David called back to the girls. "The children may be hiding under the hay."

Phyllis slipped inside the barn door. But Madge had ransacked the barn too thoroughly to believe that there was a chance of finding the babies there. Besides, she had seen David Brewster's face. He was pale through his sunburn, so she left the barn to Phil and followed at his heels.

"You've an idea what has happened to the children. Please tell me what you think," she pleaded.

[44]

The boy shook his head resolutely. "Don't ask questions, I've no time to talk," he answered rudely. Yet David did not mean to be unkind. He only knew that he could not face the look in Madge's eyes should his suspicion prove true. Besides, there was no time to waste. Already they must have waited too long to save the children if the little ones had fallen down the old well.

Instantly David knew. The plank that had lain across the well had fallen over on one side. The children must have stepped on this plank and gone down. David dropped flat on his stomach and peered over into the hole. "Look out!" he cried sharply to Madge, she was so near him.

Madge felt herself reel. The air turned black about her and the earth seemed slanting at her feet, miles and miles away. A feeling of deathly nausea crept over her. Then she pulled herself together. There might yet be hope, and there was surely work to be done. She dropped on the ground beside David.

As they knelt side by side on the edge of the well they heard a little, weak, moaning cry, and straining their eyes distinguished faintly the tops of two curly heads. Madge uttered a cry of relief. As nearly as she could judge, the babies were standing upright in the well with their arms about each other. They were nearly dead with fright and suffocation, but the wonderful instinct of self-preservation had made them continue to keep on their feet. There was not more than a foot of water in the bottom of the well, and Madge believed that the fall had not seriously hurt them.

[45]

"Dot! Daisy!" called Madge, trying to speak in natural tones.

Daisy turned a pair of big black eyes to the little light that shone above her. Hanging over the edge of the well she spied her Madge and stretched both tiny arms upward.

"You tumbled into a big hole, didn't you, dears?" soothed Madge cheerfully, although she was trembling. "Stand up just a moment longer, won't you, darlings? Madge is right here and she will not go away. We will have you out of that dark place in a minute."

David had disappeared after his first glance at the children. Madge felt absolutely sure that he would be able to get the babies out of the well within the next few moments. She did not know how and she didn't think. It was her part to keep up the children's courage. Somehow she knew that this strange boy, of whom everybody spoke ill, would justify the curious confidence she had placed in him from their first meeting.

[46]

When David returned he brought with him Phil, Miss Betsey, and Jane, the cook. He carried a small clothes basket in his hand with handles at either end and a great coil of heavy rope.

Turning to Madge he said, "One of us must go down in the well. Shall I go, or will it be better for me to draw up the basket? I am the strongest."

For answer Madge took hold of the rope. "Let me go," she begged.

"It is my place," demurred Phyllis, with a white face.

"Phil!" Madge's eyes said all she could not speak. It was her fault that Dot and Daisy had fallen into the well. Could she not be allowed to risk herself to save them?

Phyllis stepped back. During this brief exchange of words David had not been idle. He had knotted his rope securely about Madge's waist.

Over the side of the old well he had seen many loose bricks and open places. With him above to steady her, a plucky girl could manage to climb down the side of the well with small danger to herself.

Madge slipped the rope around one arm. If she fell, she might, with David's assistance, be able to drop down sailor fashion.

[47]

She dared not glance down as she began the descent, finding open spaces for her feet and hands along the brick wall. "Steady, steady!" she could hear David's voice cheering her, as foot by foot he let out more of his rope.

David had not trusted to his own strength alone. The rope he guided was in Phil's hands and also those of Jane, the cook.

When Madge was within two feet of the bottom of the well she jumped and gathered little Dot, who had toppled over, in her arms. Daisy was still standing, although she tottered and clung to her rescuer's skirts.

"Let down the basket quickly!" cried Madge. Like a flash the basket swung down. The little captain made haste to lift poor Dot into it. The basket had a rope tied on the handle at each end. Madge could see that David had replaced a heavy plank across the mouth of the well, and that he sat astride it, so as to be able to draw up the basket without striking it against the sides of the well.

Madge took little Daisy in her arms and cuddled her head on her shoulder, so she should not see what was taking place. "Shut your eyes, baby," she pleaded. "We'll soon be out of this dark old place."

Daisy did not answer. The wreath of daisies with which Madge had crowned her little head still hung loosely down among her black curls.

[48]

It seemed ages before Dot was safely landed on the ground and gathered in Phil's arms. During that time Madge had never ceased comforting Daisy. But when the basket descended for the second time Daisy refused to get into it. She was too frightened. She clung desperately to Madge and would not unloosen her fat arms from about the girl's neck.

What was to be done? The little captain was afraid to put Daisy in the basket while the little girl fought and struggled. She would probably fling herself out in her fright and be badly hurt. It was almost a miracle the way in which the two babies managed to fall straight down in the well without striking against the sides.

"Can't you coax her, Phil?" asked Madge in desperation. "She is determined not to go into the basket."

But all Phyllis's efforts to persuade her baby sister to return to terra firma via the basket route proved unavailing. Daisy kicked and screamed at the slightest attempt on Madge's part to put her into the basket.

"If you will bring a ladder and lower it into the well I believe I can climb up with Daisy on my back," proposed Madge faintly. The strain was beginning to tell upon her.

"I'll have one down in ten seconds," called David cheerily.

[49]

He was back to the edge of the well almost instantly with a long ladder that he had spied leaning against a fruit tree. He cautiously lowered it to the waiting girl.

Madge tested it to see that it was firm, then, setting Daisy down, she bent almost double.

"Climb on Madge's back, dear. Daisy must be very brave. Then we'll go up, up, up the ladder to Sister Dot. Put your arms around Madge's neck as tightly as ever you can," directed the little captain.

The novelty of the situation appealed to Daisy and she fastened her fat little arms about poor Madge's neck in a suffocating clasp. Slowly but surely, in spite of the hampering embrace, Madge climbed steadily to the top, to be met by the firm, reassuring grasp of David's strong hands.

Phil lifted the clinging Daisy from Madge's tired back. The little captain staggered and would have fallen but for David, whose hand on her elbow quickly steadied her.

Then the boy of whom Miss Betsey entertained such unpleasant suspicions, the "ne'er-do-weel" of the community, took charge of the situation with a dignity that surprised even Madge, who believed in him.

[50] "I think it will be best for me to notify Dr. Alden of what has happened. I will telephone him, then drive over and bring him back. It will be better not to let Mrs. Alden know that the children fell into the well. Dr. Alden can look them over. As your mother is recovering from a long illness, she must not be worried or frightened. What do you think of my plan, Miss Alden?"

Phyllis quite approved of the suggestion. She looked at David almost wonderingly. Was this resolute, self-contained young man the surly, unapproachable boy she had always disliked to encounter when calling upon Miss Betsey? She awoke to a tardy realization that whatever faults David Brewster possessed, they were merely on the surface, and that at heart he was a good man and true. And although David never knew it, on that day he made another friend whose friendship was destined to prove as faithful as that of Madge Morton.

That night as the two chums, wrapped in their kimonos, were having a comfortable little session together before going to bed, Phyllis said thoughtfully, "Do you know, Madge, I think David Brewster is splendid. I am afraid I have misjudged him."

[51] "Phil," said Madge with conviction, "David is a man, and I am sure he is good and true at heart, no matter how gruff he may seem on the surface. I asked Tom to take him with us on the trip, and now that he has consented to go, I feel as though I were responsible for him. I know Miss Betsey believes him to be sneaking and undependable. So far, however, I have seen nothing about him that looks suspicious, and I do not believe him to be a sneak. I trust David now, and I am going to keep on trusting him."

[52]

## CHAPTER V

### PULLING UP ANCHOR FOR NEW SCENES

**A** MOTOR boat ploughed restlessly about near the broad mouth of the Rappahannock River. It flew a red and white pennant, with the initials of the owner, "T. C.," emblazoned on it. The name of the boat, "Sea Gull," was painted near the stern. It was a trim little craft with a fair-sized cabin amidships and was capable of making eight knots an hour at its highest speed.

"Toot, toot, toot, chug, chug, chug!" the whistle blew and the engine thumped. The captain stood with his hand on the wheel, gazing restlessly out over the water.

"I wonder what can have happened?" muttered Tom Curtis impatiently. "Here it is, as plain as the nose on your face: the 'Merry Maid' with four houseboat girls, a chaperon and one other passenger, will join the 'Sea Gull' at the entrance to the Rappahannock River on the southern side of the Virginia shore near Shingray Point, on August first, at ten A.M." Tom looked up from the paper he was reading. "We have the time and the place all right, haven't we, fellows? But where are the girls?"

[53]

"Cheer up, old man!" Jack Bolling clapped Tom on the shoulder. "A houseboat is not the fastest vessel afloat. Who knows what kind of tug the girls have had to hire to get them here? And a woman is never on time, anyhow."

"We'll be in luck if the houseboat gets here by to-night, Curtis," argued Harry Sears, another member of the motor boat crew of five youths. "Do slow down; there is no use ploughing around these waters. We had better stay close to the meeting place. It's after twelve o'clock; can't we have a little feed?"

"Here, Brewster, stir around and get out the lunch hamper," ordered George Robinson. "We must all have something to sustain us while we wait for the girls."

David Brewster's face colored at the other's tone of command, but he went quietly to work to obey.

"David," interposed Tom Curtis, "come put your hand on this engine for me, won't you? I will dig in the larder if Robinson is too tired. I know where the stores are kept better than you other chaps do, anyhow."

"Tom Curtis is a splendid fellow," thought David gratefully. "Miss Morton was right. He doesn't treat one like a dog, just because he has plenty of money."

[54]

David Brewster and Tom Curtis had traveled down from New York to Virginia together. Their fellow motor boat passengers they had picked up at different points along the way. David had come to understand Tom Curtis pretty well during their trip—better than Tom did David. But then, Tom Curtis was a fine, frank young man with nothing to hide or to be ashamed of. David had many things which he did not wish the public to know.

The houseboat party had arranged to join one another in Richmond. From there they were to go by rail to a point up the Chesapeake Bay, where the "Merry Maid" had been kept in winter quarters since the houseboat trip of the fall before. A tug was to escort the houseboat to the mouth of the Rappahannock River, where they were to meet Tom and his motor launch.

[55]

Phyllis Alden had accompanied Madge to "Forest House," so the two girls and Eleanor were not far from Richmond. Miss Jenny Ann Jones and Lillian had come from Baltimore together. But Miss Betsey Taylor took her life in her own hands and traveled alone. She carried only the expenses of her railroad trip in her purse. But in a bag, which she wore securely fastened under her skirt, Miss Betsey had brought a sum of money large enough to last her during the entire houseboat trip, for when a maiden lady leaves her home to trust herself to a frisky party of young people, she should be prepared for any emergency. Miss Betsey also bore in her bag a number of pieces of old family jewelry, which she wore on state occasions.

When luncheon time passed and there was still no sign of the "Merry Maid," Tom Curtis could bear the suspense of waiting no longer.

"Something has happened, or the girls would have been here before this," he declared positively. "Bolling, I am going to leave you and Sears to wait here in the rowboat. I am going to look down the coast."

"All right, old man," agreed the other boys. They did not share Tom's uneasiness. Indeed, as the "Sea Gull" headed down the coast, the three men on board her heard Harry Sears shouting an improvised verse:

"Where, oh, where, is the 'Merry Maid'?  
What wind or wave has her delayed?  
Our hearts are breaking, our launch is  
quaking,  
Fear and despair are us overtaking,  
Where, oh, where——"

The rest of this remarkable effusion was lost to their ears as they glided along.

[56]

"It is rather strange that we haven't picked them up yet, isn't it?"

David Brewster said nothing. He was always a silent youth. With Tom's telescope in his hand he stood eagerly scanning the line of the coast as the motor launch ran along near the shore.

"Ho, there!" he cried. "What's that? Look over there!"

Tom shut off speed and hurriedly seized the spy-glass.

There, apparently peacefully resting on the bosom of the water, was an odd craft, gleaming white in the afternoon sun. Tom Curtis at once recognized the "Merry Maid."

No one on board the houseboat noticed the approach of Tom's motor launch until he blew the automatic whistle. Then, with one accord, the four girls rushed to one side of the boat. They made frantic signals, then all began to talk at the same time.

"What's up? Where's your tug?" demanded Tom. "Here you are, as peaceful as clams, while we have been scouring the coast for you."

[57]

"Don't scold, Tom," laughed Madge, "and don't refer to us as clams. We are stuck in the mud. Our wretched little tug brought us too near the shore, piled us up here and then went away two hours ago for help. We were so afraid you would go on without us. What can we do?"

While the girls talked Tom, Jack and David had been quietly at work. They had secured the houseboat to the launch by means of their towing ropes. Tom put on all speed. His motor launch tugged and strained forward. The "Merry Maid" did not move. She was a fairly heavy craft, with her large cabin and broad beam. Miss Betsey Taylor and Miss Jenny Ann joined the crowd of anxious watchers on the houseboat deck. Instead of gliding up a peaceful river, gazing at fruitful orchards and lovely old Virginia homesteads through the oncoming twilight, the houseboat crew would have to remain ignominiously on a sand bank until a larger boat came along to pull her off.

Tom tried again. Once more the "Sea Gull" went bravely forward—the length of her towing rope.

The girls were almost in tears. Suddenly Madge laughed. Eleanor and Lillian looked at her reproachfully.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," expostulated Eleanor.

[58] "I don't either, Nellie," agreed Madge. "We ought to cry, we are such geese. Tom! David!" she cried. "You have never pulled up our anchor. Of course we can't get off the sand bank. We forgot to tell you that the captain on the little tug anchored us here to keep us from drifting away. I am so sorry."

In a little while Tom Curtis's motor launch, followed by the "Merry Maid," entered the Rappahannock from the Chesapeake Bay. It was Tom's intention to tow the houseboat along several of the Virginia rivers during their vacation. It looked as though they might have a peaceful excursion with nothing to mar its serenity. But there were five boys and four girls aboard the boats, besides the two older women.

The voyagers did not journey far the first day. It was about sundown when they came along shore near a wonderful peach orchard and it was here that they decided to spend the night. The crew of the "Merry Maid" entertained the crew of the "Sea Gull" at dinner, the young folks spending the evening together. As Tom was about to bid Madge good night she said almost timidly, "Thank you so much, Tom, for being so good to David. I hope he hasn't disappointed you?"

"Oh, he is all right," replied Tom. "He is a queer fellow, though; never has much to say. He has asked me to let him have an hour or so to himself every day that we are on shore. Of course, it is only fair for him to have the time, but why does he wish to go off by himself?"

[59] "I don't know." Madge shook her head disapprovingly. Then she adroitly changed the subject, but she could not help hoping that David would not incur the displeasure of the boys by his mysterious ways. It looked as though the boy she had determined to trust was to prove very troublesome.

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## CHAPTER VI

### WANDERLUST

[60] "MISS JENNY ANN, I don't think I can endure her," declared Madge mournfully.

It was late afternoon. The houseboat was gliding serenely along the river bank. Several yards ahead of her puffed the motor launch. Harry Sears and George Robinson were in the kitchen of the houseboat, helping Lillian and Eleanor wash the dinner dishes. Phil sat comfortably in the motor launch, having her usual argument with Jack Bolling. Tom Curtis was steering his launch, with a cloud over his usually bright face. David Brewster was looking after the engine. He was silent and sullen. But unless he was at work this was his ordinary expression.

[61] "You can see for yourself, Miss Jenny Ann," continued Madge, her lips trembling with vexation, "that nothing I can do pleases Miss Betsey. I am just as polite to her as I know how to be, but she just hates me. According to what she says, everything that goes wrong is my fault. I have a great mind to leave the houseboat and let you and the other girls take the trip. It isn't much fun for the rest of the party to have Miss Betsey and me quarrel all the time. It is unpleasant for everyone, isn't it?"

Miss Jenny Ann did not answer. Madge caught hold of her impulsively.

"Do scold or preach, whichever you like, Jenny Ann," she pleaded, "but please answer me. It is not polite to be so silent."

"What is it now?" Miss Jenny Ann inquired teasingly.

The little captain's face sobered. "It isn't a little thing this time, like my putting the sheet on Miss Betsey's bed wrong side up. It's very important. Miss Betsey says," whispered Madge in Miss Jenny Ann's ear, although they were standing some distance away from any one else, "that nearly every day for the past week some of her money has disappeared out of her wretched old money bag. Not very much at a time. First she noticed that three dollars had gone, then five, and now it's ten. She seems to think that I ought to know how it happens. She doesn't want to worry you about it. Of course, I know she is mistaken," cried Madge indignantly. "She just does not know how much money she had. There hasn't been a single person on this boat this whole week except our party."



[62] Miss Jenny Ann looked serious. "Does Miss Taylor suspect any one?" she asked carelessly, not glancing at Madge.

Madge's cheeks reddened. "Miss Betsey says she does not suspect any one, but she spoke darkly of poor David Brewster. She says he never took anything that she knows of when he was on her farm, but that his father was almost a tramp. He came up to New England from goodness-knows-where, and every now and then he disappears and is gone for months at a time. Miss Taylor believes that when Tom ties up our boats in the afternoons, and David goes off and leaves everybody, it is his vagabond blood showing in him. Isn't it cruel to make the poor fellow responsible for his father's sins? I am going to stand up for him through thick and thin. Coming, Miss Betsey," answered Madge cheerfully, in response to a call from the tyrannical old spinster.

[63] Miss Jenny Ann remained by herself a few moments longer. She wondered why Miss Taylor required more attention from poor Madge than she did from any of the other girls. It was certain that she liked her least. But Miss Jenny Ann shrewdly suspected that prim Miss Betsey thought that their impetuous captain needed discipline and had set herself to administer it to her. About David Brewster Miss Jenny Ann was more worried. She did not like the lad. No one did. He was the discordant element in their whole party. Lillian and Eleanor fought shy of him. Phyllis was kind to him but had little to say to him, and the boys in the motor launch, except Tom, treated him with a kind of scornful coolness. The boy was neither a gentleman nor a servant. It was small wonder that generous-hearted Madge championed him. Miss Jenny Ann understood, from Madge's allusion to David's father, one reason why Madge was kind to the boy.

Miss Jenny Ann Jones and Miss Betsey Taylor shared one of the houseboat staterooms. The four girls, to their great joy, bunked together in the other.

It was exactly a half hour before Miss Betsey would let Madge come out on deck again. She wished her money carefully counted and a new place discovered for concealing it. Madge was strangely patient, for she had had a long talk with Dr. Alden before she left Hartford. He had told her that she would have a good deal to bear from Miss Betsey. Yet, if she wished to give the pleasure of the houseboat trip to her friends and to herself, she must remember the tiresome old adage, "What is worth having is worth paying for." So far Madge had paid with little grumbling.

[64] This afternoon, as she reappeared on deck, her red lips were pouting and her cheeks were a deeper color. Her resentment against Miss Betsey was at its height.

No one noticed the little captain standing alone on deck. Usually she would have thought nothing of it, but this evening she was tired and cross. It did not seem fair for her to have to take all the trouble with their houseboat boarder on her shoulders. She could hear Lillian, Nellie, Harry Sears and George Robinson singing on the upper deck of the little houseboat. Phyllis was talking busily to Jack Bolling and did not even glance over toward Madge from her seat on the launch. Madge knew that Tom was angry because she had not joined him in the motor boat earlier in the afternoon, when the boats had put in to the shore. She had not been able to go on account of Miss Betsey, but she certainly had no intention of explaining anything to Tom. He could think what he chose.

[65] The two boats were in the habit of landing several times during a day's cruise. Ordinarily they went ashore just before sunset, and the boys and girls had their dinner together in some sequestered place. They then spent the night with the houseboat and motor boat at anchor. But this evening it was so lovely, gliding along the face of the river, with its hills on one side and meadows and orchards on the other, that Miss Jenny Ann requested Tom not to land until just about bed-time.

Madge stood looking at the sunset for a few minutes. There was nothing to do and no one wished to talk to her. She would go to bed. A little later she tumbled into her bed and shed a few tears, she was so sorry for herself. She did not waken until the other three girls came in for the night at about ten o'clock.

"Is there anything the matter, Madge?" whispered Phil before she crept into the berth above her chum. "We missed you dreadfully."

[66] Madge gave Phyllis a repentant kiss. She knew that she had been absurd. But now that Phyllis had awakened her, she could not go back to sleep again. It was a hot August night, with a moon almost in the full. Not a breath of air was stirring along the river. The moonlight shone through the little cabin window, flooding the room with its radiance. Madge felt that if she could only get a breath of air, she might be able to go to sleep. Just now she was suffocating. Yet the other girls were breathing gently. She slipped softly into her clothes, put on a long light coat, tucked her hair under a boy's cap and stole silently out on the houseboat deck. All was solemn and still. She was the only person awake on either of the two boats. An almost tropical heat made the moon look red and ominous. Madge was oppressed by its mysterious reflection on the water. The shore seemed peaceful, deserted. She went noiselessly down the gang plank. She walked up and down the bank, keeping the boats in sight. However, the shore was not quiet. The ceaseless hum of the August insects set her nerves on edge.

"Katy did, Katy did," the noise was insistent. To Madge's ears the name was transposed. "David did, David did," it rang. Yet she did not really believe that David had stolen Miss Betsey Taylor's money. If not David, who else? Surely the money could never be found in the new hiding place where she and Miss Taylor had stored it that afternoon. It was quite secure from thievish fingers.

It was lonely along the river bank. The sudden hooting of an owl sent her flying toward the houseboat. She waited a second before going aboard. The "Water Witch" was floating peacefully on the water, tied to the rail of the "Merry Maid!"

[67]

All at once the passionate love which Madge felt for the water, that she believed to be an inheritance, woke in her. It was wrong and reckless in her, yet the desire to be alone out there on the river was uncontrollable. She went swiftly to their little rowboat, and without making a single unnecessary sound she rowed straight out into the moonlight that streamed across the water.

No one heard her or saw her leave the shelter of the two boats. Only David, who was also awake, thought for an instant that he caught the splash of a pair of oars skimming past the motor launch. He supposed it to be some idle oarsman who lived along the river, and he never glanced out of his cabin window.

Madge rowed for more than an hour in the golden moonlight, meeting no one. A cool breeze sprang up. Her restlessness, impatience and suspicion passed away. She felt that she would like to move on forever up this silent river, near her well-loved Virginia shores. It never dawned upon her how far she had gone, or that she might be missed, or that the river would be dark when the moon went down. Neither did she consider that she was not familiar with the spot where the houseboat and motor boat were anchored. Tom had chosen the landing place for the night after she had gone into her stateroom.

For a long time Madge rowed on, regardless of time. She was dreaming of her own father. Tonight she felt that she would find him. The night seemed trying to convey to her the message, "He lives."

[68]

It was nearly one o'clock when the moon went down. Madge felt, rather than saw, the darkness on the water. She was so oblivious to time that she believed for a few minutes that the moon had only gone behind a cloud. At last she realized that it was now time for her to turn back. She had been rowing in the middle of the river, where the water was deep, and she was unfamiliar with the line of the shore. Yet she knew that here and there along either bank of the river there were shoals and shallow places where rocks jutted out of the water. Once or twice Tom steered them past places in the river where there were falls and swift eddies in the current. Now she awoke to the fact that she was in danger. She could go down the river in the center of the stream as she had come up. But in the black darkness she could not pull in close to the river bank without nearing perilous places. Yet, unless she kept near the shore, how could she ever spy either the houseboat or the motor launch?

[69]

Madge rowed slowly and cautiously along. She tried to keep at a safe distance from the land while she strained her eyes for a glimmer of light that might come from either one of their boats. She was growing tired, for she was beginning to feel the effects of her long row. Her arms and back ached. All at once she became stupidly sleepy. She wondered dimly what on earth Miss Jenny Ann and the girls would do if they discovered that she had disappeared. What would Miss Betsey Taylor think of her now, when she learned that she, Madge Morton, had gone out on the river alone at night without a word to any one?

Madge sleepily pulled on her oars. She wished that she had persuaded Phil to come out on the water with her. Now the loneliness of the deserted river began to oppress her. She could have fallen over in the boat from sheer exhaustion. Through the darkness she suddenly saw a flickering light. Thank goodness, she was home at last! The light came from the left bank of the river, where their boats were moored. Madge rowed joyfully toward it. A little further in she saw that the light was on land. She had seen only its reflection in the water.

[70]

After another half hour's steady pulling Madge believed that she must have passed by their boats. Surely she could not have gone so far up the river as she had rowed down. She turned her boat and began to retrace her way, then drew in a few yards nearer the shore. Danger or no danger, she must not pass the houseboat by again. She wondered if she would have to stay out on the water until the dawn came to show her the way home. She would have to cease rowing and let the boat drift. She was too tired to keep on. She was growing so drowsy. All at once the "Water Witch" trembled violently. It gave a forward leap in the dark and went downward. Madge was thrown roughly forward. But she kept a firm grasp on her oars. She could not see, yet she knew exactly what had happened. Her boat had gone over some falls in the river. There was nothing for her to do but to try to stay in her boat. The "Water Witch" might overturn, or else right herself, at the end of her downward plunge.

The little skiff did neither. At the end of the falls she was caught in a swift whirlpool. Crouched in the boat, with her teeth clenched and her eyes watching the white spray that she could see even in the darkness, Madge felt her boat rotate like a wheel. She had never let go her oars. Now she braced herself with all her strength and gave one forward, final pull. The "Water Witch" leaped ahead. It was safely out of the eddy and in the current. But Madge's oar struck against a rock. It snapped in two and the lower half went floating with the stream. There was a grating sound, then she felt her boat ground between two rocks and stick fast.

[71]

Ahead the river seemed to gurgle and splash alarmingly. There might be other falls and whirlpools in her course. Madge had sense enough to know when she was beaten. If she pushed out from the rocks, where her boat was caught, with her single oar, she might find herself in far worse danger. She was grateful that the "Water Witch" had run aground.

Madge lay down in the bottom of her boat. She would wait until the daylight came and see

what was best to be done. She did not mean to go to sleep, for she realized her peril. She idly watched a single star that shone through the clouds, then her heavy eyelids closed and she fell asleep to the sound of the water beating against the side of her skiff.

[72]

## CHAPTER VII

### THE RESCUE

WHEN Madge opened her eyes the sun was shining into them. It was already broad daylight. Her boat was no longer held fast between rocks. In the night it had made its own way out and had floated toward the land. It was now only a few yards from the shore. With her one oar Madge pushed herself gently toward land.

Hills rose up along the river bank. The farmhouses lay farther back, she supposed. Certainly she had not the faintest idea where she was. The hills were thickly covered with scrub oaks and pines. She had not landed in a friendly spot. It was far more deserted than any place that she had ever noticed along the Rappahannock. At least, so she thought in the gray dawn of the August morning. Yet she knew that there were plenty of kind people who would be glad to help her if she could get over the hills to their homes.

[73]

From the appearance of Madge's clothes she might easily have been mistaken for a tramp. Her long coat was wet to her ankles and her shoes and stockings were muddy. She had long since lost her little cap and her hair was rough and tumbled from her night's sleep in the boat, while her face was white and haggard. Instead of following the line of the river, where she was sure to find some life stirring in another hour or so, Madge foolishly pushed up over the hill. She did not find a path, so she might have guessed that she was off the beaten track. She must have walked up the hill for half a mile when she saw a sight that at last gave her hope. An old, broken-down horse was tethered to a tree, eating grass. Surely he was a sign-post to some human habitation farther on.

Madge spied a cornfield to the left of her, though some distance off. She knew that the Virginia farmers cultivated the low hills for their crops, and that she was near some house. She sniffed the fresh morning air. A delicious odor wafted toward her, the smell of boiling coffee, which came from the thickest part of the hillside, away to the right of the cornfield.

[74]

Madge made straight for it. She had to push aside branches and underbrush, and the place was farther off than she supposed, but she found it at last. Seated on the ground before a small fire was an old woman, the oldest the little captain had ever seen. She was weather-beaten and brown, withered like a crumpled autumn leaf. She was roasting something in the fire and muttering to herself. A little farther on a man was drinking coffee from a quart cup. They were rough-looking people to come across in the woods. But Madge knew that in the harvest season many tramps and gypsies traveled about through Virginia, living on the crops of the fruitful land. They were usually harmless people, so she felt no fear of the strangers. They had no tent, but a few logs with branches over them formed a sort of hiding place.

"Please," began Madge timidly, "will you tell me where I am?"

The man sprang up and rushed toward her with a big stick in his hand. He seemed not so angry as frightened. The little captain's appearance disarmed his suspicions. He dropped his stick to the ground. The strange girl was a gypsy or tramp herself.

"Will you give me some coffee?" asked Madge pleadingly. She was beginning to feel weak and faint.

[75]

With the instant hospitality of the road the man passed Madge his own quart can. She took it, shuddering a little, but she was too thirsty to hesitate. She held the cup to her lips and drank. Then she went over and dropped down on the ground by the side of the old woman, who, although her eyes were fastened on the girl, had never ceased to mutter to herself. Madge began telling the story of her night's adventure.

"I haven't any money with me," she declared as she finished her story, "but if the man will get an oar and take me down the river to my friends, I will pay him whatever he thinks is right. I dragged my rowboat up on the shore not very far from here. I must return to my friends at once."

The old woman looked at the man questioningly. Madge's eyes were also on him. It did not dawn on her that the fellow could have any reason for refusing her simple request.

The man shook his head doggedly. "I can't row," he announced.

"Oh, that does not matter," replied Madge. "If you will get me an oar and come with me, I can do the rowing. I am rested now."

The man grunted unintelligibly, then went on with his breakfast. He paid no further attention to Madge. The old woman continued her curious muttering.

"Won't you try to find me an oar?" asked Madge again.

The man shook his head. His face darkened with anger.

[76] "Then I might as well leave you," declared Madge haughtily. "If you are so unaccommodating, I will look for some one else." She struggled wearily to her feet to continue her search. Her body still ached with the fatigue.

"Don't be rough with her," the old crone spoke from behind Madge.

The young girl felt her arms roughly seized and drawn back. She was forced to the ground. She struggled at first, but she was powerless. The man took a small rope and bound her feet together so that she could not move them. The ropes were not tight. The fellow did not wish to hurt her, but merely to prevent her getting away.

"You can't leave this place by day, Miss," he announced quietly. "I can't have anybody following you back here and running me down. When night comes I'll let you go."

Madge bit her lips. Night! Once more she must wander alone in the darkness in a vain search for her lost friends. What would they think if a day, as well as a night, passed with no sign of her?

Her big blue eyes were dark with grief and protest. "Please let me go," she entreated. "I promise, on my honor, that I will never show any one your hiding place, or say that I have seen you. I must get back to my friends, they will be so frightened." She was shaking with terror and anger, but she struggled to keep back her tears. Surely the man must relent and let her go back to the houseboat.

[77] He turned away without paying the least attention to her demands. Creeping under the pile of underbrush, he lay so still that no one would have dreamed that a human being was concealed there.

It came over poor Madge, at first dully, then with complete conviction, that the man whom she had come upon in the woods was a fugitive from justice—an outlaw hiding from the police.

Madge flung herself down in the warm, soft grass. For the first time in the seventeen years of her life she cried without any one to care for or comfort her. Until to-day Eleanor, her uncle or aunt, or one of her chums—some one—had always been near at hand to soothe her grief. Madge knew that her own recklessness had got her into this predicament. She had deserved some of the punishment. But she thought, as a great many other people do, that she was being judged more severely than her fault merited.

"Here, child," a voice said not unkindly, "bathe your face and eyes. There's no use crying. We don't mean you no harm. Only you have got to wait here."

[78] Madge sat up; the old woman, who looked like an aged gypsy, was handing her a dirty basin filled with a small supply of river water. The woman evidently went about and got what was necessary for the existence of the man and herself. At other times she kept guard over his hiding place.

Madge bathed her tired eyes and face. She was glad to have the use of her hands. She even managed to smile gratefully when the woman offered her a piece of cornbread and an ear of roasted corn.

She resolved to summon all of her courage and endurance to her aid. She would not plead or argue again. She would wait patiently until the long day had passed. Perhaps Tom or David or one of the other boys would see her skiff on the beach and come to her aid.

The morning went by. No one spoke or moved. Only once the man crawled out from under the brush for food and water. Then he stole back again.

Madge grew more tired with every hour. It was hard to have to sit still so long in one place, so she lay down on the grass. She did not go to sleep, but was drowsy from the heat and fatigue.

[79] The old woman came over to where she lay and stood looking at her sadly. Her pretty white face, with its crown of sun-kissed hair, gleaming with red and gold lights, her brilliantly red lips, brought back to this ugly, time-worn crone the memory of her own youth. Madge always caused other women to think of their own youth, she was so radiant, so full of faith and enthusiasm. It was partly because of this that Miss Betsey Taylor disliked her. Her own springtime had been prim and narrow. She had wasted the years that Madge was living so abundantly, and unconsciously Miss Betsey envied Madge.

The little captain saw the old gypsy's little, beady eyes fixed on her. She tried to sit up, but found herself too tired to do so. The woman dropped down near her and lifted her up. She had a pack of dirty cards in her hand. "Want your fortune told, honey?" she asked. "Then cross my palm with gold." The crone looked narrowly at the single gold seal ring that Madge wore. It had been a gift to her from her three houseboat chums.

Madge shook her head. "No, thank you," she answered politely, then listened for the sound of approaching footsteps. She looked up toward the crest of the hill. "From whence cometh my

strength'," she thought to herself. But she could not see or hear any one. The little spot where she was held a prisoner was surrounded with heavy shrubbery and walled in with ancient trees that had grown on the Virginia hillside for centuries.

[80]

The woman ran the cards through her withered hands. "Better let me tell your fortune; never mind the gold." She shook her head and muttered so mysteriously that Madge's cheeks flushed.

"I see, I see," the gypsy crooned, "many hearts in your fortune, but as yet few diamonds. And here, there, everywhere there is mystery. You are always seeking something. I can't tell whether it is a person, or whether you are only looking for happiness. But you are very restless." For a long time after this the old woman said nothing more. She sighed and mumbled to herself. Two or three times she went over her pack of cards. Madge watched her in fascination.

"Now I see a light-haired and a dark-haired man. They will come together when you are older. One of them will bring diamonds and the other spades. Neither are for you, not at first, not at first. I see water all about you and a fortune in the sea. But be careful, child, be careful. Go slow and——"

Madge was no longer interested. "There is always a dark man and a light one in everyone's fortune," she thought wearily. "What a silly old woman, and what utter nonsense she is talking! Oh, if you would only let me go away from this place?" she begged aloud.

[82]



David Came to Her Rescue.

[83]

At some distance off there was an unmistakable sound of people coming through the woods. Madge's heart leaped within her. She gave one glad cry, when the gypsy woman clapped both hands over her mouth. Madge fought the woman off. She cried out again. The man crept from his hiding place, half dragging, half pulling Madge behind a thick cluster of trees, keeping his coarse, heavy hand over her mouth.

Madge heard Phyllis Alden's and David Brewster's voices, yet she could not call out to them for aid.

She saw some one pull aside the low branch of a tree, then David's face appeared, discolored with anger as he caught sight of her. Before the man who had seized her could strike at the boy David had grasped him by both shoulders and hurled him to the ground.

Whipping out his knife David cut the cords that bound Madge and raising her to her feet, placed one arm protectingly around her. Her captor had also risen and stood glowering at David without offering to attack him. The boy's rage was so terrifying that even this hardened lawbreaker quailed before it.

"We didn't mean any harm," mumbled the old woman. "You know us, boy. You know we wouldn't hurt the young lady. You won't say you saw us, will you?"

But ignoring her question David turned to help Madge back to her friends.

[84]

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MOTOR BOAT DISASTER

IT was Miss Betsey Taylor who had first discovered Madge's absence. Just before daylight she awakened with the feeling that some one had stolen into her stateroom, for she was dreaming of her lost money. Miss Betsey sat straight up in bed and looked about her small cabin. There was no one to be seen.

"Miss Betsey," called Miss Jenny Ann from the berth above, "what is the matter?" Nor would Miss Jones go back to sleep until she had explored the houseboat thoroughly.

As she stole into the next cabin where the girls slept she noticed that Madge was not in her bed. She must have heard the same noise that had disturbed Miss Betsey, and gone to investigate the cause. But Miss Jenny Ann could not ascertain the cause of the noise nor did she find Madge on the decks. She aroused Phil and they sought for her together. Then Eleanor and Lillian joined them, and Miss Betsey, a prey to curiosity, came forth to find out what all the commotion was about.

[85]

It took a very brief space of time to examine the entire houseboat. The girls held the lanterns and scurried about, calling "Madge!" It seemed incredible that she did not answer.

Tom was the first of the boys on the motor launch to be disturbed by the unusual sounds from the "Merry Maid." His first thought was fire. With a cry to the other boys on the "Sea Gull" he rushed to the houseboat. But the appearance of the five young men, who had come to join in the search for the lost Madge, merely added to the confusion. They tumbled over one another, and as they were half asleep, most of them did not know what or whom they were looking for.

"Come on, Brewster," commanded Tom Curtis, "it is absurd to think that Miss Morton can be anywhere near and not have heard us. It may be she became restless and went for a little walk on the shore; let us look there."

David and Tom crept along the river bank, their eyes turned to the ground. They detected Madge's footprints leading away from the launch and then returning to the houseboat. The revelation only added to the mystery.

[86]

There was one thought in the minds of the seekers. Could Madge have walked in her sleep and fallen over into the water? The river was shallow along the bank, but she might have been borne by the current out into the stream. It did not seem a very probable idea. But then, no one had any possible explanation to offer for the little captain's vanishing into the night like this. No one had yet seen that the rowboat, too, was missing.

It was an hour after the first alarm, and daylight was beginning to dawn, when Phyllis Alden heard a noise from Miss Betsey's stateroom. She went in, to find the old lady seated on her trunk wringing her hands. She had been awake so long that she was tired and querulous. Her corkscrew curls were carefully arranged and she was fully dressed. Her head was bobbing with indignation. "I am perfectly willing to confess that I am worried about that child," she announced to Phyllis. "But I knew, as soon as I set my eyes upon her, that wherever Madge Morton went there was sure to be some kind of excitement. It may not be her fault, but—" Miss Betsey paused dramatically. "And your father, Phyllis Alden, was a great goose, and I an even greater one, to trust myself on this ridiculous houseboat excursion. A rest cure! Good for my nerves to be among young people!" Miss Betsey fairly snorted. "I shall be a happy woman when I am safe in my own home again!"

[87]

Phyllis hurried into the galley and came back with a glass of milk for the exhausted old lady. "Come, take a walk around the boat with me, Miss Betsey," she invited comfortingly. "We can't do anything more to find Madge until the morning comes."

Phil was always a consolation to persons in trouble, she was so quiet and steadfast. She wrapped Miss Betsey in a light woolen shawl and together they walked up and down the little houseboat deck. Phyllis kept her eyes fixed on the shore. Madge had surely gone out for a walk and something had detained her. Her loyal friend would not confess even to herself the uneasiness she really felt.

Miss Betsey and Phil stood for a quiet minute in the stern of the "Merry Maid," watching the morning break in a splendor of yellow and rose across the eastern sky. Not far away Miss Jenny Ann was talking to several of the boys, with her arms about Eleanor and Lillian.

Miss Betsey Taylor glanced down at the mirroring gold and rose of the water under her feet.

"My gracious, sakes alive, it has gone!" she exclaimed, pointing a trembling finger toward the river.

"What has gone, Miss Betsey?" inquired Phil. "Don't tell us that anything else besides Madge has vanished."

[88]

"But it has," Miss Betsey Taylor insisted. "Where is that little rowboat that you girls call the 'Water Witch,' that is always hitched to the stern of this houseboat? I saw it last night just before I went to bed. Wherever that child has gone the boat has gone with her."

Everyone crowded around Miss Betsey and Phyllis. Tom and David returned from their search on the shore. "I am sure I don't know what it all means," declared Miss Jenny Ann in distracted tones.

"Don't worry so, Miss Jenny Ann," protested Phil. "It only means that runaway Madge went out for a row by herself on the river last night after we went to bed." And Phil's voice was not so assured. "Something must have happened to keep her from getting back home. We shall just have to look along the river until we find her."

Tom was already aboard his motor launch. It took only a few moments to get his engine ready for service. "Come on, Sears and Robinson," he cried, "you can help me by being on the lookout for Miss Morton while I run the boat. I'll go from one end of the Rappahannock to the other unless I find her sooner."

"Let me go with you, Tom, please do," pleaded Eleanor, looking very wan and white in the morning light. "It's too dreadful to wait here on the houseboat with nothing to do."

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Tom nodded his consent. He was too busy to waste time in conversation. So Harry Sears helped Lillian and Eleanor to the cabin of the "Sea Gull."

Tom put on full speed, heading his launch up the river. He had been the captain of his own boat for several years. To-day he was unusually excited. The speed limit of his boat was eight knots an hour. Tom tested his motor engine to the extent of its power as he dashed up the river, the water churning and foaming under him.

Eleanor, Lillian, Harry and George looked vainly up and down the shore for a sign of Madge. Tom was going so fast they could see nothing.

"Do, please, go a little slower, Tom," begged Eleanor. "We shall never find Madge at the rate you are traveling."

It was morning on the river. The river craft were moving up and down. Steamboats carrying freight and heavy barges loaded with coal made it necessary for Tom to steer carefully.

The "Sea Gull" slowed down. Every now and then Tom would put in alongside another boat to inquire if a girl in a rowboat had been seen. No one gave any news of Madge.

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After gliding up the Rappahannock for ten miles, and finding no trace of the lost girl, Tom decided she must have rowed down stream instead of up. So the "Sea Gull" turned and went down the river.

The launch's engine was not in the best of humors. It may not have liked being roused so early in the morning, and David Brewster was not by to tend it under Tom's careful directions. Every now and then the gasoline engine would emit a strange, whirring noise. Harry Sears, who was watching the engine, heard it lose a beat in its regular rhythmical throb. "See here, Tom," he called suddenly, "something is wrong with this machinery. I can't tell what it is."

Harry had spoken just in time. The motor launch stopped stock still in the middle of the river. Tom flew to his beloved engine. "Don't worry," he urged cheerfully, "I'll have her started again in a few seconds."

Tom kept doing mysterious things to the disgruntled engine. The two boys and Lillian watched him in fascinated silence. Eleanor was not interested. They were only a few miles from the houseboat, and she wondered if Madge could possibly have returned home.

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Eleanor stepped out of the little cabin of the launch toward the fore part of the boat. Drifting down toward them, directly ahead and in their straight course, was a line of great coal barges, three or four of them joined together, with a colored man seated on a pile of coal, idly smoking and paying little heed to where his barges were going. It was the place of the smaller boats to get out of his way. The barges could only float with the current.

But the "Sea Gull" was stock still and there was no way to move her.

"Tom!" Eleanor cried quietly, although her face was as white as her white gown, "if we don't get out of the way those coal barges will sink us in a few minutes. You will have to hurry to save the 'Sea Gull'."

Tom sprang up from his work at the engine. Eleanor was right. Yet his motor engine was hopelessly crippled. He could not make it move.

"Get to work with the paddle, Robinson, and paddle for the shore for dear life," he commanded,

seizing the other oar himself. Tom was a magnificently built fellow, with broad shoulders and muscles as hard as iron. He never worked harder in his life than he did for the next few minutes. The girls and Harry Sears watched Tom and George Robinson in anxious silence. The coal barges were creeping so near that the "Sea Gull" was in the shadow they cast.

[92] The two boys had to turn the launch half way around with their paddles before her nose pointed to the land. The man on the coal barge was shouting hoarse commands when the side of the first barge passed within six inches of the stern of Tom's launch.

Tom wiped the perspiration from his face. "I think I had better take the girls to land," he decided. "Then we can find out what is best to be done."

"Your automobile boat's busted, ain't it?" inquired a friendly voice as the entire party, except Tom, piled out of the launch to the land.

A colored boy of about eighteen was standing on the river bank grinning at them. He held a piece of juicy watermelon in his hand.

Eleanor and Lillian eyed it hungrily. They suddenly remembered that they had had no breakfast.

"The young ladies had better come up to my ole missus's place?" the boy invited hospitably. "They look kind of petered out. I spects it will take some time to fix up your boat."

The entire company of young people looked up beyond the sloping river bank to the farm country back of it. There, on the crest of a small hill, was a beautiful old Virginia homestead, painted white, with green shutters and a broad, comfortable porch in front of it. It looked like home to Eleanor. "Yes; suppose we go up there to rest, Lillian," pleaded Eleanor. "If Tom can't get his engine mended, we can row back to the houseboat in a little while."

[93] David Brewster and Phyllis Alden had not waited quietly on the "Merry Maid" while Tom and his launch party went out in search of Madge.

Five minutes after the "Sea Gull" moved away David left the houseboat and went on shore.

"Where are you going, David?" called Phyllis after him.

"I am going to look for Miss Morton along the river bank," he answered in a surly fashion. "Anybody ought to know that if an accident happened to her rowboat, the boat would have drifted in to the land."

"I am going along with David Brewster, Miss Jenny Ann," announced Phil. "It's mean to leave you and Miss Betsey alone, but I simply can't stay behind."

David's face grew dark and sullen. "I won't have a girl poking along with me," he muttered.

"You will have me," returned Phyllis cheerfully. "I won't be in your way. I can keep up with you."

At first David did not pay the least attention to Phyllis, who kept steadily at his heels. Phyllis could not but wonder what was the matter with this fellow, who was so strange and taciturn until something stirred him to action.

[94] Only once, when Phil stumbled along a steep incline, David looked back. "You had better go home, Miss Alden," he remarked more gently. "I'll find Miss Morton and bring her to you." And Phil, as Madge had been at another time, was comforted by the boy's assurance.

"I am not tired," she answered, just as gently, "I would rather go on."

At one o'clock David made Phyllis sit down. He disappeared for a few minutes, but came back with his hands full of peaches and grapes. He had some milk in a rusty tin cup that he always carried.

"Did some one give this to you?" asked Phil gratefully.

David shook his head. "Stole it," he answered briefly. Phil, who could see that David was torn with impatience for them to resume their march, ate the fruit and drank the milk without protest.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, when David spied the "Water Witch," drawn up on the river bank out of the reach of the water. Some unknown force must have led him to Madge's hiding place in the woods.

Afterward he made no explanation either to Phyllis or Madge of his unexpected acquaintance with the man who had kept Madge a prisoner, and neither girl asked him any questions.

[95] David managed to get the "Water Witch" out into the river with the single oar, and a party of young people in another skiff, seeing their plight, brought them safely home to the houseboat.



## LEAVING THE HOUSEBOAT TO TAKE CARE OF ITSELF

"I SHOULD dearly love it," declared Eleanor.

"I think it would be a great lark," agreed Lillian.

"Are you sure you would like it, Miss Betsey?" asked Phyllis and Miss Jenny Ann in the same breath.

"I certainly should," Miss Betsey asserted positively.

Madge was unusually silent. She had been in such deep disgrace since her escapade, both with Miss Taylor and Miss Jenny Ann, that she felt she had no right to express her opinion in regard to any possible plan. But her eyes were dancing under her long lashes, which she kept discreetly down.

Miss Taylor had just suggested that, in view of the fact that Tom Curtis was obliged to take his motor launch to the nearest large town to have it repaired, and their excursion up the river must cease for a time, the houseboat party desert the river bank and spend ten days or more farther inland.

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George Robinson had offered to go back with Tom. David Brewster expected to do as he was ordered, but Harry Sears and Jack Bolling positively refused to give up their holiday. And there was no room for them on the houseboat.

Eleanor and Lillian had come back from the old farmhouse, where they had spent the day before, filled with enthusiasm. Mr. and Mrs. Preston were the most delightful people they had ever met. Their house was filled with the loveliest old mahogany and silver, and they had no visitors and no family. Eleanor was sure that, if she begged her prettiest, Mrs. Preston could be persuaded to take them all in her home until Tom came back with his motor launch.

"You see, Jenny Ann," entreated Eleanor, with her hands clasped together, "every year Mr. Preston has the most wonderful entertainment. He told us all about it. In August he gives what he calls 'The Feast of the Corn.' All the country people for miles around come to it. He asked me to bring every member of our party over for it at the end of the week. It's just like Hiawatha's feast. Do let's ask them to take us in, if only for a little while."

Miss Betsey Taylor's New England imagination was fired. The house that Eleanor described was just such a Virginia home as she had dreamed of in her earlier days. She must see it. Also, Lillian had related the story of a wonderful sulphur well not many miles from the Preston estate. Miss Betsey was sure that sulphur water would be good for her nerves.

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Two days later the entire party stood out on the deck of the "Merry Maid" to see Tom and George Robinson start off with their broken-down motor launch before the rest of the party moved over to wait for them at the Preston farm.

"I am so sorry, Tom," apologized Madge, with her eyes full of remorse. "It is really my fault that you will have to miss this part of our holiday. I wish I could go back with the boat instead of you. Can't you send David and stay here with us?"

Tom shook his head. He was ashamed of his previous grumbling. "Of course not. It wasn't your fault. The engine would have broken down just the same if I hadn't been searching the river for you. But I must see to its being mended myself, and Robinson is a brick to go along with me. I shall have no use for Brewster. Perhaps, after all, we may be able to get back in time for the Indian feast. Good-bye, Madge."

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A few minutes after the launch was seen moving back down the river, being ignominiously towed by an old horse, the same gay craft that had proudly advanced up the stream only a few days before with the "Merry Maid" in her wake.

The houseboat party waved Tom and George a sad farewell, and then promptly forgot almost all about them in the excitement of moving their clothes and a few other possessions up to the farm, Eleanor having persuaded the Prestons to take them for a few days as boarders.

Mrs. Preston drove down in her own phaeton to take Miss Betsey and Miss Jenny Ann home with her. A farm hand came with a wagon for the trunks. But the young people decided to walk. The Preston house was only two miles away from the houseboat landing. Sam, the colored boy, who had been Lillian's and Eleanor's original guide to the farm, had been engaged to show them the way.

The houseboat party formed a gay procession. None of the four girls wore hats. Lillian and Eleanor, who took some care of their complexions, carried pink and blue parasols to match their linen gowns, but Madge and Phil bared their heads to the sun, as did Harry Sears, Jack Bolling and David.

Sam lugged a lunch basket, which Mrs. Preston had sent down to the party; and David, who kept in the rear, carried a dress suit case that had accidentally been left behind.

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Most of the road ran past meadows and orchards, with few houses in sight. The ripening fruits made the air heavy with their summer sweetness. David was shy and silent, as usual, but the others were in gay humor.

Beyond a broken-down rail fence Phil espied a tree laden with luscious peaches. Farther on, past the orchard, she could just catch the outline of a house.

"Let's get some fruit, Jack?" Phil suggested to Bolling, who was walking with her. They both climbed over the fence.

"Wait a minute, everybody," Phil called. "Wouldn't you like to go up to the old house back there to ask for some water. I am nearly dead, I am so thirsty."

"Don't go in that thar place," Sam entreated, turning around suddenly, his brown face ashen, "and don't eat them peaches. The house is a ha'nt and them peaches is hoodooed."

Eleanor and Madge burst into peals of laughter. The other young people, who were not Southerners, smiled and stared.

"What is a hoodoo, Sam?" Harry Sears, whose home was in Boston, inquired teasingly.

Sam scratched his head. "I can't splain it," he announced. "But you'll know a hoodoo all right if it gets hold of you. That young lady and man'll sure have bad luck if they eat them peaches. Nobody'll touch 'em around here."

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"A hoodoo is a kind of wicked charm, like the evil eye, Harry," Madge explained, her eyes twinkling. "All we Southerners believe in it, don't we, Sam? Go and warn Miss Alden and Mr. Bolling, David. They must not bring bad luck on themselves without knowing it." Madge had not meant to order David Brewster to do what she wished; she merely requested him to take her message, as she would any one of the other boys.

David looked stolidly ahead and made Madge no answer. He was in a black humor. He had reasons of his own for not wishing to stay near the place where he had discovered Madge. He had hoped that Tom would take him down the river in the motor launch, but Tom had believed that he was doing David a favor by allowing him to remain with the others to enjoy the holiday on the farm.

"Don't you hear Miss Morton, Brewster?" shouted Harry Sears angrily. "She told you to tell Miss Alden something." Harry Sears was always particularly disagreeable with David. To-day his anger seemed justified.

A wave of crimson swept over David's brown face. He looked as though he would have liked to leap on Harry Sears and throw him into the dust. Only the presence of the girls and Madge's quick action deterred him.

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"Never mind anybody telling Phil and Jack," she added quietly. "It's too late to save them now. Besides, I want a peep at Sam's 'ha'nted house' and a drink of water from the ghost's well. So follow me, good people, if you are not afraid."

Phyllis and Jack Bolling led the way to the haunted house, as the place had been their discovery. The old house had been a beautiful one in its day. It was built of shingles that had mellowed to the beautiful shade of gray that only time can give. The front door hung loosely on its hinges. Spider-webs obscured the windows, with their narrow diamond panes of broken glass. Rank weeds grew everywhere and poison ivy hung in long branches from the ancient trees. To the left, where the old garden had once been, there was a glory of scarlet poppies and cornflowers growing amid the weeds. Their triumphant beauty had repeated itself year after year here in this neglected spot with no one to marvel at it. Madge, Eleanor and Lillian gathered great bunches of the red and blue flowers. Phyllis and Jack discovered the well, with its crystal cold water. Harry Sears prowled about near the old house, with Sam at his heels. The boy was frightened, but too faithful to desert his party. David kept at some distance from the others.

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"Don't you think this a good place to eat the luncheon Mrs. Preston has given us?" Harry called out, poised on the broken steps that led up to the tumbled-down front porch. "The well is here to supply us with water and I'm jolly hungry."

The houseboat travelers formed a circle on the grass just in front of the old house. Sam spread out the luncheon. It was a warm day, the clouds hung low in the sky and the garden was humming with honey-full bees.

There was nothing mysterious about the place that Sam described as "ha'nted," except that it was entirely deserted.

Harry Sears reached out for a sandwich. "Tell us why this old house is supposed to be inhabited by ghosts, Sam," he ordered.

## CHAPTER X

### A GHOST STORY

"IT all happened such a long time ago I can't zactly call to mind the whole story," confessed Sam. "But they was two brothers that owned this here old place. They was in the war and fought side by side. Then they lived here together, peaceful, for a long time. One of them was married and the other wasn't, but it didn't seem to make no difference. All of a sudden they fell out, and after a while one of the brothers died, mysterious like. The live man went away from here and he hasn't been heard of since. But they do say," Sam shivered and looked fearfully at the dilapidated mansion, "that the murdered man still walks around this here place at night. People even claim to see him in the daytime. Sometimes he is by himself, and then again he brings a lady-ghost with him, but there ain't nobody ever lived in this here house since them two brothers fell out," Sam concluded, mightily pleased with the gruesome impression that his tale had made on his hearers.

"I should think not," agreed Lillian Seldon hastily. "I don't like ghost stories."

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"I am sorry, Lillian, because I know a perfectly stunning one that is as true as history," declared Harry Sears. "If we had time, and Lillian didn't mind, I was going to tell it to you while we rested."

Madge put her arm around Lillian. "Do tell it, Harry," she begged. "I'll protect Lillian from the 'ghosties.'"

The other young people clamored for the ghost story.

Harry looked serious. "My story isn't a joke," he announced. "It hasn't a beginning or much of an end, like ordinary ghost stories, but it is true. The people to whom the ghost appeared are great friends of my mother and father. Somehow this deserted place here makes me think of the one down on Cape Cod. That house was also uninhabited for years and years, and no one knew exactly why, except that there were rumors that the place was haunted. One day a Mr. Peabody, of Boston, an old friend of ours, went down to Cape Cod to look for a home for the summer. The ghost house was what he wanted, so he rented it and left orders for it to be fixed up. He didn't know about the ghosts, though, and he wondered why the real estate agent let him have the place so cheaply. Mr. Peabody was a bachelor, so he asked two friends, Captain Smith and his wife, to occupy the house with him for the summer."

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"Oh, trot out your ghosts, Harry. We are getting impatient," interposed Jack Bolling.

"The first day that Mrs. Smith was alone in the house," continued Harry, "she was in the sitting room with the door open when a fragile old lady passed right through the hall. She disappeared into space. That very same night, just at midnight, when Mr. Peabody, Captain Smith and his wife were in the library, they heard the fall of a heavy body upstairs on the second floor. Captain Smith and Mr. Peabody rushed up the steps just in time to see an old man, leading a young girl by the hand, enter a room where the door was locked. When they got the door unfastened there was no one in the room."

"Harry, don't go on with that horrible tale," entreated Lillian, looking timidly up at the dusty windows of the old house, under whose shadow they had taken refuge. The sun was no longer shining brightly, but the shade was grateful to the little circle of listeners on the grass.

"Don't be such a goose, Lillian," protested Phil. "What have Harry's Massachusetts ghosts to do with us way down here in 'ole Virginny'?"

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Lillian gave a shriek. The entire company sprang to their feet, scattering sandwiches, cakes and pickles on the grass. Inside the empty house there had been a distinct noise. Something had fallen heavily to the floor.

At the same instant David, who had been apart from the others, appeared around the corner of the house.

"Whew, I am glad it was you who made that racket, Brewster!" declared Jack Bolling, grinning rather foolishly.

The young people looked at one another with relieved expressions.

"I'm so grateful it isn't night time," sighed Eleanor.

"I didn't make any noise," declared David, seeming rather confused. No one paid any attention to his reply. They were again clustered about Harry Sears, begging him to go on with his ghost story.

"Things went from bad to worse in the house I was telling you about," continued Harry. "Every night, at the same hour, the same noise was heard and the old man and the girl reappeared. Why, once Mr. Peabody was sitting in his garden, just as we are doing here"—Harry glanced across the old garden. Was it a branch that stirred behind the tangle of evergreen bushes? The day was very still—"and he saw the same old man walk by him and enter his house through a closed side door. After awhile Mrs. Smith became ill from the strain and she sent for a physician who had been

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living in the neighborhood a long time. The doctor did not wish to come to see Mrs. Smith just at first. When he did he related his own experience in the same house years before. He had just moved into the neighborhood, as a young physician, when one night, at about midnight, he was aroused by some one ringing his bell. An old man asked the doctor to come with him at once, as a young girl, his grand-daughter, was dangerously ill. Dr. Block went with the old gentleman. He found the young girl, dying with consumption, in a room on the second floor of a house. An old lady was with her, but the doctor saw no one else. He wrote a prescription, put it on the mantel-piece and said he would come back in the morning."

Harry stopped talking. A distant roll of thunder interrupted him.

"Do hurry, Harry; we must be off!" exclaimed Jack Bolling.

[109] "The next morning the doctor went back to the same house. It was closed and boarded up, and the caretaker told the physician that no one had lived in the house for many years. The doctor was indignant, so the caretaker opened the door and let Dr. Block into the house, so he could see for himself that it was empty. The hall was covered with dust, but a single pair of footprints could be seen going from the hall door to the bedroom on the second floor. The old man had left no tracks. The physician entered the room, which was empty. There was no old man, no old woman, no sick girl, not even a bed, but"—Harry made a dramatic pause—"the doctor walked over to the mantel-piece and there lay the prescription that he had written the night before!"

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" exclaimed Lillian. She was on her feet, pointing with trembling fingers toward a window of the old house which was back of the rest of the party. "I am sure I saw a face at that window," she cried. "No one will believe me, but I did, I did! It was a girl's face, too, very white and thin. Please take me away from here."

Madge slipped her arms about the frightened Lillian. For an instant she almost believed that she, too, had seen the specter that must have been born of Lillian's overwrought imagination as a result of the ghost stories she had just heard.

[110] Madge and Lillian led the way down the tangled path from the haunted house. They were some distance from the others when the little captain discovered that David was following them. She had not looked at him, not spoken to him since he had so rudely refused her simple request.

Now she walked on, with her head in the air. Lillian did not like David, but now she was almost sorry for the boy: she knew the weight of Madge's displeasure. "David Brewster wants to speak to you, Madge, dear," she whispered in her friend's ear.

Madge made no answer, nor glanced behind her.

"Miss Morton!"—David's face was very white; he was bitterly ashamed—"I am sorry, beastly sorry, I was so rude to you this morning. I was angry, not with you, but about something else. I don't seem to know how to control my temper. Perhaps it is because I am not a gentleman. I would do anything I knew how to serve you." David was not looking at Madge, but on the ground in front of him.

Madge's expression cleared as though by magic. "Never mind, David," she said impulsively. "Let's not think anything more about it. I lose my temper quite as often as any one else. And don't say it is because you are not a gentleman; you *are* a gentleman, if you wish to be."

[111] The other young people came hurrying on. The clouds were now heavy overhead and the thunder seemed ominously near. The lightning began to streak in forked flames across the summer sky.

"I think everybody had better run for the farm," suggested Phyllis. "Sam says it is only a short distance away."

No one cared to linger any longer in the deserted grounds. The story of the tragic old house, oddly mixed as it was with Harry Sears's ghostly tale and Lillian's fancied apparition of a girl's white face at the window, did not leave a pleasant recollection of the morning spent near Sam's "ha'nted house."

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[112] **CHAPTER XI**

**THE FEAST OF MONDAMIN**

"MINNEHAHA, Laughing Water, otherwise known as Madge Morton, you are the loveliest person I ever saw," announced Phyllis Alden, while Eleanor and Lillian gazed at Madge in her Indian costume with equally admiring eyes.

"See, here is the description of Minnehaha. Doesn't it sound like Madge?" Phil went on, reading

from a volume of Longfellow:

"Wayward as the Minnehaha,  
With her moods of shade and  
sunshine,  
Eyes that smiled and frowned  
alternate,  
Feet as rapid as the river,  
Tresses flowing like the water,  
And as musical a laughter."

Phyllis paused and Madge swept her a low curtsy. "Thank you, Phil," she said, her blue eyes suddenly misty at her chum's compliment.

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It was the day of the great corn feast on the Preston estate, and Madge had been selected to appear in the costume of Minnehaha and to read to the guests certain parts of Hiawatha that referred to the Indian legend of the corn.

All the young people were to appear in the guise of Indians. Phyllis, with her olive skin, black eyes and hair, made a striking Pocahontas.

Phil looked more like an Indian maiden than Madge, but Madge had more dramatic skill. Lillian, with her hair as yellow as the corn, was the paleface princess stolen by the Indians in her babyhood. Eleanor wore an Indian costume, also, but she represented no especial character.

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Much against his will David Brewster impersonated Hiawatha. He hated it. He did not wish to come to the entertainment at all, much less in the conspicuous position of the hero of the evening. But Mr. Preston had taken a deep fancy to David. He seemed not to mind the boy's queer, moody ways, and he had a great respect for his practical judgment. Mr. Preston had asked David to remain in his service when the houseboat party disbanded, but David, for reasons that he would not tell, had refused. The boy did not think he could decline to impersonate Hiawatha when Mr. Preston considered that he had paid him a compliment in asking him. In spite of his embarrassment David Brewster was a good representation of a young Indian brave, with his swarthy skin, his dark eyes that flashed fire when his anger was aroused, and his vigorous, muscular body, made lean and hard by his work in the open fields.

In the middle of the Preston estate, between the orchards and the cornfields, a huge platform had been erected with a small stage at one end. The place was decorated with sheaves of wheat, oats and barley, with great stacks of green and yellowing corn standing in the four corners. The platform was filled with chairs and hung with lanterns, some of them made from hollowed-out gourds and pumpkins, to carry out the harvest idea. After the reading of Hiawatha the platform was to be cleared and the young people were to have a dance.

The invitations to the feast read for six o'clock. At seven a dozen open wood fires were roasting the green ears of corn for more than a hundred guests. The long tables under the trees in the yard were laden with every kind of delicious food.

But Madge wished the feast was over and her poem read. Her knees were knocking together when she rose to read before so many people.

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The August moon was in the full. It was a golden night. In a semi-circle behind her crowded her friends from the houseboat party. They formed an Indian tableau in the background, and David stood near her at the front of the stage.

"And in rapture Hiawatha  
Cried aloud, 'It is Mondamin!'"

read Madge, with a shy glance at the young Hiawatha standing beside her.

At this moment there crept up on the platform an old woman, so old that the audience stared at one another in amazement. They believed that the strange visitor was a part of the performance. David and Madge knew better. David's face turned white as chalk, but Madge's voice never faltered as she went on with the reading:

"Yes, the friend of man, Mondamin!  
Then he called to old Nokomis'."

The old woman's presence was explained to at least those of the audience who were familiar with the story of Hiawatha. The ancient gypsy woman who had appeared on the stage among the young people so unexpectedly was "old Nokomis," Hiawatha's grandmother, one of the principal characters in Longfellow's poem.

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The moment that Madge finished her recitation David Brewster disappeared. But the old gypsy went about among the Prestons' guests, keeping their attention engaged by telling their fortunes.

The gypsy woman was not the only mysterious visitor at the famous corn feast. Madge and Lillian were dancing with two young country boys when two Indian braves unexpectedly appeared in the midst of the guests. They had on extremely handsome Indian costumes and their faces were completely covered with Indian masks. They spoke in strange, guttural voices, so that no one could guess who they were.

Madge and Lillian tried in vain to escape them. Wherever the girls went the Indian chiefs followed them.

As the evening progressed Madge grew very tired. The apparition of the old woman, whom she had seen before on the day when she was held a prisoner in the woods, had made her nervous. She longed to ask Phil if she also recalled the face of the old woman.

"Miss Jenny Ann," Madge kept a tight hold on Phil's hand, "Phyllis and I are a little tired. We are going away by ourselves to rest. You and Miss Betsey won't be frightened about us?" Madge gave her chaperon a repentant hug and Miss Jenny Ann smiled at her. The little captain had promised never to wander off again without saying where she was going.

[117] The fires where the corn had been roasted were still burning dimly. The girls made a circuit of the fires and went over into another nearby field, where a haystack formed a good hiding place. There they dropped down on the ground and Madge, who was more easily tired than Phil, laid her head in her chum's lap.

No matter how much Phyllis and Madge enjoyed parties and people, they were never happier than when they could stroll off to have a quiet talk with each other. The two girls were splendid associates. Phil had the calm sweetness, poise and good sense that impetuous Madge often lacked, while Madge had the fire and ardor that Phyllis needed to give her enthusiasm.

"I wish Tom and George Robinson were here at the farm to-night, Phil!" exclaimed Madge, after a short pause, giving a little sigh.

Phyllis looked at her chum closely. The moonlight shone full in Madge's wistful blue eyes. Phil patted her hand by way of sympathy.

[118] "You see, Phil, it is like this," went on Madge. "I feel sorry about Tom, because I was really responsible for making him break his engine and spoiling a part of his holiday. If I had not run away by myself in the moonlight, Tom might have been here with us. It seems to me that I am having a perfectly lovely time, while poor Tom is being punished for my fault. It isn't fair."

"Sh-sh!" Phyllis put her fingers gently over her friend's lips. Some one was stealing quietly past them on the other side of the haystack. He disappeared in the darkness, a little way off, and the girls supposed that he was one of the Prestons' guests escaping from the crowd.

A few minutes later Phil exclaimed: "Madge, is that one of the fires from the corn roast over there? I did not think that there was any corn roasted so near to Mr. Preston's barn."

Madge glanced idly across the field. The girls were at one side of the group of buildings where Mr. Preston kept his live stock. She saw a tiny jet of flame, apparently running along near the ground. Both watchers stared at it silently. A larger flame crawled up the outside wall of the barn, then smoke began to pour out through the cracks.

The two girls sprang to their feet. "One of the barns has caught fire!" cried Phil. "I'll find Mr. Preston. You give the alarm to the men about the place." Phil ran toward the festival grounds.

[119] As Madge turned she heard a slight sound behind her. Some one was coming toward her, moving cautiously over the grass. She slipped to one side of the haystack so that she could see who it was. "Why, David Brewster!" she cried, "what are you doing way off here? Quick! hurry! Phil and I think Mr. Preston's barn is afire!"

David set his teeth in rage as he sped across the field with Madge close at his heels. He had taken off his Indian costume, but his face was still stained and painted in Indian fashion, so that it gave him a wild, unnatural appearance. Instead of stopping at the barn David, without a word of explanation, ran on to the Preston house.

Madge found a crowd of men already gathered about the burning barn. Mr. Preston had formed a bucket brigade and a dozen men were passing buckets from the well to the fire. Half a dozen of the more valorous men, three of them farm-hands, were fighting their way into the barn, leading, driving, or coaxing out the terrified horses and cattle.

Mr. Preston stood at the barn door, giving commands to the workers.

By this time the hay in the loft had caught and the whole barn was a seething mass of fire. Mrs. Preston stood near the scene, with Madge and Phil on either side of her. David Brewster suddenly joined them. No one noticed his peculiar expression.

[120] "Let the barn go, men!" shouted Mr. Preston. "Quick, out of it! It will fall in a minute. We have saved the other buildings, and we must let this go."

"Oh, my poor Fanny!" wailed Mrs. Preston, as though she were talking of a human being. Fanny was a beloved old horse that had belonged to Mrs. Preston for twelve years. She had driven her in her phaeton nearly every day in all this time and loved the old horse almost as a member of the family.

Madge felt sure that Mr. Preston could not know that Fanny was still in the burning barn. The little captain broke away from her friends and made a rush toward the smoke and flames. Mr. Preston was within a few feet of the partially consumed building. From the inside of the barn came a groan of anguish and terror that was human in its appeal. Mr. Preston covered his face with his hands. "Don't try it, men," he commanded authoritatively; "the old mare can't be saved.

It is useless to try to go into the barn now."

Madge could no longer endure the piteous sounds. She made a headlong plunge toward the barn door. She could not see her way inside, but the noise that the horse was making would guide her, she thought.

[121] Just at the threshold of the barn she felt herself shoved aside and hurled several feet out of harm's way. She fell backward on the ground and lay still. It was David who had flung her from the reach of the fire's scorching heat and plunged into the barn in her stead.

The crowd watched the brave young man in horrified silence. Seconds that seemed ages passed. The front of the barn collapsed. Madge felt Mr. Preston seize her and drag her away with him, but not before she and all the watchers had caught sight of David. He stood in the far corner of the barn with his coat thrown over the terrified horse's head. His face was almost unrecognizable through the smoke, but the ringing tones of his voice urging the old horse forward could be heard above the crackling wood.

"Hurrah!" shouted Mr. Preston hoarsely. He almost trampled over Madge, who was sitting on the ground staring wildly at David. Then she saw Mr. Preston and a half dozen other men pick David up on their shoulders and bear him away from the crowd, while two of the farm-hands took charge of old Fanny.

[122] David's burns, though not serious, were painful. His hands and arms were severely blistered. But the excitement occasioned by the fire had hardly passed when it was discovered that during the fire some one had entered the Preston house and had stolen a quantity of old family silver. Miss Betsey Taylor's money bag, which she had carefully concealed under the day pillow on her four-post mahogany bed, had also disappeared.

There would probably never be any way to discover how or when the thief entered the house. There had been more than a hundred visitors about the place, and the house had been open for hours. During the fire every one of the servants had rushed into the yard.

There was also another disturbing fact to be considered. Either before or after the fire the old gypsy woman, who had unexpectedly appeared to take the character part of old Nokomis in the Hiawatha recitation, had completely vanished; also, the two men disguised as Indian braves had gone.

The Prestons and their guests discussed all these pertinent features of the affair until long after midnight. Miss Betsey wept and mourned over the loss of her money bag, and dolefully repeated that she wished she had never, never heard of a houseboat. The four girls and Miss Jenny Ann became thoroughly disgusted with the disgruntled spinster's selfish bewailing of her own loss, when the Prestons, who had met with a much heavier loss, were heroically making light of their misfortune.

[123] Madge also had a private grievance, one that was quite her own. David had behaved roughly, almost brutally, toward her when she had tried to dash into the burning barn. She decided that she did not in the least like David, and that she was not at all grateful to him for literally hurling her out of harm's way.

As for David himself, he had slipped away from the men who had borne him in triumph on their shoulders and, in spite of the pain of his burns, was striding across the fields in the direction of the woods with angry eyes and sternly set mouth.

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## CHAPTER XII

### A BOY'S TEMPTATION

**I**N the days that followed David kept more than ever to himself. He occupied a small room alone, and for hours at a time he would stay inside it, with his door locked against intruders.

Few sounds ever came forth to show what the lad was doing. His hands and arms were bandaged almost to the elbows, but he had use of his fingers and his face was uninjured.

Madge had forced herself to thank David, both for his rescue of her and of the old horse, which she had intended to save. But David had not had the courtesy to apologize to her for having thrown her aside so roughly. He wished to, but the poor fellow did not know what to say to her, nor how to say it.

The girls had all offered to read to David, or to entertain him in any way he desired, while he was suffering from his burns. But the boy had refused their offers so flatly that no one of them felt any wish to be agreeable to him again.

The young people spent a great part of their holiday on the Preston farm in riding horseback by

[125] daylight and by moonlight, and in exploring the old salt and sulphur springs and mines in the neighborhood. Word had come from Tom Curtis and George Robinson that the accident to the engine of the motor launch had been more serious than they had at first supposed. The boys would be compelled to remain away some time longer. Mrs. Curtis wished to see Tom on business, so he had gone on to New York for a few days.

Since the corn roast, the burning of his barn and the burglarizing of his house Mr. Preston had been quietly endeavoring to discover the evil-doers. He had notified the county sheriff and the latter had set his men to work on the case, but so far there were no clues. Mr. Preston believed that the same person who had set fire to the barn had committed the robbery. The barn, must have been burned in order to keep the attention of the family and guests centered on the outside disaster while the thief was exploring the house.

[126] Madge did not like to mention to Mr. Preston that David Brewster might be able to give him some information about the burglary; for Madge remembered having seen David run toward the house at about the time the fire was started. He did not come back for some minutes afterward. Yet, as David did not speak of his presence in the house to Mr. Preston or to any one else, she did not feel that it was her place to speak of it. David might have some reason for his silence which he would explain later on.

Miss Betsey Taylor was now more than ever convinced that the same thief who had robbed her of various small sums on the houseboat had but completed his work. How the robber had pursued her to Mr. Preston's home she did not explain. But she certainly cast aside with scorn Madge's suggestion that no one had stolen from her while she was aboard the "Merry Maid." She had only miscounted her money, as many a woman has done before, Madge had contended. Miss Betsey had been fearful that the little captain might be right before the final disappearance of her money bag. But now she regretted, far more than her money, the loss of the few family jewels that she had inherited from her thrifty New England grandmothers.

[127] David Brewster stood at his little back window, watching Madge, Phyllis, Lillian, Eleanor, Harry Sears and Jack Bolling mount their horses for a long afternoon's ride over to some old sulphur springs a few miles from the Preston estate. The party was to eat supper at the springs and to ride home before bed time. Mrs. Preston, Miss Jenny Ann and Miss Betsey Taylor were already driving out of the yard in Mrs. Preston's old phaeton. They were to be the advance guard of the riding party, as no one except their hostess knew the route they should take.

Mrs. Preston had invited David to drive with her, as he was not able to use his injured hands sufficiently to guide a riding horse, but David had refused. The party were to be away for some time. Mr. Preston would be out on the farm, looking after his harvesting. David Brewster had other plans for the afternoon.

Once the others were fairly out of the yard the boy found an old slouch hat in his shabby suit case. He pulled it well down over his face. Then he got into an old coat that he had been ashamed to wear before the new friends, but it served his present purpose. Inside his coat pocket David thrust a small, flat object that, in some form, always accompanied him whenever there was a possible chance of his being alone for any length of time.

Then David left the farm. He said good-bye to no one. To one of the maids who saw him leaving he merely explained that he was going for a walk. He did not ask for food to take with him. His one idea was to be off as soon as possible.

[128] The boy was not entirely certain of the route that he must travel. He knew of but one way to go, and it stretched over many miles. It might mean delay and difficulty. David was not as strong as he had been before the shock and injury of the fire. Still, the thing must be done. It was not the physical effort that worried David.

The trip seemed interminable. The lad had to travel along the road that led back to the houseboat, and from there to follow the line of the river bank to a well-remembered spot. David swung along as rapidly as possible. His greatest desire was to make his journey and to return to the farm before the riding party got home. He might then have an explanation to make. What could he say if anybody demanded to know where he had been? His silence would create suspicion. But then, David had kept his own counsel before to-day.

It was well into the afternoon before the boy reached his destination. Slowly and cautiously, making as little noise as possible, he climbed a hill that rose before him. The crest of the hill was heavily wooded and a high pile of sticks and branches formed a clever hiding place. But there was no human being in sight, no old woman, no man, no sign of a fire except a few ashes that had been carefully scattered over the ground.

[129] When the youth reached the top he stood still and looked cautiously about him. He could hear the rush of the river below the hill and the rustle of the wind in the trees. He crouched low and put his ear to the ground, like an Indian, then rose and, with a frown, went to the brush heap and crawled under it. Presently he came out, holding in his hand a small red handkerchief which was knotted and tied together. David's face was very stern. It seemed that something which he had feared had come true; yet the lad turned and went down the hill again, whistling and kicking at the underbrush and shrubbery as he walked, as though he were trying to make as much noise as possible. Ten minutes later David came back up the hill by another route as quietly as some creature of the woods in hiding from a foe. Behind a tree the boy lay down flat. He took out of his pocket the small package that he had brought with him from the farm and, holding it before him,



seemed to lose himself completely in earnest contemplation of it.

After a while some one else drew near the same place, walking even more stealthily than had the boy. David did not stir nor turn his head. He was hidden by the trees. An old woman crept to the pile of underbrush. She crawled under it and stayed for some time. When she came out she had forgotten to be silent; she was mumbling and muttering to herself.

"Granny," David touched the gypsy woman on the shoulder.

"Is it you, boy?" she asked, riveting her small black eyes on him. "How came you to Virginia? We thought that you were many hundreds of miles away. It's a pity!" She shook her head. "Fate is too strong for us all," she muttered to herself.

"I am sure I am as sorry as you are that I am here," David interrupted her passionately. "But perhaps you are right, and it is fate. I came to Virginia because I had work to do here. Where is *he*?"

"I don't know. I ain't seen him but once since," answered the woman.

David laughed rather drearily. "Don't try to fool me. You've got to tell me the truth before I go away from here. You might as well do it first as last."

The old woman looked furtively and anxiously at the heap of dead branches. "I *am* telling you the truth," she asserted.

"Where is he, Granny?" continued David. "I've got to find him."

"You *ain't* got to find him," protested the old woman. "You can't give him away, and it won't do no good. Ain't you his—" She stopped short. "You can't make him change now; it is too late."

"I don't want to talk; I've got to get back," returned David quietly. "If you don't tell me where he is, I'll give the alarm and have the country scoured for him."

The old woman whispered something in David's ear. "I am not sure he is there, but I think that's the place. I know we can trust you, boy, for all your high and mighty ways."

"You had better get away from here, Granny," answered David. "You are too old for this sort of life, and some day you will get into trouble."

The gypsy's hand moved patiently. "It's the only kind of life I have been used to for many, many years. I don't mind, so long as he keeps on getting off."

David strode down the hill. It was just before sunset. He was beginning to doubt his being able to make his way back to the Preston place before the picnic party came home. He could not walk so fast as he had come, for he was tired and disheartened.

After a few miles' journey along the river bank he came to a bend where he could see, farther ahead, the "Merry Maid," the poor little houseboat, looking as deserted and lonely as David felt. Her decks were cleared and her cabins locked until the return of the houseboat party. She was being taken care of by a colored boy who lived not far away.

David felt a sudden rush of longing. The houseboat was filled with happy memories of the girls. He was tired out and exhausted. He must rest somewhere. The boy climbed aboard the houseboat. But he did not rest. He walked feverishly up and down the deck.

An overwhelming impulse never to return to the Preston farm swept over David. The love of wandering was in his blood. To-day he did not feel fit to associate with the girls and boys who made up the two boat parties. He ought never to have come with them. His lowly birth and lack of training were against him. David knew that trouble, and perhaps disgrace, might be in store for him if he went back to Mr. Preston's and faced what was probably going to happen.

The poor boy wrestled with temptation. Mr. and Mrs. Preston had been good to him. Miss Betsey meant to be kind, in spite of her fussiness, and she had evidently told his new acquaintances nothing to his discredit. Tom Curtis and Madge Morton trusted him. Yet could he face the suspicion which he felt sure would fall upon him?

The sun was going down and the river was a flaming pathway of gold when David turned his back on the houseboat and started for Mr. Preston's home. His steps grew heavier and heavier as he walked. He was stiff, sore and weary. The bandages were nearly off his hands and the flesh smarted and burned from the exposure to the air. David was also ravenously hungry. Against his heart the things wrapped in the old red handkerchief cut like sharp tools.

Night and the stars came. David was still far from home. He decided that it might be best for him to struggle on no farther. It would be easier to explain in the morning that he had gone out for a walk and lost his way; than to face his friends to-night with any explanation of his trip.

David remembered that the house that the colored boy, Sam, had described as "ha'nted" lay midway between the houseboat and the farm. He could sleep out on its old porch.

David filled his hat with Sam's "hoodoo" peaches. He sat on the veranda steps as he ate them, thinking idly of Sam's story of the old place and getting it oddly mixed with what he had heard of Harry Sears's ghost story. David was not superstitious. He did not believe that he could be afraid of ghosts. He had other live troubles to worry him, which seemed far worse. Still, he hoped that if

[134] ghosts did walk at midnight about this forlorn old spot that they would choose any other night than this.

It was a soft, warm summer evening with a waning moon. David rolled his coat up under his head for a pillow and lay down in one corner of the porch.

He did not go to sleep at once; he was too tired and his bed was too hard. How long he slept he did not know. He was awakened by a sound so indescribably soft and vague that it might have been only a breath of wind stirring. But David felt his hands grow icy cold and his breath come in gasps. He was conscious of something uncanny near him. Something warm touched him. He could have screamed with terror. But it was only a thin, black cat, the color of the night shadows.

[135] The boy sat up. He was wide awake. He was not dreaming. Stealing up the path to the house was a wraith; tall, thin, emaciated, with hair absolutely white and thin, and skeleton-like hands; it was the semblance of an old man. He was not human; he made no noise, he did not seem to walk, he floated along. There was something dreadfully sad in the ghost's appearance. Yet he was not alone. He led some one by the hand, a young girl, who was more ghost-like than he was. Her hair was floating out from her tiny, gnome-like face. She was thinner and more pathetic than the old man. She had no expression in her face and she, too, made no sound.

The awestruck boy did not stir. The midnight visitants to the empty house did not notice him. They came up to the porch. They mounted the steps and, without touching the fallen front door, passed silently into the deserted mansion.

David did not know how long he waited, spellbound, after this apparition. But no sound came forth from the house; no one reappeared. The black cat rubbed against him the second time. Even the cat must have been dumb, for she made no noise, did not even purr.

David Brewster was not a coward. If you had asked him in the broad daylight if he were afraid of ghosts he would have been too disgusted at the idea even to answer you. But to-night he could not reason, could not think. As soon as he could get his breath he ran with all his speed down through the yard of the "ha'nted house," over the fence and into the road, and then for the rest of the distance to the Preston house. He forgot his fatigue, forgot that he might have to answer difficult questions once he got home. David wanted to be with real, live people after his night of fears.

[136] The boy found no lights in the Preston house. The front door was closed and the back one barred for the night. Evidently the excursionists had come back late and, believing him to be in bed, had not wished to disturb him.

David prowled around the house. He hated to wake anybody up to let him in. He knew that Miss Betsey would be frightened into hysterics by the sudden ringing of a bell. The boy found a pantry window unlocked. Opening it, he crawled into the house. He got up to his bedroom without anybody coming out to see who it was that had entered the house at such a mysterious hour. It was not until early the next morning that David learned that he need not have been so careful, as there was no one in the Preston house except himself and some of the servants.

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## [137] CHAPTER XIII

### ELEANOR GETS INTO MISCHIEF

[138] **M**RS. PRESTON, Miss Jenny Ann and Miss Betsey, in the old phaeton, plodded on ahead of the young people to show them the route to the old sulphur springs. They passed by a number of beautiful Virginia farms and old homesteads along the shady roads. Miss Betsey was deeply interested in the history of the neighborhood, and in the old families that had lived in this vicinity since the close of the Civil War. Mrs. Preston liked nothing better than to relate that history to her New England guest.

To tell the truth, Miss Betsey Taylor was far more clever than any one might have supposed. She remembered very well that the friend of her youth, Mr. John Randolph, had come from somewhere near Culpepper, Virginia. Nor was she by any means unwilling to know what had become of him after he had disappeared from her horizon. But Miss Taylor did not intend to ask her hostess any direct questions if she could be persuaded to relate the story of this John Randolph in the natural course of her conversation. It may be that Miss Betsey had even been influenced in her desire to spend some time on the Preston estate by this same thirst for information in regard to the friend who had certainly lived not far from this very neighborhood.

"Whose place is that over there?" inquired Miss Jenny Ann unexpectedly, pointing to an old brick house overgrown with ivy.

Mrs. Preston flicked her horse. "It belongs to the Grinsteeds. They are descendants of the

Randolphs, who used to live in these parts."

Miss Betsey's eyelids never quivered. "The Randolphs?" she inquired casually. "What Randolphs?"

"James and John were the heads of the family in my day, but they have both—— Dear me! are the young people following us? We must hurry along," returned Mrs. Preston absently.

Miss Jenny Ann looked out of the phaeton. She reported that she could see Madge and Phil, who were riding side by side, leading the horseback cavalcade.

Miss Betsey's side curls bobbed impatiently, but she decided to ask no more questions of her hostess just at present.

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Behind Madge and Phil, Lillian and Jack Bolling were riding companions, and Eleanor and Harry Sears brought up the rear. The four front riders kept close together, but every now and then Harry and Eleanor would lag behind until they were almost out of sight of the other riders.

Madge did not like Harry Sears. He was not always straightforward, and he was not kind to those who were less fortunate than himself. It may be that the little captain's dislike was due to the fact that Harry was always particularly rude to David and never failed to try to make the boy feel his inferior position. She did not believe, as Harry did, that because he was well off and well-born he had the privilege of being impolite to poorer and less aristocratic people. So Madge could not imagine how Eleanor could like Harry Sears. She did not know that Harry showed only his best side to Eleanor.

"I do wish Nellie would keep up with us, Phil!" she exclaimed a little impatiently. "I am afraid she and Harry may get lost if they keep on loitering; they don't know which roads to take." Phil looked back anxiously over the road. At some distance down the lane Harry and Eleanor were riding slowly, deep in conversation.

"I think I will ride back and ask Nellie to hurry," proposed Madge, turning her horse and cantering back to her cousin.

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"Hurry along, Eleanor," she said rather crossly. "It is ever so much nicer for us to keep together."

Eleanor laughed. "Don't worry about me, Madge. I am not going to fall off my horse and we can catch up with you at any time we wish. I don't wish to ride fast. Harry and I are talking and I like to look at the scenery along the road."

Madge's face flushed. Eleanor was generally easy to influence, but once she made up her mind to a thing she was quietly stubborn and unyielding.

"All right, Nellie," Madge shrugged her shoulders eloquently, "but if you and Harry are lost, don't expect us to come back to hunt for you. Mrs. Preston particularly asked us to keep her in sight, as the roads about here are confusing. I am sure I beg your pardon for intruding." Madge touched her horse with the tip of her riding whip and cantered back to Phil's side, her cheeks scarlet, her eyes snapping. Hereafter Eleanor could go her own way. Madge had heard Harry Sears chuckle derisively as she turned away and it made her very angry.

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Eleanor gazed after Madge's horse a little regretfully; not that she intended doing what her cousin had asked of her, but she was sorry that Madge had become so cross over nothing.



"Hurry Along, Eleanor," Called Madge.

"I tell you, Miss Eleanor," Harry Sears continued when Madge was out of hearing, "I don't trust that fellow Brewster. I know we are going to have trouble with him before this holiday is over. I want to warn you, because I know you don't like the fellow either. Tom Curtis won't hear a word against him. But I know Brewster is up to some mischief when he goes off for hours and stays by himself. I have pretty well made up my mind to follow him some day to find out what he does."

Eleanor shook her gentle, brown head. "I don't think I would spy on him, Harry," she protested. "I don't like David, because he is so rough and rude, but I don't think he is positively bad."

"Oh, it wouldn't be spying," argued Harry. "If I think the fellow is going to get us in trouble, I believe it is my duty to keep a close watch on him."

"He'll be awfully angry," sighed Eleanor.

Harry made no answer, but merely smiled contemptuously.

Eleanor's horse was ambling down a road that was cut along the foot of a tall hill. On the other side there was a steep declivity that dropped nearly twenty feet to the ground. A low rail fence separated the embankment from the road, which was rough and narrow.

All of a sudden Eleanor's horse began to shy off to one side of the road. The more Eleanor pulled on her left rein, the more her horse moved toward the right; and on the right side of the road was the precipice.

One of her horse's forefeet went down beneath the level of the road. Eleanor tried to rein in, but she felt herself sliding backward over the right side of her horse.

"Harry!" she cried desperately. Harry Sears turned in amazement. He was not in time. Eleanor rolled off her horse. In falling she struck her back on the rail fence. But the fence saved her life. She tumbled forward toward the road, instead of rolling down the steep embankment.

Harry was off his horse in a moment. Eleanor was huddled on the ground, her face white with pain. She had fallen off her horse, though the animal had not tried to run away. It had stumbled back into the road and stood waiting to know what had happened.

"Your saddle girth broke, Eleanor," explained Harry. "Are you much hurt?"

"No-o-o," replied Eleanor bravely, with her lips trembling. "I believe I have bruised my shoulder, but it isn't very bad."

Harry had Eleanor on her feet, but he could see that she was suffering intensely. He did not know what to do. The rest of the riding party was well out of sight. He did not like to leave Eleanor alone while he galloped after them; yet he did not believe that she would be able to ride on.

"Can you fix my saddle girth, Harry?" questioned Eleanor. "We shall be left behind sure enough, and Miss Jenny Ann will be angry with me."

It took Harry quite ten minutes to mend Eleanor's saddle girth. She sat limply on the grass, hoping that the pain in her shoulder would pass. It did not, but she managed, with Harry's help, to get back on her horse.

Harry started off at a brisk canter, a little uneasy. He and Eleanor were entirely unfamiliar with the country through which they were traveling. There were roads that intersected each other every few miles. These were not marked with sign-posts and Harry had no idea in what direction lay the old sulphur springs.

But Nellie was not following him. He reined up and rode back to her. "What's the matter now?" he asked impatiently.

[146] "I am so sorry, Harry," apologized Eleanor. "I think I can ride, but I can't go fast; it hurts my shoulder so dreadfully." Eleanor's soft brown eyes were filled with tears, which she tried in vain to keep from falling. Her pretty, light-brown hair, which she had braided and tied up with a black velvet ribbon, hung in a long plait down her back.

Slowly, keeping the horses in a walk, Harry and Eleanor continued their journey. Harry hoped that some one would ride back to see what had delayed them. Eleanor knew that no one would. Madge would think that they had purposely tarried. She would say so to the others, and no one would seriously miss them until after the arrival at the picnic grounds.

But Eleanor and her companion conquered another mile of the way, when they came to what Harry had feared, two roads that crossed their path like two sides of a triangle, each leading in a totally different direction.

Both riders reined up. Harry found a spring and Eleanor felt refreshed after drinking and bathing her face in the cold water. But which road should they take? They had both given up all hope of rejoining the rest of the party on their way to the springs; all the two now dreamed of was ultimately to arrive there. After careful consideration Harry and Eleanor chose the wrong road.

[147] The old sulphur springs had been a fashionable summer resort in Virginia twenty-five years before. It still had its famous sulphur well and a dozen or more brick cottages in various stages of dilapidation. The big hotel had been burned down and no one had attempted to rebuild it.

It had been Miss Betsey Taylor's special desire to drink the waters of the famous sulphur well. She had heard of it as a cure for all the ills of the flesh.

When the riding party dismounted from their horses Madge and Phil espied Miss Betsey peering down the old well. Madge had visited sulphur wells before. "Want a drink, Miss Betsey?" she inquired innocently, coming up to the old lady. She decided to revenge herself on Miss Betsey for the excellent daily advice that the maiden lady bestowed upon her.

Miss Betsey looked pleased. "Certainly. I intend to drink the sulphur water all day, and to have some of it put up in bottles to take back home with me. I can't say that I exactly like the odor." Miss Betsey's aquiline nose was slightly tilted.

"Here you are," interrupted Madge, passing Miss Betsey a glass of the sulphur water.

Miss Betsey took one swallow and gave a hurried gasp. "Take it away, child," she urged faintly. "It is the most horrible thing I ever tasted in my life." The old maid's eyes almost twinkled. "I think, my dear, that I will cure my nerves in a pleasanter way," she decided.

[148] Miss Jenny Ann hurried over to them. "What has become of Nellie, Madge?" she questioned immediately.

The little captain shook her head. "She will be along soon. She and Harry Sears were loitering a little behind the rest of us."

But Eleanor and Harry did not arrive. An hour passed, then Miss Jenny Ann and the girls began to feel uneasy. It was growing late. The time had long since come for supper. Finally Jack Bolling suggested that he ride back to see what had become of the wanderers. In the meantime the supper was spread out on the grass. No one ate much. The whole party kept gazing up the road. It was nearly dark when Jack Bolling returned—alone. He had galloped back over the way they had come for three miles without seeing a sign of either Eleanor or Harry.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### "CONFUSION WORSE CONFOUNDED"

"I CAN'T go any farther, Harry," said Eleanor despairingly.

Harry Sears reached her just in time. Eleanor fell forward on her horse's neck. She had fainted with the pain in her shoulder, which had increased with every step her horse had taken.

Harry laid Eleanor on the ground under a tree. Then he stood staring at her pallid face. He had not the faintest idea what he should do. He knew of no spring nearby where he could get water. Girls were an awful nuisance, anyway; something was always happening to them. Harry was sorry that he had ever ridden with Eleanor. It was stupid of him to have let the rest of the party get so far ahead of them.

Still, poor Nellie did not open her eyes. Harry hitched both of the horses to a fence rail and then came back to gaze at Eleanor until she came to herself.

[150] When Eleanor opened her eyes it was to see Harry's frown, partly of impatience and partly from worry. She tried to sit up, but the pain made her ill and she lay back on the ground. She realized that she must have sprained her shoulder when she fell from her horse. She had been wrong in believing it to be only bruised.

"What shall we do, Eleanor?" asked Harry gloomily. "You can't ride any more and I can't leave you here by yourself. This road seems to be cut through a wilderness. We have not passed a house in miles!"

"You can help me over into that woods, Harry," she said faintly. "I'll lie down under the trees and wait—the sulphur springs can't be very far from here—then you ride on and find the others. Madge will drive back in Mrs. Preston's phaeton for me," smiled Eleanor, though her lips were almost colorless with pain. "Please don't forget where you leave me, Harry."

Harry Sears's face cleared. Eleanor's idea was the only possible one, and she was a brave girl to be willing to be left alone. "Don't you fear," he comforted her, as he led her deeper into the thick grove of trees. "I'll tie my handkerchief to the tree nearest the road. Besides, your horse will be hitched near here. When you hear us driving along the road, in about ten or fifteen minutes, just you sing out."

[151] Eleanor was grateful when Harry left her, and she could give way to her real feelings. She was on a bed of moss and Harry had rolled up his coat for a pillow to put under her head. But the pain in her shoulder was excruciating. She could not get into any position where it seemed to hurt less. Each time she moved a twinge caught her and she would have liked to scream aloud. But Eleanor did not scream; she waited patiently, though now and then the tears would rise in her eyes of their own accord and trickle down her white cheeks. Madge was such a long time in coming to find her. However, Harry did not know his way to the sulphur well. It might take him some time to find it. How late it was getting! The sun was low in the west.

[152] After taking a last look at the spot where Eleanor lay, at her horse hitched to a fence rail, at his own white handkerchief, which fluttered from a low branch of a tree near the road, Harry rode furiously off. He would surely find their friends in a few moments. But Harry continued to ride in exactly the wrong direction. Every yard he covered took him farther away from the sulphur springs. While he was galloping on his wild-goose chase the party at the springs decided to return to the Preston farm. They were too uneasy about Harry and Eleanor to have a good time, and they concluded that they would either overtake the lost couple on the way home or else find that the two young people had given up and returned to the farm.

The three girls gave their horses free rein and cantered home with all speed. Yet it was dark when they arrived. No word had been heard of Eleanor or Harry. It was a cloudy evening and the sun had disappeared quickly. Without waiting, except to give the alarm to Mr. Preston, the entire riding party set out again. Madge thought that she would have liked to ask David to help them, but there was no time to spare. The riders met Mrs. Preston, Miss Jenny Ann and Miss Betsey, who had set out for home in the phaeton. The three older women also refused to go back to Prestons, until Eleanor and her companion were discovered.

[153] In the meantime Harry Sears had finally reached the decision that he was not on the right road to the sulphur well. At the end of a five-mile gallop he turned his horse and cantered back. He passed Eleanor's horse, tugging impatiently at the reins that bound her; he saw his own white handkerchief tied on the tree; but he could not see or hear Eleanor. He would have liked to stop to find out that all was well with her, but he dreaded to let Eleanor know that he had spent all this time and was still without assistance. At the crossroads, where the young man had made his original mistake in the roads, he at last turned down the lane that led to the sulphur springs. But by this time his friends were well on their way home to the Preston farm.

Eleanor's horse had grown weary of remaining standing. It was past her supper time and she wished her measure of oats. The horse tossed her head restlessly, walked forward a few steps and then backward, tugging and straining at her bridle. In his excitement and hurry to be off, Harry had not tied the horse very securely. He had no other hitching rope than her bridle. The mare gave one final jerk and shake of her head and was free. Quite innocent of the mischief her desertion would cause, she trotted back to her own stable at the Prestons.

At nine o'clock in the evening rain began to fall. The night was pitch dark, except for an occasional jagged flash of lightning. When Madge, in advance of all the others, passed along only a few rods from the very spot where Harry had left Eleanor the latter must have heard nothing,

for she made not the faintest outcry.

[154] It was almost midnight before Eleanor's friends discovered that Harry was not with her. Not finding any of the party at the sulphur springs, Sears had lost his head completely. Instead of returning to poor Eleanor he went on to the Preston farm, hoping stupidly that Nellie had in some way been rescued and that he would find her there. The journey back home was a long, weary one. His horse was completely fagged out and had gone lame in one foot. Harry was terrified at the emptiness of the Preston farm; only one or two servants were about; the others had gone with Mr. Preston to look for Eleanor. There were no horses left on the place. So, on foot, Harry set out again, only to have Eleanor's riderless horse pass by him in the night. He hardly saw the animal in his excitement. He did not dream that it was the horse he had hitched to mark Eleanor's resting place, but plodded on, tired and dispirited.

Harry finally ran across Madge, Phyllis and Jack. He told them his story as best he could. Foot by foot the young people retraced their way over the same road, looking for the fluttering signal of Harry's white handkerchief and the waiting horse.

[155] The horse, of course, had run off, and at first it seemed impossible to find the handkerchief. Madge was desperate. It was her fault that poor Nellie was alone at midnight in the rain with her injured shoulder. If only Madge had begged Eleanor to ride on faster, she knew that Eleanor would have consented. It was only because she had commanded it that her cousin had been so obstinate.

The other members of the Preston household were almost as miserable as Madge. Even Miss Betsey Taylor could not be persuaded to return to her bed. She forgot all about her health and her nerves, and was intent only on finding Eleanor, who was her favorite of the four girls.

The rain was still pouring in heavy, unrelenting streams, and everyone was soaked to the skin.

"My poor Nellie!" cried Madge. She and Phil were leading their tired horses along the road. "I shall never forgive Harry Sears for leaving her by herself and chasing all over the country for help. What an idiot he is!"

"Sh-sh!" Phil comforted her, although she herself was quietly crying. It was so dark that no one could see the girls' tears. "Don't blame Harry. He did what he thought was best at the time, although it seems silly to us now."

It was Harry, though, who at last found his rain-soaked handkerchief tied to the branch of a tree. He had held a dark lantern up by every bush or tree that he passed in the neighborhood where he believed he had left poor Eleanor.

[156] "I've found the place, I've found the place!" he cried triumphantly. "Just a minute, Eleanor, and we will come to you!" He ran toward the spot where he remembered to have left Eleanor. Madge hurried after him, Phyllis keeping tight hold of her hand.

Harry's cry had thrilled all the searchers. Jack and Lillian came next to hunt, with Mr. Preston close behind them. They stood together under the tree where Eleanor had lain. The dark lanterns lit up their haggard faces. Eleanor was not there!

"You have made a mistake in the place, Sears," declared Jack.

Harry reached down and picked up his own coat. "No, this is my coat," he declared.

Madge dropped to the ground, shaking with sobs. She had found Eleanor's little, soft felt riding hat.

"Children," urged Mr. Preston, "don't be so alarmed. It is very natural that, when we took so long to find the poor child, she got up and wandered off somewhere to get out of the rain. I will rouse the neighborhood and we men will search the woods and fields. We will inquire at all the farmhouses in the vicinity. Why, we are sure to find Eleanor. You girls must run along home and wait until morning. I can't have you all ill on my hands with pneumonia."

[157] Miss Jenny Ann, Mrs. Preston and Miss Betsey were crawling out of the phaeton when Mr. Preston led three of the girls back to "I can't go home, Jenny Ann," insisted Madge. "It was my fault that Nellie is lost. Uncle and Aunt will never forgive me."

It was in vain that Miss Jenny Ann pleaded, argued and commanded the little captain to return with the other women to the Preston farm. She simply would not go. So Phyllis stayed behind with her for company.

Just before daylight one of the farmers who lived near the woods where Eleanor was supposed to have been left took the two girls home with him. Eleanor had not then been found.

## THE BLACK HOLE

HOURS and hours had gone by, and Eleanor had lain quite still. Sometimes she was conscious, but oftener she was not. The pain in her shoulder, the exhaustion from the long waiting, had made her delirious. When the rain began it seemed at first to refresh her, she was so hot and feverish. Later rheumatic twinges began to dart through her injured shoulder; her whole body was racked with pain. She seemed to be in some horrible nightmare. She forgot what had happened to her. She no longer realized that she was waiting for her friends to come to her rescue; she only believed that, if she could in some way get back to her own home, "Forest House," the agony and terror would cease.

[159] In her delirium Eleanor managed to get up from the wet ground. She never knew how or when, but she remembered groping her way cautiously through the dark forest. The hundreds of trees seemed like a great army of terrible men and women waving angry arms at the frightened girl. Now and then she would bump into one of the trees. Eleanor would then step back and apologize; she thought that she had collided with a human being.

At times Eleanor was dimly conscious that she could hear the sound of her own voice. She was singing in high, sweet tones a song of her babyhood:

"When the long day's work is over,  
When the light begins to fade,  
Watching, waiting in the gloaming,  
Weary, faint and half afraid,  
Then from out the deep'ning twilight,  
Clear and sweet a voice shall  
come,  
Softly through the silence falling—  
Child, thy Father calls, 'Come  
home.'"

There was something in the familiar words that comforted Eleanor. She would soon find her mother and father and Madge. But step by step Eleanor went farther away from civilization and deeper into the woods. At last she came out of the woods altogether to a more forbidding part of the country. A group of small hills rose up at the edge of the woodlands. They seemed to poor Eleanor's distorted imagination to be a collection of strange houses.

[160] A yawning hole gaped in the side of one of the hills. Years before a company of promoters had believed that rich coal deposits could be found in these Virginia hills. A coal mine had been dug in the side of this solitary hillock. But the coal yield had not been rich enough. Later on the company had abandoned it and the old coal mine was disused and almost forgotten. A strange freak of destiny led Eleanor to the spot.

She felt, rather than saw, the opening. The rain had ceased, but the night was still dark. Eleanor believed that she had found the door of her own home at "Forest House." Why was it so dark in the hall? Had no one lighted the lamps? Surely, she heard some one cry out her name!

"Mother! Father!" she called. "Madge!" She put out one hand—the other was useless—and stepped into the black hole. It was all so dark and horrible. Eleanor took a few steps forward; a suffocating odor of coal gas greeted her; she stumbled and fell face downward. Eleanor was literally buried alive. She had wandered into a place that the world had forgotten, and she was too ill to make any effort to save herself.

[161] So it was that Eleanor Butler heard no sound and saw no sign of the desperate search that was being made for her. But if Eleanor were unconscious, there was some one else who knew that the woods and all the nearby fields and countryside were being investigated, inch by inch, by a party of determined seekers. The man believed that the search was being made for him. For several days he had been in hiding on the edge of the woods, not far from the old coal mine into which Eleanor had stumbled. He had his own reasons for hiding, although he believed that until to-night no crime had been fixed on him.

While Eleanor was groping her way out of the woods this man was crouched in the branches of a heavily wooded tree. He had spent all his life in the open, and knew that a party of men searching through a forest on a dark night would not spy him out so long as the darkness covered him. But he knew that at dawn he must find a better hiding place.

Just before daylight the woods were silent once more. The fugitive understood that the searching parties had gone home to rest and to get reinforcements in order to begin a more thorough hunt at dawn.

[162] The greater part of the night the man had spent in trying to decide where he should conceal himself before the daylight. He knew of but one possible hiding place that was safe. He had tracked through the country for miles to hide his treasures in the old coal mine, although he had believed that he was absolutely free from suspicion. Who had betrayed him? Not the old gypsy woman. The man did not consider her. But there was—*the boy!*



As soon as the woods were free from the hunting parties the man slipped down from his tree. It was a poor place of refuge, but he would crawl into the disused coal mine, for the day at least, to guard his life and his stolen property. He crept cautiously along. As soon as he could get word to the gypsy woman they would both try to get away from the neighborhood. Things were getting too hot for them both. And again, there was *the boy!*

There was some one else afoot in the woods. The man could hear a cat-like tread. Nearer stole the other prowler. There was another sound, a faint call, which the man answered. An instant later the old gypsy woman appeared. "I have been searching for you, lad. The boy says he has got to see you."

It was hardly dawn, but a faint light had appeared in the sky that was not daylight but its herald. A pause hung over the world that always comes just before its awakening.

[163] The man and woman hesitated just a moment at the opening of the old mine. It was dreadful to shut themselves away from the daylight. The man went in first, the old woman close behind him. But a few feet from the entrance he staggered back; he had struck his foot against something. The man's first thought was that some one had crept into the mine to steal his treasure. A few seconds later he became more accustomed to the dim light and saw the still figure of Eleanor.

The man and the woman stared at the girl as though they had seen an apparition. She was so deathly pale it was not strange that they thought at first that she was not alive.

Both the man and the woman kept close to the ground, so as not to inhale the odor of the coal gas. The old gypsy took Eleanor's limp, white hand. "She is alive," she whispered to the man.

The man nodded. He realized at once that the woods were being searched, not for him, but for this lost girl. He could not imagine how the girl had wandered into this dreadful place of concealment. But she was certainly innocent of any wrong or suspicion of him. Yet, if she stayed in the coal mine with them all day, she might die.

There has hardly ever been born into this world any human creature who is wholly wicked. The man in the mine with Eleanor was not a cruel fellow. He had one strange, wicked theory, that the world owed him a living and he would rather steal than work for it.

[164] Unexpectedly Eleanor opened her eyes. She did not cry out with terror. She was no longer delirious. She smiled at the man and at the old woman in a puzzled, friendly fashion. "It is so dark and dreadful in here! Won't you take, me out?" she pleaded.

Fortunately Eleanor had fallen near enough to the entrance of the mine to get the fresh air from the outside. She struggled to sit up, but the pain in her shoulder again overcame her.

"How did you get in here?" the man asked Eleanor suspiciously.

"I don't know," she answered, beginning to cry gently. "Please take me out."

The man realized that whatever was to be done for Eleanor must be done at once. Every minute that passed made it the more dangerous for him to return to the forest. Later on, when the woods were full of people, he would not dare leave the mine. He knew that even now he was risking his own freedom if he carried the girl out from the safe shelter that concealed them.

The man lifted Eleanor in his arms as gently as he could. She cried out when he first touched her; then she set her teeth and bore stoically the pain of being moved.

[165] "You can trust me," her rescuer said kindly. "I can't take you to your friends, but I will take you to a place where they can find you. Now you must promise me that you will never say that you have ever seen me or the old woman, and that you will never mention the old coal mine."

Eleanor promised and the fugitive seemed impressed with her sincerity.

The man carried her about a quarter of a mile into the woods. Then he laid her down in the grass and hurried away. Eleanor watched him with grateful eyes. She did not wonder why the man and the old woman had come to the mysterious hole in the earth, nor why they wished her to keep their hiding place a secret; she was not troubled about it. She was still in great pain, but her fever had gone and she was no longer delirious. She remembered the events of the day before up to the time when she started to wander in the woods. Now Eleanor waited, content and full of faith. The day had come, with its wonderful promise. She knew that she would soon be found. She would bear the pain as well as she could until then.

[166] "Nellie! Nellie!" It was Madge's voice calling to her from afar off. The tones sounded queer and strained, but Eleanor felt sure they were those of her cousin. She could not be mistaken, as she had been last night. She must have been dreaming when some one seemed to summon her from the mouth of the cave. Eleanor did not realize that she had but caught an echo of some one crying to her through the heart of the forest.

Eleanor was weak and faint, but she summoned her strength. "Madge! here I am!" she cried. Her voice was too feeble to carry far.

Neither Madge nor any of her companions caught the answering sound. David Brewster, Jack Bolling, Phil and Lillian were with her. Harry Sears had given out at daylight and had gone back to the Preston farm.

Again they were wandering away from the spot where Nellie waited so patiently.

"Nellie! Nellie!" Madge called once more, her voice breaking.

Poor Eleanor realized that Madge's voice was farther off than it had been when she first called.

Eleanor made an heroic effort. She raised herself to a sitting position. "Madge! Phil! Oh, come to me!" she cried. Then Eleanor fainted.

It was a limp, white figure that Madge, running ahead of all the others, found stretched out on the grass. Her companions soon caught up with her.

"Nellie is dead!" cried Lillian, bursting into tears and sinking down beside her friend on the grass.

[167]

"Oh, no," assured Phil, "Nellie has only fainted." She turned quietly to David and Jack. "Go back, please, and tell Mr. Preston and some of the other men to bring a cot on which to carry Eleanor. She is only worn out and exhausted with exposure and pain. She will be all right soon. Don't look so heartbroken Madge."

Madge had not taken her eyes from her cousin's pale, haggard face. She could not believe that she was really looking at Eleanor. Could this poor, white, exhausted little creature be her Nellie? Why, it was only the afternoon before when Madge had last seen Eleanor laughing and talking to Harry Sears. And now——!

A few minutes later the men came with the cot and Eleanor was carried to the Preston home. Everybody, except David, followed her in triumph.

For David Brewster did not go back home with the others; he wished to find out about an old coal mine which he had been told was in this vicinity. He did not, of course, dream of Eleanor's connection with the place, but he had his own reasons for wishing to discover it.

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An hour later the man and the old gypsy woman were startled by another visitor. David crept into the opening in the side of the hill. When he left, the man and woman in the mine had promised the lad to leave the countryside as soon as possible. They had also agreed to return to David the silver and the greater part of the money stolen from the Preston house on the night of the corn roast. It remained for David to see that the stolen goods were returned to the house without suspicion falling on any one. David believed that he could save the evil-doers from disgrace and detection. But how was he to save himself?

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## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BETTER MAN

"**E**LEANOR, dear, do you know who the two Indian Chiefs were who appeared so mysteriously at our 'Feast of Mondamin'? They followed Lillian and me about all evening and wouldn't take off their masks."

Eleanor was propped up in a big, four-post mahogany bed with half a dozen pillows under her lame shoulder. One arm and shoulder were tightly bandaged. Eleanor had had a serious time since her accident. For rheumatism, caused by her exposure to the rain, had set in in the strained shoulder. She was now much better, though still feeling a good deal used up, and she found it very difficult to move.

Eleanor turned her head and smiled languidly at the excited Madge.

"Of course I don't know who the Indians were. Dear me, I had forgotten all about them. I suppose they must have been Mrs. Preston's and Miss Betsey's burglars. Has any one caught them?" Eleanor was getting interested.

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"I should say not," giggled Madge cheerfully. "Those Indian braves were no other persons than our highly respected friends, Mr. Tom Curtis and Mr. George Robinson! The sillies came all the way here just to be present at the corn roast, and then rushed off without telling us who they were. Tom was awfully cross because I never mentioned their appearance at the feast in any of my first letters. But I forgot all about them, there has been so much else going on. Only in my last letter I just happened to say that Mr. Preston had never been able to find out anything about his burglars, and that the two men dressed as Indians, whom Mr. Preston had always suspected, had disappeared."

Eleanor laughed. "Of course Tom had to 'fess up' after that, didn't he? Tom would so hate to do anything that might arouse suspicion. I think Tom Curtis is the most honorable boy I ever knew. Don't you?" asked Eleanor.

[171] "Of course I do," answered Madge emphatically. "By the way, Tom and George will be back in a short time now with the motor launch. As soon as you are well enough we shall probably start off again, though our holiday time is almost over. You and I have distinguished ourselves by getting lost on this houseboat trip, haven't we, Nellie, dear? Only it is the old story. It was my fault that I got into trouble, while yours was only an accident, you poor thing!" Madge patted Eleanor's hand softly.

The bedroom door now opened to admit Phyllis and Lillian. Phil carried a large dish of ginger cookies, hot from the oven, and Lillian a platter heaped with a pile of snowy popcorn. Both girls planted themselves on the side of Eleanor's bed.

"Phil, I thought you and Lillian promised to go walking with Harry Sears and Jack Bolling," protested Madge. "I was to take care of Nellie this afternoon while Miss Jenny Ann and Miss Betsey drove with Mrs. Preston to look at the 'ha'nted house' we have talked so much about."

Lillian shook her golden head calmly. "Did not want to go walking," she remarked calmly. "Phil and I broke our engagements. We decided that we would much rather stay with you and Nellie." She smiled and gave Eleanor a hug. "Cook is going to send up a big pitcher of lemonade in a few minutes. Who wouldn't rather stay at home than go walking with two tiresome boys on an afternoon like this?"

[172] "You girls are terribly good and unselfish about me," exclaimed Eleanor. "It's worth being ill, and having a sprained shoulder, and being rescued by an old gypsy woman and a strange looking man to——" Eleanor stopped short. Her face flushed painfully and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I'm so sorry I have broken my word. I promised not to tell. Please, please, don't anybody ask me any questions, for I can't answer them even to please you girls."

Lillian looked mystified and extremely curious. Phyllis and Madge gazed at each other blankly. Neither of them spoke, but they were both concerned with the same question. Could it be possible that Nellie had also run across the old gypsy woman and the man who had held Madge a prisoner until Phil and David had rescued her? But then, Eleanor had been found several miles from the spot where the two old people were in hiding when Madge ran across them.

The little captain made up her mind to one thing; she would not trouble Eleanor with questions. But she would ask David if he thought his mysterious acquaintances were still in the neighborhood. Neither she nor Phil had ever spoken of them, though they had never ceased to wonder at David's knowing such peculiar people.

"Is David Brewster going for a walk with Jack and Harry?" inquired Madge casually.

[173] Lillian shook her head. "Of course not," she replied. "David is going off on his usual secret mission. He goes on one every single afternoon!"

"It doesn't concern any one but him, does it?"

Lillian shrugged her shoulders. "I am certainly not in the least interested," she answered disdainfully. "I think he is the rudest person I ever met."

Unfortunately, there were other members of the boat party who were much concerned with David's peculiar behavior. Harry Sears and Jack Bolling were rather bored with their stay on the Preston farm since Eleanor's accident. The girls devoted all their time to nursing Eleanor; they could rarely be persuaded to take a walk or a drive, or to stir up a lark of any kind. Neither Harry nor Jack, who were from the city, felt the least interest in the farm work. David spent every morning in the fields with Mr. Preston. So Harry and Jack, having nothing else to think about, began to worry and pry into David's actions. It was strange that the boy went away every afternoon and never told any one where he was going, nor spoke afterward of what he had done or where he had been!

[174] Jack Bolling did not really care a great deal about Brewster's affairs, but Harry Sears was a regular "Paul Pry." He had made up his mind to find out what Brewster was "after" on these afternoons when he "sneaked" off and hid himself.

Just before Jack and Harry started on their walk David Brewster came out on the side porch of the Preston house with his coat pockets bulging with flat, hard packages. He had his hat pulled down over his eyes, and was hurrying off without looking either to the right or left, when Harry Sears called out: "Where are you off to, Brewster? If you are going for a walk, Bolling and I would like to go with you. We are looking for something to do."

David turned red. It was unexpected friendliness for Harry Sears to suggest coming for a walk with him. Harry usually never noticed David at all, except to order him about at every possible opportunity.

But David was resolute. He particularly needed to be alone on this afternoon. Besides his usual occupation, he must make up his mind how he could go about restoring to the Prestons and Miss Taylor their stolen property.

"I'm off on personal business, Mr. Sears," he returned politely. "I can't let any one else come along."

"Well, you are a nice, sociable person, Brewster," sneered Harry. "Sorry to have intruded. I might have known better."

[175] David swung out of the yard without answering. It never occurred to him to glance back to see what Sears and Bolling were doing.

"Let's go after the fellow, Bolling," proposed Harry. "We have nothing else to do this afternoon. It would be rather good fun to find out what knavery the chap is up to and to show him off before the girls. I actually believe that Madge Morton and Phyllis Alden like the common fellow. Maybe they think Brewster is a kind of hero; he is so silent, dark and sullen, like the hero chap in a weepy sort of play."

Jack Bolling hesitated. "I don't think it is square of us to spy on Brewster, no matter what he is doing," he argued.

"I *do*," returned Harry briefly. "If he isn't up to something he has no business doing, what harm is there in our chancing to run across him—quite by accident, of course? If he is up to some deviltry, it is our business to find it out."

David had turned a corner in the road and had jumped over a low stone fence into a field when the other two young men started after him.

Harry soon espied David, and he and Jack tramped after him cautiously, always keeping at a safe distance.

[176] But David Brewster was wholly unaware that he was being followed. He hurried from one field to another until he came to a meadow that had been left uncultivated for a number of years. It was uneven, running into little hills and valleys, with big rocks jutting out of the earth. One of these rocks formed a complete screen. David walked straight toward this spot as though he were accustomed to going to it. He lay down on the grass under the rock. On his way to his retreat he had made up his mind how he should try to return the stolen goods to the rightful owners, so there was nothing to keep him from his regular occupation. David pulled out of his pocket one of the small, flat objects that he carried and almost completely concealed it with his body as he leaned over it.

A few minutes later Harry Sears crept up on tip-toe from the back of the rock. Jack Bolling was considerably farther off. He meant to give David some warning of his presence before he approached him.

Harry Sears lay down flat on top of the rock. He made a sudden dive toward David, grabbing at the object that David held in his hand.

"What have you there?" he demanded. "Out with it! You've got to tell what you do every afternoon, hiding off by yourself."

David Brewster sprang to his feet, his face white with passion. He thrust the object that Harry coveted back into his pocket.

[177] "Get up from there!" he shouted hoarsely. "What do you mean by spying on me like this? What business is it of yours how I spend my time? I am answerable to Tom Curtis, not to you. Here is your friend, Mr. Bolling, sneaking behind you on the same errand; and I suppose you both think you are gentlemen," he sneered.

"Oh, come, Brewster," interrupted Jack Bolling apologetically, "I suppose Harry and I were overdoing things a bit to come over here after you. But there is no use getting so all-fired angry. If you are not up to mischief, why do you care if we do happen to come up with you?"

"Because I care to keep my own business to myself," answered David.

"Look here, you fellow, don't be impertinent," broke in Harry Sears coolly, as though David had scarcely the right to speak to him.

David felt a blind, hot rage sweep over him. The boy was no longer master of himself. Some day, when he learned to control this white heat of passion, it was to make him a great power for good in the world. Now his rage was the master.

[178] "Take care!" he called suddenly to Harry. He swung himself up on the rock opposite Harry, forcing his opponent into an open place in the field. Then David let loose a swinging blow with his closed fist.

Harry and David were evenly matched fighters. Harry was taller and older, and had been trained as a boxer in school and college gymnasiums; but David was a firmly built fellow, of medium height, with muscles as hard as iron from his work in the open. In addition, David was furiously angry.

Harry parried the first blow with his left arm, then made a lunge at David.

"Here, you fellows, cut that out!" commanded Jack Bolling. "You are almost men. Don't scrap like a couple of schoolboys. You know the women in our party will be disgusted with you."

Neither Harry nor David paid the least attention to Jack's excellent advice. Both fighters had their blood up. Harry's face was crimson and David's white. Few blows were struck, because David made a headlong rush at his opponent and the combatants wrestled back and forth, each boy trying to force the other on the ground. It was by sheer force of determination that David won. David got one hand loose and struck Harry over the eye. Harry went down with a sudden

crash. His head struck the earth with a whack that temporarily put him out of the fight.

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But David kept his knee on Harry's chest. He made no effort to get up. His face was still working with anger.

"Say, get off of Sears, Brewster, can't you?" growled Jack Bolling. "You see he is down and out and you've won the fight. Don't you know that the rules of the game won't let you hit a man when he is down?"

David straightened up and stood upright. "Thank you, Bolling," he said curtly. "I wasn't a sport and I am glad you reminded me of it. I was too angry with Sears to want to quit the fight."

Harry was sitting upon the ground, looking greatly chagrined. He had a bruise over one eye and the place was rapidly swelling.

"I expect I ought to apologize to you, Sears, for not having let you alone when you were down," remarked David proudly. "But in the future you will kindly leave my private affairs alone."

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David made off across the fields. He hoped to be able to get back to the Preston house before Miss Betsey Taylor returned from her ride to the haunted house. He was lucky enough to find Miss Betsey still out. As David passed through the hall he was glad to find her bedroom door open. He had just time enough to slip into her room and thrust a red cotton handkerchief, which was tied up in a curious knot, under Miss Betsey's pillow, when he thought he heard some one about to enter the room.

David hurried out into the hall just as Madge and Phyllis passed by. Both girls nodded to David in a friendly fashion, though Madge's expressive face was alive with the question: "What is David Brewster doing in Miss Betsey's room?"

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## CHAPTER XVII

### THE BIRTH OF SUSPICION

MISS BETSEY TAYLOR had a very successful drive to the "ha'nted house." She returned home with the secret curiosity of years partly satisfied. Not that Miss Betsey saw the "ghosts walk," or that anything in the least unusual took place at the "ha'nted house"; it was simply that Mrs. Preston at last unveiled to Miss Betsey Taylor all she knew of the history of the particular "John Randolph" in whom Miss Betsey had once been interested.

It happened that Miss Jenny Ann, Miss Betsey and Mrs. Preston, in driving up the road to the "ha'nted house," had met an old colored mammy coming toward them, carrying a basket on her arm and talking to herself.

She raised up one hand dramatically when she caught sight of the three women. "Stay where you is. Don't come no farder," she warned. "The house you is drawing nigher to is a house of 'ha'nts.' Ghosties walk here in the day and sleep here in the night. It am mighty onlucky to bother a ghostie."

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"Why, Mammy Ellen," protested Mrs. Preston, smiling kindly at the old woman, "you don't tell me that you believe in ghosts? I thought you had too much sense."

"Child," argued the old woman, "they is some as *says* they is ghosts in this here house of Cain and Abel; but they is one that *knows* they is ghosts here." She shook her head. "I hev seen 'em. Jest you let sleepin' ghosts lie."

"We are not going to disturb them, Mammy Ellen," promised Mrs. Preston. "We are just going to drive about the old place, so that my friends, who are from the North, can see what this old, deserted estate looks like."

"That old woman once belonged to the family of John Randolph, Miss Betsey. Do you recall your speaking of him to me a few days ago?" inquired Mrs. Preston as the old colored woman marched solemnly away.

"Yes, I remember," answered Miss Betsey vaguely. "I believe I knew this same John Randolph when I was a girl."

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"Then I am sorry to tell you his story, because it is a sad one," sighed Mrs. Preston. "My husband and I often talk of him. We feel, somehow, that we ought to have done something. John Randolph came back here suddenly, after spending a year or so in New York, after the close of the war. He married three or four years afterward a girl from the next county. She wasn't much of a wife; the poor thing was ill and never liked the country. She persuaded John to sell out his share in the estate to his brother James. You remember, it was the Grinstead place I showed to you on our drive to the sulphur well the other day. Well, John and his wife settled in Richmond

and John tried to practise law. He wasn't much of a success. I reckon poor John did not know much but farming. He and his wife had one child, a girl. She married and died, leaving a baby for her father and mother to look after. A few years ago John's wife died, too, and the old man came back here to the old place. He didn't have any money, and I expect he didn't have any other home to go to." Mrs. Preston paused. She had driven around the haunted house, but her visitors were more interested in her story than they were in the sight of the deserted mansion.

"Then, I suppose, poor John died," added Miss Betsey sadly, her face clouding with memories; the John Randolph she had known had been so full of youth and enthusiasm.

[184] Mrs. Preston flapped her reins. "I reckon so," she sighed. "You see, John Randolph did not have any real claim on the Grinsteads. They were his brother James's wife's people, and I suppose they were not very good to him; or it may be the old man was just sensitive. Anyway, John Randolph went away from the Grinstead place about six months ago. No word has been heard of him, so I suppose he is dead."

Miss Betsey surreptitiously wiped away a few tears for her dead romance. They were not very bitter tears. Of course, her old lover, John Randolph, was only a memory. But it was sad to hear that he had had such an unfortunate life; he might better have been less "touchy" and not have left *her* so abruptly. Miss Betsey's tears passed unnoticed. Miss Jenny Ann was also depressed by the story, and as for kind Mrs. Preston, she sighed deeply every five or ten minutes during the ride home.

But Miss Betsey was so quiet and unlike herself all the evening that Madge, Phyllis and Lillian decided that she must feel ill. The girls would never have believed, even if they had been told, that Miss Betsey, who was on the shady side of sixty, could possibly have been sorrowing over a lover whom she had not seen in nearly forty years. But girls do not know that the minds of older people travel backward, and that an old maid is a "girl" at heart to the longest day she lives.

Miss Taylor went up to her own room early.

Madge and Phyllis were undressing to jump into bed, when a knock on their door startled them.

"Girls!" a voice cried in trembling tones.

[185] "It's poor Miss Betsey!" exclaimed Phil. "I'll wager she is ill or something, she has been acting so queerly all evening." Phil ran to open their door.

"Take me in, children," whispered Miss Betsey, shaking her head. "Sh-sh! Don't make a noise; something so strange has happened. I couldn't wait until morning to tell you."

Miss Betsey dropped into a chair by the window. She was minus her side curls and she had her still jet-black hair screwed up into a tight knot at the back of her head. But in honor of her present frivolous life as one of the houseboat girls she wore a bright red flannelette dressing gown.

Madge looked at Miss Betsey, then choked and began to cough violently to conceal her laughter.

"Don't make that noise, Madge; laugh out-right if you think I am funny," whispered Miss Betsey, instead of giving the little captain the lecture she deserved. "I don't want any one to know I am in here with you. I've got something so strange to show you."

Miss Betsey slipped her hand into the capacious pocket of her dressing gown. She drew out a bright red cotton handkerchief, knotted and tied together into a dirty ball.

[186] "What on earth have you there, Miss Betsey?" asked Phil. "I should be afraid to touch such a dreadful looking handkerchief."

Miss Betsey fingered it gingerly. She seemed to be trying to open it.

Madge picked up a pair of curling tongs and caught the handkerchief by one end. "Do let me throw it out of the window for you, Miss Betsey!" she urged.

Miss Betsey gave a little shriek of protest. But Madge and Phil were staring in Miss Betsey's lap, their eyes wide with amazement. Into the old lady's lap had fallen, from the dirty cotton handkerchief, all her stolen jewelry.

"Where did it come from, Miss Betsey?" demanded Phil.

"From under my pillow," answered Miss Betsey.

"Then the thief must have put it back!" exclaimed Madge impetuously.

[187] Miss Betsey nodded emphatically. "Yes, of course he did. But who and why and how? My money has not been returned. Why should the burglar take pity on me and return me my poor little jewelry? It is of some value. And now Mr. Preston will have a much easier time in tracing the thief, with this handkerchief as a clue to go on. I can't help suspecting one of the servants, for, girls," Miss Betsey lowered her voice solemnly, "I was in my own room all the morning. I made my bed, as it has been my custom to do every day of my life, and when I made my bed there was certainly no red cotton pocket handkerchief with my jewelry in it under my pillow. I have been out this afternoon, but you children have been up on this floor with Eleanor. Now think. Did you

hear anything or see any one enter my room at any time?"

Madge and Phyllis stood still, thinking deeply. Suddenly Madge's cheeks flamed. "David!" exclaimed Phil Alden involuntarily at the same moment.

"David?" Miss Betsey's face was a study. She turned almost as red as Madge. "You don't mean that you girls saw David Brewster enter my room this afternoon? No, no, children, it couldn't be! The boy has a bad disposition, I know. He is surly and cross. But then the lad has had no training of any kind. He has had everything against him. He seemed to be quite honest when he lived with me. But, but——" Miss Betsey hesitated. "Of course, David will tell me why he came into my room this afternoon. He probably went there on an errand."

Phyllis Alden shook her head regretfully. She said nothing.

"You don't suspect David, do you, Phil?" questioned Madge.

[188] "I don't know what to think," remarked Phil judicially. "Of course, I don't really suspect David. No one has the right to suspect him without any real proof. But it does seem queer to me that Miss Betsey lost her money first on the houseboat and then here. What is your honest opinion?"

To save her life, Madge could not but think of David's mysterious trip to the Preston house while the barn was burning on the night of the robbery. Still, she did not answer Phyllis.

"Tell us what you think, Madge," insisted Miss Betsey. "Why, I was beginning to feel proud of the boy, his manners have improved so much since he came on this trip. And I have been saying to myself that if I had believed in the boy and tried to help him, as you have done, perhaps he might have been less surly years ago. Some day I may tell you children more of the lad's history."

[189] "Miss Betsey," Madge's voice was very grave, "to tell you the truth, I don't know what to think. I know that there are some things that point toward David's being a thief. But, just the same, I don't believe he is one. You know I have always been sorry for David, Miss Betsey, ever since he pulled me out from under Dr. Alden's buggy, when I was trying to spoil your lawn, as the donkeys did Miss Betsey Trotter's in 'David Copperfield.' And somehow"—she paused reflectively—"I believe in him still. I *know* that David Brewster wouldn't steal! It may be my intuition that makes me say this; I have no real reason for thinking it. I trust David, trust him fully. I am sure that he is absolutely honest."

[190] Miss Betsey patted Madge's auburn head almost affectionately. She felt nearly fond of her for her loyalty toward David. "We won't, any of us, speak of suspecting any one, children," she concluded. "You are not to mention having seen David Brewster come out of my room. I would not have suspicion rest on the boy wrongfully for a great deal; it might ruin his whole future life. But we must be very careful; say nothing and watch! There are sure to be other developments that will point toward the real thief. If we do see or hear anything else that seems suspicious, then we owe it to Mr. and Mrs. Preston to take them into our confidence. We must remember that their property was stolen as well as mine, and that they have taken us into their household and treated us as members of their own family. Much as I may wish it," Miss Betsey lowered her voice solemnly, "I feel that we have no right to shield David if he is at fault. But"—Miss Taylor's voice was even more serious—"it would be a far more wicked thing for us to accuse the boy if he is guiltless."

Miss Betsey rose to go. In spite of her funny, old maid appearance and her usually severe manner toward Madge, that young woman flung her arms around the spinster's neck and hugged her warmly. "You are perfectly splendid, Miss Betsey," she whispered. As Miss Betsey tip-toed cautiously out of the room, Madge blew a kiss toward her retreating back. "You can just lecture me, after this, as much as you like. And I promise, I promise"—Madge hesitated—"I promise not to like it a bit better than I do now," she ended truthfully.

Then Madge turned to Phil, her rock of refuge. "Phyllis Alden, if David Brewster stole from Miss Betsey or Mrs. Preston, I don't care what excuse he has, I shall never forgive him, or myself for bringing him on this boat trip. Oh, dear me! I wish dear old Tom were here! I would ask Tom to ask David to clear things up. I suppose if I try to talk to David Brewster, he will bite my head off."

"Come to bed this minute, Madge, and don't talk to anybody about anything until you know more," commanded Phil stolidly. And Madge obeyed.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### DAVID'S MYSTERIOUS ERRAND

**P**OOOR David Brewster was facing a more difficult problem than he ever had had to conquer in his life. He must manage to get over to the old coal mine, bring back the Preston silver and as much of Miss Betsey's money as he could force the thief to leave behind him, without being

noticed or suspected of any unusual design. The jewels that David had already returned to Miss Betsey had been in charge of the old gypsy woman; David had found them on his first visit to her. But to carry back a quantity of old family silver, some of it in fairly large pieces, was not so simple a task. Yet David had one thing in his favor: Harry Sears and Jack Bolling had both left the Preston farm. After Harry's encounter with David, and the latter's frank account of his own part in the fight, Harry had not cared to linger at the farm. He knew that some day Madge and Phyllis Alden would find out why David had been tempted to fight. Harry Sears had no desire to recount his own unsuccessful attempt to act the part of "Paul Pry," so Harry and Jack had gone on to join Tom Curtis and George Robinson, and the four boys were to come on to the houseboat party in a few days.

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David Brewster knew that whatever he had to do must be done quickly. So he borrowed a horse and cart from Mr. Preston a day or so after Miss Betsey's midnight talk with Madge and Phyllis. He did not explain what he wished with the horse. However, his host asked no questions, for Mr. Preston had entire faith in the boy.

Madge happened to be in the yard as David drove out from the stable. She waved her hand to David in a friendly fashion, feeling secretly ashamed of having even discussed the question of his possible guilt.

David was too worried and unhappy to respond to Madge's greeting pleasantly, but he acknowledged her salutation with a curt nod of his head. He had lately been more silent and reserved than ever in his manner, because, in his heart, he longed so deeply to know some one in whom he could confide. Yet he was afraid to trust even Madge.

"Going driving all alone, David?" questioned Madge.

"Yes," answered David harshly. Yet he was thinking at the same moment that if he only could confide in her, Madge was just the kind of a girl to help a fellow out of a scrape and to stand shoulder to shoulder with him if he got into a difficulty.

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Madge hesitated. She wanted so much to be friendly with David. She thought that perhaps if he talked with her alone, he might explain a number of things about himself that she wanted to understand, not from curiosity but in a real spirit of friendliness. Yet she could not make up her mind to make this request of David. If he had been like Tom, or any one of the other motor launch boys, she would not have hesitated for an instant.

"Stop a minute, please, David," she said, looking earnestly at the boy, "I have a favor to ask of you." She knew that David had some mysterious occupation that took him away from the farm every afternoon, and that he would brook no interference. "If you are going to drive alone and I won't be in the way, won't you take me with you?"

David Brewster colored to the roots of his dark hair. Never in his whole life had a nice girl approached him in the friendly way that Madge had just done. Yet he knew he must refuse her request, though David would have dearly loved to have Madge drive with him. He simply must return the stolen goods to Mr. Preston's house to-day, or else run the risk of never restoring them to their rightful owners. He would not dare to ask Mr. Preston to lend him a horse again soon, and Tom might return any day with his launch.

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Madge realized before David answered her that he meant to refuse to take her with him. She felt furiously angry, more with herself than with the boy.

"I am sorry," muttered David, when he at last found his voice. "I've got to attend to some business this afternoon and I've got to attend to it alone, or I would like very much to have you come along with me."

"Oh, never mind, then," answered Madge coldly, turning away from David, who took a step toward her retreating figure, then, with a muttered exclamation, sprang into the cart and drove off.

As for Madge, she decided never to speak to David again; he was insufferable.

About five o'clock on the same afternoon Madge, Phyllis, Lillian and Miss Betsey were out on the lawn eating watermelon. Eleanor stood at her front window gazing down wistfully at her friends. Miss Jenny Ann was reading to amuse her, but it was really more fun to look down at the girls. Nellie was getting dreadfully tired of being confined to one room, and yet she did not feel well enough to go downstairs.

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David Brewster drove back into the yard. Inside his cart Madge noticed a square, wooden box, which she had not seen when David left the farm. Without saying a word to any one, the boy lifted the box and carried it into the house. A little later he came out on the lawn to where Miss Betsey and the girls were sitting and approached Madge rather diffidently.

"Miss Morton," David's voice was unusually gentle, "don't you think I might carry your cousin, Miss Butler, downstairs? I saw her at the window as I drove into the yard. She looks lonely. Perhaps she would like to be down here."

Madge blew a kiss up to Eleanor. She, too, had caught her cousin's wistful expression. The little captain's heart melted toward David. "I don't know," she answered doubtfully. "I'll go upstairs and ask Miss Jenny Ann what she thinks."



"I'd be awfully careful," urged David. "I know I could carry Miss Butler without hurting her shoulder. We could bring a steamer chair out here on the lawn for her when I get her down."

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Madge hurried away. A few seconds later David saw her at the open window waving her hand and nodding her head energetically. "Yes; do come up," she called. "Eleanor is *so* anxious to have you carry her down into the yard, and Miss Jenny Ann is willing that you should try."

The girls busied themselves with arranging Nellie's chair in the shadiest spot on the lawn, under a great horse-chestnut tree, and piling the chair with sofa cushions and a pale pink shawl, and in cutting the "heart" out of the choicest watermelon to bestow on the invalid and her cavalier.

David bore Nellie as comfortably as though she were a baby. She had her well arm about his neck and the other, the bandaged one, rested comfortably in her lap. David's face had completely lost its sullen look. He was actually smiling at Eleanor as she apologized for being "so heavy."

Then he sat down on the ground in the midst of the bevy of laughing girls. Lillian passed him his piece of watermelon in her prettiest fashion. David accepted it as gracefully as Tom Curtis might have done. When the watermelon feast was over David helped the three girls to clear away the dishes. When he came back he dropped down at Miss Betsey's side and began to wind her ball of yarn.

"I wish you would knit me some gloves this winter, Cousin Betsey," he begged boyishly.

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The old lady patted him affectionately. When, before, had the boy ever called her "Cousin Betsey"? He had seemed always to try to ignore their relationship. "The lad isn't so bad-looking after all," Miss Taylor thought to herself. "He is handsome when he is happy." David had on a soft, faded, blue shirt, with a turned-down collar that showed the fine, muscular lines of his throat. He had a strong, clear-cut face, and his brown eyes were large and expressive. When he laughed his whole face changed. He looked actually happy.

Then Miss Betsey realized all of a sudden how seldom she had ever seen the boy even smile before. Perhaps, after all, Dr. Alden's prescription for Miss Betsey Taylor was precisely what she needed. Sunshine and the company of young people had really given her something to think about besides her own nerves.

"Mr. Brewster," Eleanor's voice was still a little weak from her illness, "where were you the night I was lost? Madge said you did not join the searching party until early next morning. I believe if you had been with the others, you might have found me sooner, you were so clever about finding Madge."

David's face changed suddenly. The old, sullen look crept over it. Then, as he glanced straight into Eleanor's clear eyes, his expression softened.

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"I was sorry I wasn't along with the others," he answered kindly. "But I forgot to tell you something. I had an experience of my own that night. I went for a long walk. On my way back I decided to take a nap on the porch of the 'ha'nted house.' What do you think happened?" David lowered his voice to a whisper.

"You saw the ghosts?" shivered Lillian.

David nodded his head solemnly. "I suppose you'll think I am quite mad," he insisted. "I think I am myself when I recall the story in broad daylight. But, as sure as I am sitting here, I saw two ghosts walk up the path and pass into the empty house. They were those of an old man and a young girl. They flitted along like shadows."

"You were dreaming, boy," insisted Miss Betsey.

David shook his head. "I don't think so," he argued. "I was as wide awake as I am now. I got up and made a blind rush for home as soon as the spooks went by me."

"Girls! Miss Betsey!" called Mrs. Preston from the veranda, "it is time to come into the house to get ready for tea."

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As the watermelon party scrambled to their feet Madge waved one hand dramatically. "Pause, kind friends," she commanded. "Who among us has the courage to find out whether David Brewster's 'spooks' are real? I have always longed to spend a night in a haunted house. Now, here's our chance!"

"I'm with you," answered David. "I'll go."

"So will I," announced Phil.

Miss Jenny Ann, who was in for most larks, hesitated. "Of course, I don't believe in ghosts, children; there are no such things," she declared. "Still, I shouldn't like to meet them at night."

Before the laughter at Miss Jenny Ann had ceased reinforcement for Madge's ghost party arrived from an unexpected quarter. Miss Betsey Taylor offered her services as chaperon, and suggested that the "spook investigation" take place the very next night.

## CHAPTER XIX

### GHOSTS OF THE PAST

IT was nearly ten o'clock the following evening when four excited adventurers set out from the Preston house. They carried dark lanterns, while practical Phil had a package of lunch stored away out of sight. She had an idea that sitting up all night in a forlorn, dirty old house was not going to be half as much sport as enthusiastic Madge anticipated.

The little captain was not the only enthusiast in the ghost party, which was composed of herself, Phil, David and Miss Betsey. Miss Betsey Taylor had cast from her the sobriety of years. She was as eager and as interested in their midnight excursion as any young girl could have been. Not that the pursuit of ghosts had been a secret passion of Miss Betsey's. It was only that, at the age of sixty, she was at last beginning to understand how it felt to be young, and she was as ready for adventure as any other one of the party of young folks.

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Indeed, she was far more eager than Lillian Seldon, who could not be persuaded even to contemplate the thought of approaching the "ha'nted house." Lillian insisted that it was her duty to stay at home with Eleanor and Miss Jenny Ann.

No one had been told of the proposed trip except Mr. and Mrs. Preston. The ghost party had no intention of allowing practical jokers in the neighborhood to get up "fake spooks" for their entertainment. They were seriously determined to find out why the ancient house was supposed to be inhabited by spirits from another world, and whether David Brewster had seen real ghosts during his visit to the house or only creatures of his own imagination.

Miss Betsey clung tightly to David's arm as they made their way along the dark road. The old lady wore a pale gray dress, with a soft real lace collar around her neck. Recently the houseboat girls had persuaded her to leave off her false side curls and to wave her hair a little over her ears. No change of costume could make Miss Betsey a beauty, but she was improved, and she did look a little less like an old maid. To-night Miss Betsey had concealed her dress with a long, black macintosh cape, which completely enveloped her. With her tall, spare form and her lean, square shoulders Miss Betsey looked like a grenadier. On her head she had tied, with a long gray veil, one of Jack Bolling's soft felt hats.

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"Madge, if you keep on prattling such gruesome tales I shall turn back and leave you to your fate," expostulated Phil, as she urged Madge along behind David and their chaperon. "I know nothing will happen to-night, except that we will all be dead tired and wish we were safe at home in our little beds. Good gracious, what was that?" Phil gave Madge's arm a sudden pinch. "That" was an old woman hobbling along the road in the opposite direction from the four adventurers.

"Scat!" cried Miss Betsey nervously as the woman came face to face with her.

David laughed and took off his hat in the dark. The old woman had picked up her skirts and started to scurry off as fast as she could. But as she caught sight of Miss Betsey's face in the light of the lantern that David carried the old mammy paused. She was the "Mammy Ellen" to whom Mrs. Preston had talked on the day of the drive to the "ha'nted house."

"Land sakes alive, chillun, how you scairt me!" grumbled the old woman. "When you done said 'Scat!' I thought certain you'd seen a black cat, and it jest nacherally means bad luck. Ain't you the lady I seen with Mrs. Preston?" inquired Mammy Ellen of Miss Betsey, with the marvelous memory that colored people have for faces.

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Miss Betsey nodded. "I wish you would come to see me in the morning, Mammy," suggested Miss Betsey. "Long years ago I used to know Mr. John Randolph, and Mrs. Preston tells me you were a member of his family. We can't stop to-night. We are going—on up the road," concluded Miss Taylor vaguely.

Even in the darkness Madge and Phyllis could see the whites of Mammy Ellen's eyes grow larger. "You ain't a-goin' near the house of 'ha'nts,' is you? If you do, you'll sure meet trouble, one of you, I ain't a saying which. But ef you disturb a dead ghost, he am just as apt to put his ice cold fingers on you, and you ain't no more good after that. You am sure enough done for."

"Why not, Auntie?" inquired Madge, her blue eyes dancing. Meeting this aged colored woman with her mysterious tale of ghost signs and warnings was the best possible beginning for their lark.

"Child, ef a ghost's cold fingers teches you, your heart grows stone cold. There ain't nobody that loves you and you don't love nobody ever after. Don't you go near that old house, chilluns. It ain't no place for the likes of you," pleaded Mammy Ellen. "I tell you there am more buried there than youall knows. That old house am a grave for the young and the old. Mind what I say. It sure am."

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"Why do you think we are going to the 'ghost house,' Mammy?" queried David, laughing.

The old colored woman shook her head slowly. "It ain't caze I think youall's going to the old

place that I warn ye; it am only caze I's so afeerd you might. I know there ain't nobody, in their right good senses as would want their wits scairt clean out of 'em."

"But we don't believe in ghosts, Mammy," argued Madge.

Mammy Ellen peered into Madge's bright face. "Go 'long, child," she said. "You don't believe in ghosts caze you ain't seen 'em, jest as ye don't believe in most of the things you's got to find out."

Mammy Ellen bowed courteously to Miss Betsey and the young people as she walked away from them.

"I do wish we hadn't met that old colored woman, Madge," whispered Phil. "She makes me feel as though we were intruding on ghosts when we go prying about their haunts at night."

Every leaf of every tree, every rustling blade of grass, every stirring breath of the night wind took on a more sinister character as the four ghost-investigators slipped up the tangled, overgrown path to the house of mystery.

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"We must put out all our lanterns but one," ordered David. "If any one happens to be walking along the road, we don't wish them to see us prowling about this place. Besides, we don't want to frighten the ghosts."

The three women put out the light of their lanterns. David kept his light, walking in front, with Miss Betsey next and Madge and Phyllis bringing up the rear. The women clutched at one another's skirts as they went around and around the dark old house, tumbling over crumbling bricks and tangled vines. They thought it best to look thoroughly around the outside of the house for loiterers, whether ghostly or real, before exploring the inside.

"'Chickamy, chickamy, crainey crow, went to the well to wash her toe! When she came back her chickens were all gone.' What time is it, old Witch?" murmured Madge, giving Phil's skirt a wicked pull. Phil fell back, almost upsetting Miss Betsey, who clutched feverishly at David's coatsleeve.

"What on earth happened to you, child?" she asked tremulously.

"It was that good-for-nothing Madge's fault," laughed Phyllis.

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No one of the party took the first part of their ghost hunt seriously, but when David reported that the hour was growing late, and that it was now time for them to enter the old house, a different feeling stole over each one of them—a kind of curious foreboding of evil, or unhappiness, or some unexplainable mystery.

"Let's give up and go back, Madge," proposed Phyllis. "The old house is so musty, dark and horrible that it is sure to have rats in it, if nothing worse. I feel that it would be better for all of us not to go in. Suppose we should see something queer? What could we do?"

"Phyllis Alden, the very idea of your suggesting that we turn 'quitters'!" expostulated Madge. "Do you suppose we could face Miss Jenny Ann and the girls if we retreat before we even know there is an enemy? Come on, Miss Betsey; you and I will go on ahead. Let Phil come with David if she likes."

Madge danced up the old, tumbled-down veranda steps, guided by the rays of her lantern. Each one of the women had relit her lantern to enter the deserted house. Once inside they might put them out again. But who could tell what they might stumble against in a house that was supposed never to have been entered in nearly forty years?

Madge pushed at the front door, which hung by a broken hinge, and drew Miss Betsey in after her. "Oh, dear me, isn't it awful?" she whispered.

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Not one of the ghost party had spoken in an ordinary voice since the start of their adventure. Somehow their errand, the darkness of the night and their own feelings made whispered tones seem more appropriate.

The four explorers gazed silently at the sight that Madge described as "awful." They had expected to find the "ha'nted house" empty of furniture. Yet in the broad hall there was an open fireplace. On either side of it were great oak arm-chairs. Spider webs hung in beautiful silver festoons from the mantel, with their many-legged spinners caught in their mesh. Gray mice, lean and terrified, scuttled across the dusty floor. A bat flapped blindly overhead.

Miss Betsey caught Madge by the hand. "I can almost see dead people sitting in those dusty chairs," she murmured. "Let us go on upstairs. I wish this thing were over."

The railing had fallen away from the steps, that were covered not only with dust but with a kind of slippery mould, as many winters' rain had fallen down upon them from the holes in the roof. David crawled up first, pulling Madge, Phyllis and Miss Betsey after him. They groped their way to the front bedroom.

"I won't go in there; I shall wait here in the hall," Phil said pettishly. "I can't help thinking of Harry Sears's story about the sick girl in that old house on Cape Cod."

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David shoved at the closed door. It was fastened tight. Had the room been locked against intruders for nearly half a century? But ghosts do not hesitate at closed doors. David pushed

harder than he knew. The lock on the old door gave way. It fell forward, striking the floor with a terrific crash.

Phyllis screamed with horror, then turned rigid. Not one of the others made a single sound, except that Madge's lantern dropped to the floor at her feet and her light went out.

An old man rose slowly from the side of a tumbled bed. He was so thin, so white, so ethereal that he could not be human. But the four pair of frightened eyes strained past the ghostly old man to a thin wraith that lay on the bed. It was a girl, frail, white and wasted, staring not at the intruders before the fallen door, but at an object that she seemed to see afar off.

Madge's voice caught in her throat. Her knees trembled and she swayed helplessly toward Phil. If only she and Phil could have run from the sight before them! But they stood stupidly still, unable to move. There was absolutely not a ray of light in the ghostly bedroom, save that which came from the reflection of the dark lanterns in the hall. David had jumped back when the door fell before him. But Miss Betsey's tall, thin figure, in her queer, military coat, cast a long black shadow across the old room. Why did not some one speak? Ghosts can not talk and the onlookers were dumb with fear and amazement.

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Then the ghost laughed drearily. "You have found me out," it said mournfully. "I have no place, even in this house of darkness. I can not see your faces. But I wonder why you wish to disturb an old man's last retreat?"

For answer, Madge burst into tears. She was nervous and overwrought, and to find that "the ghost" was a real person was more than she could bear.

"We didn't know there was any one living in the house," she faltered. "We are strangers in this neighborhood. The people about here told us that this old place was haunted, and we came to-night to see if ghosts were real."

"Come in and bring your lights," invited the old gentleman. "There are many kinds of ghosts, child. I will tell you who I am."

The four visitors crowded into the musty room. Phyllis and Madge had their eyes fixed on the girl's figure in the bed. She did not return their look, although the muscles of her face were twitching pathetically.

Miss Betsey Taylor was behaving very curiously. She held her dark lantern up so that its light fell full on the white face of the old man whom they had so rudely disturbed.

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"Bless my soul!" she murmured out loud, "it *can't* be!"

"My name is John Randolph," explained the old gentleman, with a fine stateliness. "My grandchild and I have been living in this deserted house because we had no other home in the world."

"I knew it!" announced Miss Betsey. "Isn't it just like John Randolph! Would rather bury himself alive than let his friends take care of him. Southern pride!" sniffed Miss Betsey. "I call it Southern foolishness."

"Madam," answered Mr. Randolph coldly, "I have no friends. I can not see that I have done wrong to any one by hiding away in this old place, that was once the property of my friends. If people have thought of me as a ghost, and I have tried to encourage them in the idea, well, lives that are finished and have no place in the world are but ghosts of the unhappy past."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Betsey vigorously, her black eyes snapping, though she felt a curious lump in her throat. "You were always a sentimentalist, John Randolph. But you can't live on memories. You still are obliged to eat and to breathe God's fresh air. How do you do it?"

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If the broken old man wondered why Miss Betsey Taylor took such an interest in his affairs, he was too courteous to show it.

"An old colored woman, 'Mammy Ellen,' who was a girl in our family when I was a young man, has not forgotten us. She brings us each day such food as she can procure. As for air"—the old man hesitated—"we do not go out in the daytime. I prefer that the people of the neighborhood should think of me as dead. But at night my little grand-daughter and I walk about over the old place."

Madge, Phil and David gasped involuntarily. They had been silent and amazed listeners to the dialogue between the two old people. Now the thought of a girl younger than themselves being shut up all day in this dreadful house, and only being allowed to go out-of-doors at night was too dreadful to contemplate.

"Oh, but surely you can't keep your little grand-daughter shut away from the daylight!" exclaimed impetuous Madge, her face alive with sympathy as she gazed at the thin little form on the bed.

"Daylight and darkness are as one to my little girl," the old gentleman answered quietly, "she is blind."

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Madge shivered. Phil went over to the bed and patted the girl's hand softly. But they both longed, with all their hearts, to get away from this house of tragedy. It was strange that Miss

Betsey did not offer to go and leave the old man and child to their privacy.

Miss Betsey's black eyes were no longer snapping; they were wet with tears.

"I am coming to take you both away from this place in the morning, John Randolph. If you won't come for your own sake, you must come for the child's. So like a man not to know that that poor baby needs to *feel* all the more sunlight because she can't *see* it! And she may even be able to see it some day with proper care." Miss Betsey bent over the child so caressingly that she looked more like a funny old angel in her strange, long cape and her ridiculous hat than a selfish, cross-grained old maid.

"I do not understand your kindness, Madam," returned the old gentleman with courteous curiosity.

"Because I am your friend," answered Miss Betsey curtly. "I'm Betsey Taylor, whom you used to know a great many years ago. You have forgotten me because you have had many interests in your life that have crowded me out. But I—I have remembered," concluded Miss Betsey abruptly. "Good night." She swung her dark lantern and, looking more than ever like a grenadier, led the little procession out.

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## CHAPTER XX

### THE FANCY DRESS PARTY

"MRS. PRESTON says we may have a dance before we go back to the houseboat, Eleanor," announced Lillian. The two girls were out under the big grape arbor filling a basket with great bunches of red and purple grapes. "And Madge suggests that we have a surprise dance for the boys the night they get back with the motor launch."

Eleanor laughed happily. "What a perfectly delightful idea! Isn't Mrs. Preston a dear? We must have been a lot of trouble to her."

Lillian shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't think so," she answered. "At least, I believe Mrs. Preston has liked the trouble. She says that we have made her feel younger and jollier than she ever expected to feel again in her life. She says that she is awfully fond of each one of us, and that Mr. Preston has never cared as much for a boy since his own son died, many years ago, as he does for David Brewster."

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"Lillian," Eleanor's tones were serious, "I think that we ought to change our opinions of David. Somehow, he seems so much nicer recently, since the other boys went away. He is awfully quiet and sad, but I don't believe he is hateful and sullen, as we thought him at first. Poor David!"

Lillian did not reply at once. A sympathetic expression crossed her delicate, high-bred face. "I suppose, Nellie, dear, it must be hard for David to be with fellows who have everything in the world, like the motor launch boys—money and family and friends—when David has nothing."

"Madge declares that David will some day be a great man," rejoined Eleanor. "There he is now over there under the trees with Madge, Phil and little blind Alice. Isn't she a quaint child? She says she loves Madge best of all of us, because she can feel the color in Madge's red hair and cheeks. Miss Betsey is almost jealous of our little captain."

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Lillian finished eating a bunch of catawba grapes. "Miss Betsey wants to take that blind child back to Hartford with her. She says that if Alice sees specialists in New York her sight may be restored. And her grandfather has consented to let her go, though I don't see how the old man can bear to give her up. Mr. and Mrs. Preston have asked him to live here with them, but he says he will go into a Confederate home for old Southern soldiers as soon as Alice leaves. Let's go over under the trees with Madge and Phil. We can eat our grapes and talk about the party."

Madge waved a yellow telegram frantically as Nellie and Lillian came toward them. "Tom and the boys will be back with the motor launch the day after to-morrow," she announced. "And that darling, Mrs. Preston, says we can have our dance on that very night, and it's to be a fancy dress party if we like, because she has stores and stores of lovely old-fashioned clothes up in her attic and she won't mind our dressing up in them. So we must drive round the neighborhood this afternoon and deliver our invitations and decide what characters we are to represent and——" Madge gasped for breath, while Phil fanned her violently with a large palm-leaf fan.

"Come right on upstairs to the attic with me," ordered Madge, as soon as she could speak again. "We have no time to waste. We can look at the dresses and then see what characters we wish to represent. David, you can come, too," invited Madge graciously. "You can carry Alice up the steps."

David lifted the blind girl to his shoulder and trotted obediently after the girls. He no longer

minded Madge's occasionally imperious manner, for he knew she was unconscious of it.

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On top of all the other clothes in Mrs. Preston's cedar chest was a black velvet gown, made with a long train and a V-shaped neck. Phyllis laid it regretfully aside. "This is perfectly elegant," she sighed, "but it isn't appropriate for any of us to wear."

Lillian Seldon received the rejected costume with outstretched arms. For some time she had cherished the belief that she bore a faint resemblance to the beautiful but ill-fated "Mary, Queen of Scots." Lillian had come across a picture of the lovely Mary Stuart in an illustrated "Book of Queens" in Miss Tolliver's school, and had borne the book to her bedroom and carefully locked her door. There she had gazed thoughtfully at the picture and then at her own reflection in the glass. Of course, it would never do for her to mention it, not even to one of the beloved houseboat girls, but it did appear to Lillian that her own blonde hair grew in a low point on her forehead in much the same fashion as Mary Stuart's. Also, she had a similar line to her aristocratic, aquiline nose, and her chin was almost as delicately pointed. Assuredly Lillian was not vain. She did not think for a moment that she was beautiful, like Mary Queen of Scots, still she thought that she bore a faint resemblance to the ill-fated Queen.

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In the velvet gown lay Lillian's opportunity to impersonate the lovely Mary, but she blushed as she smoothed it softly. "I wonder if I might not wear this dress to the party?" she suggested meekly.

Madge shook her head critically. "It is much too old for you, dear," she argued.

"But I have always wanted to wear a black velvet gown so much, Madge, I mean to buy one as soon as I am really grown-up," she pleaded, "and I could come to our dance as 'Mary, Queen of Scots.'"

The three girls surveyed pretty, blonde Lillian thoughtfully. Then three heads nodded approvingly.

"Here is a costume for Nellie. It looks like her, doesn't it, girls?" exclaimed Phyllis, picking up a soft, white silk gown with a Greek border of silver braid a little tarnished by time. "Isn't it just too sweet for anything?"

"It is a love of a frock," sighed Eleanor rapturously, "but I don't think it suggests any special character."

Madge frowned thoughtfully. "Oh, it doesn't make so much difference about representing a particular character, Nellie. You can go as a lady of King Arthur's time. I imagine the women wore just such gowns in the days of beauty and chivalry."

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"All right," said Eleanor obediently. "There is a 'King Arthur's Knights' in the library. I'll get it and read up on the doings of the King and his subjects. Perhaps I'll find a character that will just suit me. I'm too dark to ever think of impersonating Elaine."

"I can't represent a great historical character," declared Madge, peering into the trunk—"who ever heard of a heroine with red hair and a turned-up nose?—but I am going to wear this dress." Madge held up a flowered silk of softest, palest blue, with great pale-pink roses trailing over it. It was made with a long, pointed blouse, and had little paniers over the hips. Madge slipped the gown on over her frock. The dress had a little bag of the same silk hanging at its side and in it a dainty lace handkerchief, sweet with a far-off fragrance of lavender.

David and the three girls gazed admiringly at Madge.

"Miss Dolly Varden!" exclaimed Phil. "It is just the kind of costume that Dickens makes Dolly Varden wear in 'Barnaby Rudge.' Only Miss Jenny Ann must make you a poke bonnet. But what about poor me? I am such a dreadfully unromantic-looking person. I am not a tall, stately maiden like our rare, pale Lillian, nor a witch like Madge, nor a dainty little maid like Nellie. I am just plain Phil!" Phyllis sighed, half in jest and half in earnest.

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"I know what character I want you to represent, Phyllis, darling," cried Madge. "There is no costume here that is very appropriate for it, but I know how to make a helmet and shield out of silver paper and cardboard. And I am sure we could get up the rest of the costume."

"Whom do you mean, Madge?" inquired Phil.

"Guess. My character is a wonderfully brave girl, who sacrificed her life to save her King and her country. Just lately she has been declared a saint by her church."

David glanced up from the floor, where he was amusing little Alice. "Joan of Arc, you mean, don't you?" he asked.

"Of course I do, David. How did you guess it? I don't say that Phil looks just like the pictures of Joan of Arc, but she is like her. She would do anything in the world that she thought was right, even if she lost her life in doing it," declared her friend admiringly. "Now, Mr. David Brewster, having arranged the costumes of four important members of the Preston household, what character will you represent?"

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"My own humble self," announced David firmly. "Please don't ask me to 'dress up.' I felt like a perfect chump the night I had to rig myself up as 'Hiawatha.' I rushed up to the house and got the crazy clothes off, even before I—before I—" David stopped, then continued nervously:

"Remember, the other fellows won't have time to get themselves into fancy costumes, so please let me off. I'll clear out, now, and let you girls fix up your costumes."

To save her life, Madge could not help looking curiously at David. It was the usual hour in the afternoon when the young man disappeared. When, late that afternoon, the lad came home he had lost his cheerful mood of the morning. He was sullen and downcast. David had made up his mind that his best chance to restore the stolen property to Miss Betsey Taylor and Mrs. Preston was on the night of the fancy dress ball. The upstairs part of the house would then probably be empty, and no one would think of him or notice him. At any rate, he dared not wait longer. As soon as Tom and the other boys returned, the houseboat party would start off up the river again in tow of the "Sea Gull," and his opportunity would be lost.

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## CHAPTER XXI

### THE INTERRUPTION

ALL afternoon, just before the night of the fancy dress ball, the four girls took turns watching at the front windows of the Preston house for the belated boys. In spite of Tom's telegram, plainly stating the day of their arrival, the motor launch boys had not put in an appearance. Soon after luncheon David went down to the river bank to watch for them. At six o'clock he came back to say that he had waited as long as possible and had seen no sign of the "Sea Gull." It looked as though the boys had been delayed.

The girls were in despair. Here they had planned a wonderful surprise party for the boys, and their guests of honor were not going to be present. The young people from the nearby country houses had been invited to the dance, to begin at eight o'clock that evening, so it was quite impossible to put it off.

At half-past eight the old Virginia homestead, where belles and beaux had made merry many long years before, was gay with the voices of the invited guests. But the dancing had not yet begun. Each time the old door-bell rang the four girls hoped it meant the return of the four boys.

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Under the great curved stairway the orchestra of colored musicians was tuning up. Sam, the colored boy, who had first introduced two of the houseboat girls to Mrs. Preston, was the leader of the band of six instruments. If you have never heard old-time colored people play dance music, you can hardly imagine how delightful it is. To-night Sam's orchestra was composed of six instruments, a bass violin, which he played himself, two banjos, two guitars and a tambourine.

In the long parlors that were to be used for the dancing Mr. and Mrs. Preston stood, shaking hands with their guests. Just back of them sat Miss Betsey in her best black silk dress, and dear Miss Jenny Ann in a white silk gown, looking as young as any one of her girls. Between them was little Alice. On the other side of Miss Betsey a stately old gentleman smiled indulgently on the young people. Mr. John Randolph could no longer have been mistaken for a ghost. A few days of cheerful conversation with his old friends, good food and sunshine had revived him wonderfully. Mrs. Preston explained to her friends that Mr. Randolph had been living alone and, accompanied by his grand-daughter, had lately come to make them a visit.

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The four girls walked about the great room, receiving their visitors, talking to them, trying to entertain them, doing everything in their power to delay the dancing, in the vain hope that their friends would still appear.

In answer to a nod from Mrs. Preston, Madge and Phil hurried to her side. "It is time to begin the dance, dears," reminded Mrs. Preston. "I am sorry that your friends have not arrived, but we can't disappoint our other guests on their account. Tell Sam to begin with an old-fashioned Virginia reel. It is the way we begin our dances down here in the country."

Madge slipped out in the back hall. She noticed David standing alone near the front door. He seemed shy and ill at ease. He did not know how to dance, and it was hard to pretend to be cheerful when he had such a load on his mind.

A loud ring at the front-door bell and a knock on the door startled David. He went forward to open it, but a witch of a girl in a pale blue flowered silk, her blue eyes dancing under her poke bonnet, flitted by him. "Please let me open the door, David," she entreated. "I feel just sure Tom and the other boys have come at last."

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Tom Curtis stared blankly. Who was this lovely apparition that had opened the old farmhouse door for him? Was he dreaming, or had he and his friends strayed into the wrong house? There were the sounds of music and strange boys and girls were about everywhere. Tom took off his hat. With a familiar gesture he ran his fingers through his curly light hair, making it stand on end. "Who is it, and where am I?" he asked feebly, pretending to be overcome with emotion, like the hero in a romantic play.

"Come into the house, Tom Curtis, this minute, and don't be a goose! You know perfectly well I am Madge. Only to-night I am appearing in the character of Miss Dolly Varden. We were giving you boys a surprise party, but we were afraid you would not get here in time for it. Hello, everybody!" Madge shook hands first with Tom, and then with the other three boys. She then took Tom by one hand and her cousin, Jack Bolling, by the other. With Harry Sears and George Robinson following her, she escorted them proudly across the room to Mr. and Mrs. Preston. Lillian, Phil and Eleanor hurried to join them, tendering the belated guests an enthusiastic welcome.

"Here the young men are, at the last minute, Mrs. Preston," exclaimed Madge triumphantly. "Now our dance can really begin."

Tom leaned over to whisper in Miss Dolly Varden's ear, "You'll dance with me, won't you, Madge, for old time's sake?"

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Madge nodded happily. "I have waited for you," she answered. "I felt perfectly sure you wouldn't disappoint us."

Jack Bolling asked Phyllis to dance with him, Harry Sears and Lillian were partners and Eleanor and George Robinson.

"Get your places for the Virginia reel!" Sam shouted.

Mr. and Mrs. Preston stood, each one of them at the head of a long line. Miss Jenny Ann came next, with her partner, a man from the next farm. The four girls were hurrying off with the motor launch boys when Madge stopped suddenly. Old Mr. John Randolph smiled at her. It was hard not to smile at Madge when she was happy.

The little captain whispered something in the old man's ear. "Do, please," she urged, "it will be such fun."

Mr. Randolph rose and bowed low to Miss Betsey Taylor, with his right hand over his heart in the manner of half a century ago. "Miss Betsey, will you do me the honor to dance this reel with me?" he asked, almost with a twinkle in his eye.

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"My gracious, sakes alive!" exclaimed Miss Betsey nervously. "I haven't danced in half a lifetime. I am sure my bones are much too stiff." Nevertheless, frivolous Miss Betsey allowed her old admirer to lead her to her place in the line.

"The Camels are coming, Ho, ho, ho, ho!  
The Camels are coming from Baltimo',"

piped up Sam's orchestra, and jolly Mr. and Mrs. Preston swept down the long line of the dancers with the energy of boy and girl.

David Brewster watched the scene for a minute from the open doorway. He tried to still the feeling of jealousy that swept over him; but he could not help but have a sore feeling in his heart. The girls, who had been so friendly with him in the last few days, had forgotten his very existence, now that the other boys had returned. Also, not one of the motor boys had stopped to speak to him as they passed him in the hall. Poor David!

Well, it was just as well that he had been forgotten for to-night, at least, for he had work to do. Now was the appointed time for the return of Miss Betsey's money and Mrs. Preston's silver. The servants were busy downstairs; the guests were dancing. He would try to accomplish his purpose.

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David was Kneeling Before the Open Box.

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David slipped quietly up the steps and went into his own small room. The Preston house was divided by a long hall, with four large bedrooms on either side. David's room was on the same floor, but at the back of the house. He dragged a big wooden box out from under his bed and silently went to work to open it. He had already got together the tools that were necessary for the purpose. The box lid came off and on top of a pile of silver was Miss Betsey's money bag. It contained all the money that David had been able to persuade the thief to leave behind him.

David emptied his own pockets of every cent he had earned from Tom Curtis during the summer, and postponed the dearest ambition of his life as he did it. Then he crept out into the hall—like a thief, he thought bitterly. The hall was deserted—not even a servant in sight. It was the work of a moment for David to slip into Miss Betsey's bedroom and place her money bag under her pillow.

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But to return the silver to the Prestons was a far more difficult matter. The burglar, on the night of the fire, had swept the old mahogany sideboard clean. He had taken away dozens of solid silver knives, forks, spoons and some large, old-fashioned goblets. It was impossible for David to return the silver to its rightful place in the dining room. He gathered up a load in his arms and ran to the front bedroom, where Mr. and Mrs. Preston slept. His cheeks were flaming from shame and nervousness. He hated, with all the hatred of a passionate, honest nature, the task he was engaged in, but he knew of no other way to do what he believed to be right.

David made his first trip with the silver in safety. But there were still a few pieces remaining in the box. He could hear the music and the merry laughter downstairs. In a few seconds his task would be accomplished. He would bear in silence whatever came afterward.

The lad was kneeling on the floor before the open box. He had just reached down to gather the last handful of silver. His door was partly open; in his hurry David neglected to close it.

"Hello, old chap! How are you?" a cheerful voice called out. Tom Curtis's frank, friendly face appeared at the now open door. "I did not have a chance to speak to you downstairs when I first came in, but Madge sent me up here for her fan, and I thought I'd take a peep in here to see if you could be found. What have you got there?" Tom stared with open curiosity at David's box of silver; then he looked puzzled and unhappy.

David had sprung to his feet with a muttered exclamation of anger.

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Neither boy spoke for a moment. Some one was coming up the steps. "Couldn't you find my fan, Tom? It is almost time for our dance," called Madge. "Why, here you are gossiping with David." Madge was now at the open door. She, too, stared at the open box of silver. Then her face turned white. "O David! what does it mean?" she pleaded. "I simply can't believe my own eyes."

## CHAPTER XXII

### MADGE MORTON'S TRUST

DAVID would make no reply to either Madge's or Tom's questionings. He was sullen, angry and silent. After a while his two friends gave up in despair. But Madge and Tom decided that it would be better not to tell their dreadful secret to any one until the party was over. They did not wish to spoil the evening for the others.

The two friends went back among the dancers and Madge danced the rest of the evening as though nothing had happened. Yet all the time she felt sick at heart. She had trusted David and looked on him as her friend, while he had done her many kindnesses and she was grateful for them. In spite of the evidence of her own eyes she told herself that she still trusted him.

For the rest of the long evening David Brewster never left his own chamber, where Tom had found him. He did not even trouble to take the rest of the silver in to Mrs. Preston. He just sat, staring miserably in front of him, looking old and haggard. The worst had happened. He had been found with the stolen goods in his possession and he had absolutely no explanation to make to his friends.

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It was after one o'clock in the morning when the last guest had departed from the Preston home.

"Dolly Varden looks tired," said Mrs. Preston kindly to Madge, who was lingering near her. "You had better run upstairs to bed, my dear."

"O Mrs. Preston!" cried Madge brokenly, "something strange—has—happened. Won't—you—make—David explain—it to—you?" Then she threw her arms about the good woman's neck and began sobbing disconsolately.

"What's the matter, little girl?" asked Mr. Preston in alarm. He had come upon the scene just in time to witness Madge's outburst of grief.

But all Madge would say was: "Ask David. Make him explain. He isn't guilty; I know he isn't. He didn't steal the silver and Miss Betsey's money; I am sure he didn't."

While Madge was sobbing forth her defense of David, Ned, the old butler, came hurrying in with an excited, "Won't you please come into your bed room, sah; de silver am all back again."

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Mr. Preston hurried after Ned. Sure enough, there was the silver, spread out on the sidetable. David was nowhere to be seen, however, and Mr. Preston decided not to ask the boy any questions that night concerning the mysterious fashion in which the lost silver had suddenly been returned. Neither would he discuss the situation with any member of the household, and for this Madge was secretly very thankful.

David did not come down to breakfast with the family. Soon after Mr. Preston went upstairs to his room. The household was strangely divided in its feeling. Jack Bolling, Harry Sears and George Robinson were all against David. Tom was silent and depressed. Miss Betsey Taylor had not closed her eyes all night, and was extremely cross. She hated to admit it, but her own judgment told her that David was a thief. Though Phil was bitterly sorry and would have done anything in the world she could to help David out of the scrape, she was forced to agree with Miss Betsey.

The young people openly discussed the question of David's guilt. Only Madge was absolutely silent. She would give no opinion one way or the other. But poor David found an unexpected champion in Eleanor. She did not believe that David had taken the money and silver. If he had, he must have meant it for a joke, or he had had some other good reason. Nellie felt perfectly sure he would explain later on.

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The entire party was out on the veranda that led from the dining room when Mr. Preston came back from his interview with David. Mr. Preston's face was very grave, and sterner than any one of his young guests had ever seen it. "The boy refuses to give me any explanation of his strange behavior," announced Mr. Preston to his wife in a voice that they could all hear. "He begs only that I let him leave the house at once. He says that the silver is all safe, and that he will pay Miss Betsey back the rest of her money as soon as he is able to earn it."

"What answer did you make to him, William?" asked Mrs. Preston nervously. Her kind face was clouded with sympathy and regret.

"I told David that he most certainly should not leave us," returned Mr. Preston severely. "I insisted that he come among us, as he has before, and remain here until Mr. Curtis wishes to take his friends away. He will then do what he thinks wisest with the boy. But David shall *not* escape the penalty of his own act. I have no desire to punish him by law. He has returned the stolen property, so I presume that he has had a change of heart; but his refusal to explain why he committed the theft, or to say that he is sorry for his deed, makes it hard for me to have patience with him. He is very trying."

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The gloomy morning went by slowly. The motor launch boys took Phil, Lillian and Eleanor down the river bank. Madge would not go. The young people wished to see that the houseboat was set in order for sailing, and Tom suggested that they eat their luncheon aboard the "Sea Gull." Only Madge guessed that generous-hearted Tom Curtis wished to spare David the embarrassment of meeting his former friends so soon after his disgrace.

David came down to Mrs. Preston's luncheon table. His face looked as though it were cut from marble; only his black eyes burned brilliantly, and his mouth was drawn in a fine, hard line. He bowed quietly as he entered the room, but spoke to no one during the meal. Miss Betsey talked to him kindly, and asked him to come to her room some time during the afternoon.

David shook his head firmly. "It wouldn't do any good, Miss Taylor," he said in a firm tone. "I am willing to let you do anything to me that you like, but I have absolutely nothing to say."

After leaving the dining room, David hurried toward his retreat in the woods. Madge had gone upstairs and was watching the lad from her open window. As she saw him disappear down the road she ran quietly after him.

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David had the start of her and he strode on so rapidly that it was difficult to catch up with him. Then, too, Madge did not wish David to see her until they were both well away from the Preston house.

But once the boy had vaulted the fence into the field, Madge called after him softly: "David, please stop a minute, won't you? I only wish to speak to you."

David marched straight on. If he heard Madge, he did not turn his head. She climbed the fence into the field after him and ran on. "David, don't you hear me?" she panted, for David was walking faster than ever.

She was now so near to David that she knew there was no possibility of his not knowing that she had called to him. When he did not turn his head or show any sign of answering her, she stopped still in the center of the field, with an involuntary exclamation of hurt surprise. Then she turned her back on the boy and began to slowly retrace her steps toward home.

David had heard every sound that Madge made, even to her last little admission of defeat. As she moved away from him he stopped still. He then swung himself around and gazed wistfully after her retreating form. "If she asked me the truth, I think I would have to tell it to her," he murmured to himself. "I don't dare trust myself. It is better that she should think me the rude boor that I am. But I am not a thief; I wish I could tell her that, at least."

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Madge's eyes were full of tears as she stumbled back across the fields. She was hurt, angry and disappointed. Somehow, in spite of everything, she had believed that David could explain his mysterious possession of the stolen property. She would not try again to tell him that she still had faith in him, she thought resentfully.

The field was full of loose rocks and stones, but Madge was apparently oblivious to this. Suddenly a stone rolled under her foot, giving her ankle an unexpected wrench. With a little cry of pain she sank down on the ground to get her breath. In an instant David Brewster was at her side.

"I am afraid you have hurt yourself," he said humbly.

"No," she returned coldly. "I wrenched my ankle for a second; it is all right now."

"Do let me help you home," offered David miserably.

Madge shook her head. "No, thank you; I wouldn't trouble you for worlds," she protested icily.

"But you wouldn't trouble me; I should dearly love to do it," replied David so honestly that the little captain's heart softened though her severe manner never changed. "See here, Miss Morton," David burst out impetuously, "if you won't let me take you home, do let me help you to that old tree over there. You can't stay here in the broiling sun; it will give you a dreadful headache. I know you don't want to speak to me, and I will go right away again."

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"I *did* want to speak to you very much, David," returned Madge gently; "only you would not let me."

"I know," answered David. "I did hear you call to me. I am not going to lie to you, too. I didn't answer because I didn't dare."

Madge put her hand on David's arm and let him assist her across the field to the tree. Her ankle was really well enough by this time for her to have walked alone, but Madge was not quite ready to walk alone.

David sat down abruptly beside his companion under the shadow of a mammoth tulip tree, staring moodily in front of him.

Madge said nothing. A minute, two minutes of silence passed.

"I don't believe you stole the things, David," she avowed simply.

David's eyes dropped and his face twitched. "How can you fail to believe that I stole them?" he questioned doggedly. "I had them in my possession. You know that."

Madge turned her sweet, honest face full on the boy. "I don't know why I think so, David, but I do. I trust you, and I *know* you are honest. Do you dare to look me squarely in the face and say: 'Madge Morton, you are mistaken. I *did* steal Miss Betsey's money and Mr. Preston's silver'? If you will say this, I promise never to betray you and I will never trouble you with questions again. But if you don't, David Brewster, I am going to work until I come to the bottom of this mystery."

David Brewster covered his face with his hands. "I can't say it, Madge," he faltered; "it is too much to ask of me."

The little captain's face broke into happy smiles. "Never mind, David," she comforted him, "I believe I understand."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LITTLE CAPTAIN'S STORY

**D**AVID Brewster rose to his feet.

"If your ankle is all right now," he suggested hurriedly, "I had better go."

"Why?" asked Madge innocently.

"I have some work to do," returned David.

"The same work that you do every afternoon?"

David bowed his head. "Yes," he replied. "See here, Miss Morton, there isn't any reason why I shouldn't tell you what I do when off by myself every afternoon. I don't want you to think that I am always up to some dishonest kind of business." David flushed hotly. "I am only studying when I hide off here in the woods. You see, I have always had to work awfully hard; I never have had much time for schooling. But I don't want the other fellows to get too far ahead of me, for I am going to college some day, even if I am a grown man, when my chance comes."

"Good for *you*, David!" cried Madge, clapping her hands softly. "Of course you will go to college if you have set your mind upon going. I don't believe you are the kind of boy that gives up. You'll do most anything you want to do some day."

David's face flushed under Madge's enthusiasm. "Oh, no, I won't," he answered miserably. "There are some things a fellow can't live down."

"You mean this theft?" inquired Madge.

"Yes," nodded the boy. "Everyone believes me to be a common thief."

"But you didn't steal the things. I believe I know who took them," hazarded Madge; "that man and the old woman who were hiding in the woods."

Madge saw at a glance that her guess was true. David gazed at her helplessly. Then he shook his head. "Those people must have been far away from this neighborhood when the things were taken," he replied.

"Oh, no, they weren't," retorted Madge. "The old woman was at the farm the night of the fire, dressed up as 'Old Nokomis.' I wondered, at the time, if she was not up to some kind of mischief. Then, later on, when Nellie was lost, she saw the same man and woman. I believe they changed their hiding place for fear they might be suspected of the theft, and that we would send the sheriff to look for them."

"But why should I try to shield *them*, Miss Morton?" asked David obstinately, "and how could I have the stolen goods if other people took them?"

It was Madge's turn to flush and be silent. "Don't make me tell you why I think you are trying to shield them, David, by taking the shame on yourself," she pleaded. "You see, I believe I have guessed what those people are to you."

"You can't have guessed," protested David hoarsely. "You don't know anything of me or my people."

"Girls are good at guessing," explained Madge apologetically. "You see, Miss Betsey told us that your father wasn't a very good kind of man, and that he sometimes went away from home and wandered around the country for a long time. And, and——" Madge hesitated. "At first when you spoke to the man and old woman, I was just surprised at your knowing such curious people. Then I began to think. The man looked something like you, David. So I have just worked it out in my own mind that the man took the things, and that you made him let you return them to Miss Betsey and Mrs. Preston, and that you are willing to take the blame on yourself because—"

because—" Madge hesitated again and looked down. "Because the man is your father!" she said gently. "Am I right, David? Please tell me."

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David's face turned red, then white, then red again. "You think that thief is my father, because I look like him, and because I am willing to bear the burden of his guilt?" David was not conscious that he had at last confessed to Madge that the man she suspected was the actual robber!

"He is not my father," continued David passionately. "My father is good for nothing; he comes of bad people, and he has dragged my mother down with him. But he is not a thief! The man who stole the money from Miss Betsey and the silver from the Prestons is my first cousin. He is a great deal older than I am. His father was my father's eldest brother. Hal used to live with us when I was a little boy, and I was fond of him then. But he got too bad, even for us to stand, and he has since been tramping around the country, stealing, or living any way that he could. He would not give me back the things until I promised to take the blame if anybody was suspected. He threatened to implicate me in the robbery if I told any one, so I thought the best thing to do was to return the things and let him go."

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Madge's face was burning and her hands quite cold. "I am sure I beg your pardon, David, with all my heart," she said humbly. "I know that you never can forgive me for insulting your father. I ought not to have tried to find out your secret. Once, long ago, a girl told my friends a story about my father. She said that he had been disgraced when he was a captain in the Navy, and had been dismissed from the service. It wasn't true," faltered Madge, "but most people believed it. I had to try awfully hard to forgive that girl when, later on, she asked me to pardon her. So I don't even ask you to forgive me, David," she insisted mournfully; "only you will believe me when I say that I am awfully sorry for my mistake."

David was staring at her intently. "Forgive you," he replied. "Of course I won't—because there is nothing to forgive. You have been the best friend I ever had. To think that, even when you thought my father was a thief and a tramp, you were still willing to believe in me and to be my friend! You are simply great! Some day I am going to do something splendid that will make you feel glad to know David Brewster." David shook Madge's hand warmly, his eyes clear and untroubled for the first time in their acquaintance. This girl had thought the worst of his family and still had trusted him. No one with a faithful friend need ever be discouraged.

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Madge and David walked slowly back to the Preston house, across the August fields. It was late afternoon. The boy and girl had talked together for a long time under the old tree. They had confided to each other many of their hopes and ambitions. They were not to see each other alone again for a long time. But neither one of them was to forget that summer afternoon.

At the front gate Madge turned and faced David squarely. Her charming face wore an expression of stubborn determination.

"David Brewster, I have not promised your cousin to keep his secret, or to let you be suspected of his crime. I am going to tell Mr. and Mrs. Preston and Miss Betsey that you did not steal their property, and that just as soon as I get inside the house."

David shook his head resolutely. "I thought I could trust you, Madge."

"You can," urged Madge. "Only, please, don't be so stubborn. It can't hurt your cousin for me to tell what he has done. Mr. Preston and Miss Betsey have never seen him and they will both promise never to try to punish him for the theft. They have their things back, so they are not hurt, except by—"

"By what?" asked David unsuspectingly.

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"By their lack of faith in you, David," answered Madge convincingly. "It hurts awfully to be deceived in people. Miss Betsey cried all night, and Mr. Preston ate hardly any breakfast or luncheon, they have been so unhappy over you."

The little captain thought she saw signs of relenting in David's face. "Do let me tell," she pleaded. "I really can't bear it, if you don't," she ended in characteristic Madge-fashion.

David smiled and nodded.

Without waiting to give him a chance to change his mind she ran into the house and up the front steps. The three girls and the motor launch boys had returned and were wondering what had become of her. Madge swept them all before her into the Preston library. Then, summoning her host and hostess, Miss Betsey and Miss Jenny Ann, Madge told David's story. Perhaps she made him a hero in explaining how he was willing to take his cousin's crime on his own shoulders, rather than have Miss Betsey and Mrs. Preston lose their property, but at least, after she had finished, there was no one present who did not have a feeling of admiration for David, who had tried to do his duty even at the expense of his good name.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### "GOOD LUCK TO THE BRIDE"

"DO you think it is very funny, Tom?" inquired Phil. She and Madge, Lillian, Eleanor and the four motor launch boys were on the deck of the "Sea Gull." They were gliding down the Rappahannock toward the great Chesapeake Bay. Moving gracefully behind the motor boat was the familiar form of the "Merry Maid." A group of older people sat out on her deck, gazing along the sun-lit shores of the river. The cruise of the houseboat was almost over.

Tom Curtis hesitated at Phil's question. "I ought not to say it is funny," he returned, "but I really think it is."

"Don't any of you dare to let Miss Betsey know you think so," warned Madge.

Eleanor looked aggrieved. "I am sure I don't know what there is funny about it," she protested. "I think it is lovely. Only it wasn't nice in Miss Betsey not to let us be her bridesmaids." Eleanor gazed across the little space of water to where Mr. and Mrs. John Randolph sat together on the deck of the "Merry Maid" with the blind child, Alice.

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Madge laughed softly. "Miss Betsey said she felt enough like a fool, being married at her age, without having a lot of young girls standing around to laugh at her. But John Randolph wouldn't let her take care of him unless she did marry him, and she had no idea of separating him from his grandchild," concluded Madge.

"What a lot of things have happened this summer," remarked Lillian. "Who would have thought that we should leave David Brewster in Virginia! Mr. Preston says that if David will work for him he will help him go to college."

"David is a bully fellow!" declared Tom. "I don't think we understood him just at first."

"Yes, and Tom Curtis is another," teased Madge; "only he won't blow his own horn, unless it is his fog-horn. Tom offered to pay David's expenses at college if he would come home with us, but David said he thought it would be better for him to earn his own way."

Miss Jenny Ann waved frantically from the deck of the houseboat.

"Tie up along shore, Tom; it is growing late. Remember, this is our last supper party together this summer," she called out.

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It was the first week in September. The evening had grown unexpectedly cool when Tom ran the two boats up by the river bank. In the morning they were to put into shore at a nearby town, and the little company of friends would disband to travel to their homes in various parts of the country. So for to-night they had planned to have a wonderful feast on land, and to make it their good-bye memory of their summer cruise.

Tom had selected a line of open shore, with a grove of chestnut trees just back of it.

Each member of the party went on land, bearing boxes, lunch-hampers and baskets of fruit. Tom staggered under a particularly large box that was very tall and round, as though it contained a new Easter bonnet with feathers standing straight up on it.

Madge and Phil marched behind him, urging him to be careful every foot of the way.

"Girls!" cried Miss Betsey excitedly, coming up beside them with her bonnet over one ear and her long cape flying out behind her, "I have a confession to make to you; I had better out with it before I forget it. You remember those small sums of money that I vowed I had lost when we were first aboard the houseboat?"

Both girls nodded, though their faces clouded at the recollection.

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"Well, they were not stolen at all," announced Miss Betsey shamefacedly. "I am an old woman, children, in spite of my present performances. I had tucked that money away in the little table drawer in my cabin on the houseboat; I suppose I meant to use it for something, and then forgot it. I have a short memory for some things and a long one for others," Miss Betsey's eyes twinkled as her husband came up to join her.

Harry Sears and George Robinson made a huge campfire near the spot where the voyagers had chosen to have their supper. Miss Jenny Ann got out the big coffee pot. The rest of the party started in to spread the feast on a big damask table cloth that Miss Betsey had arranged on the grass.

"Madge, you and Tom Curtis go off to some place to find water for the lemonade," ordered Miss Betsey. Madge and Tom each seized a large tin bucket. Not far off they could see a funny little log house that must belong to one of the river men, it was set so close to the river. They would find water there.

"I have something important to tell you, Madge," said Tom. He began searching diligently in his coat pocket for something, pulled out half a dozen letters, his knife and pocket-book, then with a blank look he exclaimed, "Jiminy! I hope I haven't lost it. Mother will never forgive me if I have."

"Lost what?" demanded Madge.

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"Why, Mother sent you a present, and I have forgotten to give it to you. Now I am afraid I have lost it somewhere."

"Tom Curtis, put down that wretched bucket and hunt for it until you find it," insisted Madge. "What's that sticking out on the front pocket of your coat?"

Tom smiled in a relieved fashion as he handed Madge a box about four inches square. "It's Mother and it's a beauty," he announced.

Madge opened the box to find an exquisite miniature of her friend, Mrs. Curtis. It was painted on ivory and was about the size of a locket. Around it were exquisite pearls, and it hung on a slender gold chain.

The little captain's eyes filled with tears as she looked at it. "I would rather have it than anything in the world," she murmured. In the lining of the box Madge found a note, written on a card: "For my Madge," it read, "whom I shall never cease to wish to have for my daughter."

"I have something to tell you, too," added Tom. "My sister, Madeleine, is going to be married."

Madge nearly dropped her gift in her excitement. "Married! Madeleine! What do you mean? Whom is she going to marry? Why didn't you tell me before?" she demanded, all in one breath. "Do hurry and tell me."

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Tom laughed. "You'll never guess. She is going to marry the Judge Hilliard who rescued you and Phil the night that that wretched Mike Muldoon put you out of his sailboat. Judge Hilliard has always been a friend of ours, you know. At first Madeleine was just grateful to him for what he did for her. Afterward"—Tom colored—"I suppose she fell in love with him. I am not quite sure as to what it means to 'fall in love.' But Madeleine isn't going to be married for a year. Then she wants the four houseboat girls to be her bridesmaids."

Madge clasped her hands in rapture. "Won't it be fun!" she exclaimed. "But do hurry on, Tom, or we shall never get the water for the lemonade."

They were almost back with their other friends when Tom had finished his mother's message: "When Madeleine is married, Mother means to ask you again to be her adopted daughter, Madge," continued Tom; "and you know how much I want you."

Madge shook her auburn head, her face pale with emotion. "It is too soon to talk about it, Tom," she answered. "You see, when I finish school I am going first to hunt for my father."

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"Madge and Tom, do hurry here this minute!" scolded Phil from her seat on the grass. "The lemonade is all ready, except pouring on the water, and we are waiting supper for you."

The two boat parties were in a great circle about the big table cloth, with Mr. and Mrs. John Randolph at the head as the guests of honor of the feast.

It was growing dark, but the bushes and trees nearby were strung with lanterns borrowed from the two boats. The feast was almost over when Madge whispered something in Tom's ear and Phil nodded emphatically.

Tom slipped away, to return bearing the big box which he had carried so tenderly up from the houseboat.

Between them Madge and Phil lifted out a mammoth wedding cake and placed it, with a flourish, in the center of the feast. "You wouldn't have a wedding supper at Mrs. Preston's, Miss Betsey—Mrs. Randolph, I mean," announced Madge, "so we have made you have it here." Madge handed her a knife, saying, "You must cut your own wedding cake."

"I can't cut it," protested Mrs. Randolph; "it is too lovely." On top of the cake was an exquisite frosted ship, made to represent the houseboat. Six tiny dolls danced about it, Phil, Lillian, Eleanor, Madge, Miss Jenny Ann and Miss Betsey! On it was written in icing: "Good luck to the Bride."

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It was too dark to see the bride's radiant old face as she cut into her wedding cake, but her hand trembled.

A minute later Eleanor gave a little cry of surprise. In biting her cake she had come across a small gold ring.

"Eleanor will be married first, but I shall be the richest," announced Lillian, as she held up a bright silver dime. "Who will be the old maid?"

Nobody spoke, but Madge produced a small, bent thimble. "I am going to be the old maid, of course. Haven't I always said so?" she inquired.

"*Not* if I know it!" whispered Tom into Madge's unheeding ears.

"Come on, children, to the boats," ordered Miss Jenny Ann, a little later. "Night has come on. We must say good-bye. We won't have any farewells, even in the morning. They are too dismal. But pleasant dreams on the houseboat and the motor launch. And may we meet again!"

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Transcriber's Note:

Page 14 "is" changed to "it"—Yet [it](#) was impossible to

Page 26 "Phillis" changed to "Phyllis"—[Phyllis](#) was a little girl

Page 63 hyphen removed from "reappeared"—as she [reappeared](#) on deck

Page 137 fullstop removed after chapter heading ELEANOR GETS INTO [MISCHIEF](#)

Page 234 "champon" changed to "champion"—David found an unexpected [champion](#)

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