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Annie Roe Carr**

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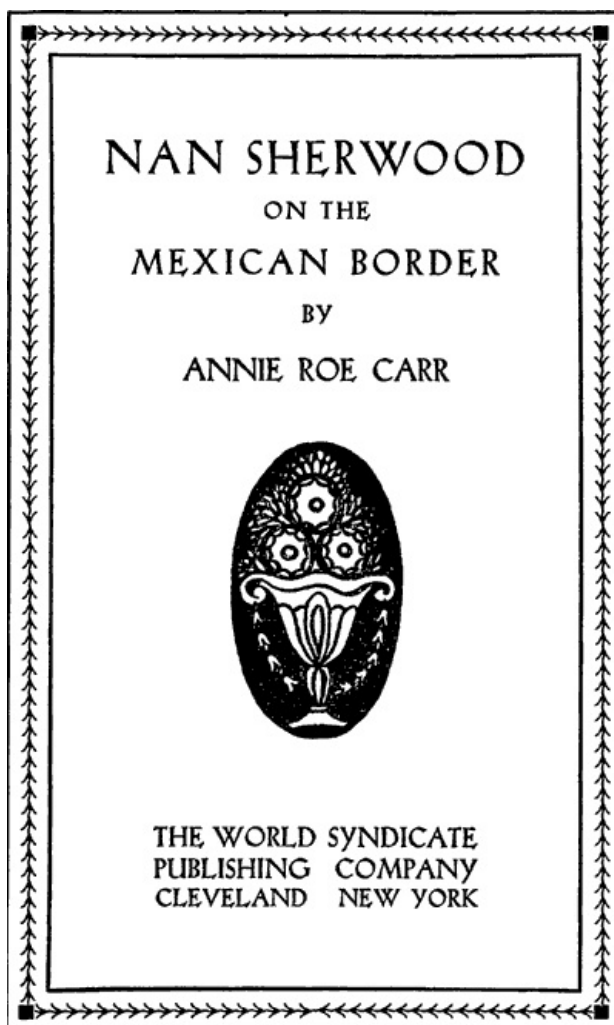
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NAN SHERWOOD ON THE MEXICAN
BORDER ***



NAN SHERWOOD
ON THE

MEXICAN BORDER

BY

ANNIE ROE CARR

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[1]

NAN SHERWOOD ON *the* MEXICAN BORDER



CHAPTER I

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

Elizabeth Harley jumped down from her bicycle and dropped it noisily against the steps of the Sherwood back porch.

"Nan, oh, Nan!" she called.

There was no answer. She ran up the steps and into the cottage, letting the screen door bang behind her. A friend since primary school days of Nan Sherwood, she was like one of the family and always ran into the Sherwood home on Amity Street without the formality of ringing the doorbell or pausing to knock.

Now she was more than anxious to find Nan. She had something important to tell her, news, she felt, that had to be told right away.

Grace and Rhoda and Laura and Amelia, the whole crowd that had gone to England to see the king and queen crowned in Westminster the year before were coming to Tillbury by motor to spend a couple of weeks. Nan and Bess had invited them during the last busy days at school, but Bess had only just now received a telegram saying they could come. Oh, there was so much to do!

[2]

"Nan, Nan!" she called again. They would have to have parties and picnics and hikes. Bess's mind was busy planning even as she wondered where in the world Nan was. They would have a steak fry down on the shore of the lake. They would stay late and after the moon was up, they would sit on the shore and sing and talk and build the fire up high and then when the embers were low, they would toast marshmallows and talk some more until it was time to go home. But where was Nan?

Bess called again. Again there was no answer, but Bess heard the sound of voices in the front of the house. She walked on through. Excited herself, she failed to notice the excitement in the voices that attracted her, so when she stuck her head through the door between the hall and the Sherwood front parlor, she was taken completely by surprise.

There were strangers in the room! Bess withdrew her head in embarrassment, but Nan had seen her and came towards her laughing.

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"Oh, Bess," she said, reaching her hand out toward her friend and pulling her into the room. "Come on in, you are just the person we wanted to see."

"Yes, Bess, it's so," Mrs. Sherwood nodded her head reassuringly at her daughter's young friend.

"Yes, lassie, come in," one of the strangers, a white-haired old man spoke up. "Come over here by me, and let me look at you." His bright blue eyes twinkled as he noted the blush on the girl's cheek but he did nothing to relieve her embarrassment. On the contrary, he adjusted his glasses

on his nose, and carefully looked her up and down.

"Hm-m-m, a pretty bit," he smiled as he rendered his verdict and then reached over and drew Nan, who was standing close beside Bess, near to him. "So this is another of the lassies who went over to see the good king crowned," he addressed his remark to Nan. "And I gather you are pretty good friends."

Nan and Bess both nodded at this.

"And you go to the same school and you pay attention to your lessons and you mind your own business?" The old gentleman tried to look severe as he asked these questions.

"We try to, sir." Bess found her voice at last.

"You obey your elders and you think you are going to spend your vacation here in Tillbury, a God-forsaken place, with a half dozen bright lassies like yourself?" [4]

"Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir." Bess didn't know what to answer. This strange old man was like no one she had ever met before. She wanted to protest that Tillbury was not a God-forsaken place, that she and Nan both liked it, but she didn't quite dare. She wanted to speak up and tell him that vacation in Tillbury with all her friends would be fun, but she didn't dare do that either. She didn't quite know what to think of this white-haired gentleman who seemed so fond of Nan and was so outspoken. In her confusion, she was tongue-tied.

But he wasn't. Each time that he opened his mouth, the words that came forth were more astonishing than they had been before. Bess found herself listening in amazement.

"Well, you're not going to stay here in Tillbury for the summer," he continued his discussion of Bess and Nan's vacation. "I won't have it. And your friends aren't going to either. You're all coming with me. England one summer, and Tillbury the next. Forsooth! I thought you all had more imagination than that. You, Nan, I'm disappointed in you." His eyes twinkled merrily as he looked at his young cousin, for the stranger was Adair MacKenzie, first cousin to Mrs. Sherwood, and a wealthy Memphis, Tennessee, business man. [5]

"Now, let's see, when can we start?" He took out his watch as he spoke. "Hm-m-m. It will take a little time to pack," he reflected. "Lassies are such fussy creatures. They have to have two or three dresses—"

"Two or three!" Nan exclaimed, "Why, cousin Adair, we have to have just dozens if we are going to stay away all summer."

"Who said you were?" The old Scotchman roared and then threw back his head and laughed long and heartily at the young girl who seemed so self-possessed no matter what he said or did. Nan laughed with him and then, turning toward Bess, she introduced her eccentric old relative and his pretty daughter, Alice, a young lady about five years older than Nan who, up to this time, had said nothing, but had watched her father with amusement.

At the introduction, Adair MacKenzie bowed gracefully and, taking Bess's hand lightly in his, kissed it quickly. "You're a nice lassie," he said then. "Now let's all sit down and talk a while about this trip to Mexico."

"To Mexico!" Bess was wide-eyed as the exclamation slipped off her tongue. "Are we going to Mexico?" [6]

"Why, yes. That was all settled weeks ago," MacKenzie knitted his brows as he looked at Bess. "Such a bright young lassie and yet she didn't know that!"

"Don't mind father," Alice took Bess's hand in hers. "He goes about planning all these things and never says anything to anyone until he has everything all ready. It used to wear me out, but now I think it is quite charming of him. Of course, it keeps everyone at home in a constant state of turmoil and it makes the housekeeper furious, but then we manage."

"Manage!" the old man exploded again. "Manage! Why, you imp, you, you love it and you know you do. It's the spice of life to you. Mexico, Europe, Alaska, South America, Egypt, why, the world's a place to live in, not just to read about. India and China and Japan, these are places we haven't been."

"And daddy, we're not going just yet." Alice acted as though she wanted to forestall any possibility of their starting off the next day or the next hour for the Orient. "Remember, it's Mexico we're going to this summer. We're going to live in that big hacienda that was dumped into your hands when you sued those clients of yours that were exporters in Mexico City. Oh, daddy, remember, when you came back the last time, you said it was a grand old place with gorgeous vines flinging scarlet sprays all over everything." [7]

"Yes, I remember. I said that the sunsets were more gorgeous, the birds more brilliant, the flowers brighter, the moon more silver, the sea bluer than anything we've ever seen."

"And that wasn't all you said," Alice seemed to be baiting her father now.

"I know it." He fell right into the trap of the daughter whom he adored. "I said also that there was a bunch of darn Mexicans cluttering up the place down there who put the politeness of us Southerners to shame. Never saw anything like it," he turned to Mrs. Sherwood with this. "They

fall all over themselves every time they turn around, and women just eat it up. Can't stand it myself. Never get anything done. Have to change that."

Mrs. Sherwood laughed softly at this. Adair had not changed a bit since she saw him last, and that was longer ago than she liked to remember. That was at her wedding. She smiled now to herself in recalling it. She and Bob, in their anxiety to escape from the wedding reception without being followed, had taken Adair into their confidence. He had promised to get them a horse and buggy, to see that they got off safely to the train that was to bring them up North on their honeymoon. He had told them to leave everything to him, and, in their innocence, they had.

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Adair had meant well, but somehow or other in his peremptory handling of events, he got everything in such confusion that practically the whole town turned out to see the Sherwoods off. They, in their turn, almost missed the train, for the horse and buggy never did arrive. However, it had all turned out happily, and when the bride and groom stood on the back of the train and waved to their friends, they had an especially fond feeling for Adair. He, however, felt pretty glum, and their last view of him was of a perplexed young man standing off alone on one corner of the station platform, wondering how in the world all of the people had happened to be there.

No, Adair, she could see, hadn't changed a bit. He still liked to manage people, still liked to follow up any impulsive idea that came to his active mind. Through the years, tales of his adventures had reached her by letter from friends and relatives. Adair himself was not given to writing. "Takes too much time," he said. "Can't sit still that long."

His visit now was a surprise. He had arrived, unannounced, when she and Nan were in a turmoil unpacking the trunks that Nan had brought back from school with her. Only the peremptory peal of the doorbell had announced his coming. When she opened the door, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her and then, without even introducing Alice whom she had never met, he began immediately to call for Nan.

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"Where's that girl?" he asked almost before he was inside the door. "Come all the way up here from Memphis to see her and then she doesn't even come to greet me." In his impatience, he pounded on the floor with his cane. Mrs. Sherwood called her daughter.

"You're Nan," he said positively, when Nan finally entered the room. "I'm Adair. I would have known you anyplace. You look and walk and talk (Nan hadn't said a word) just like your mother. The same eyes, the same hair, the same determined chin. Now I believe everything I've been hearing about you. Didn't before. Sounded like a bunch of nonsense to me."

"Young school girl takes part in English coronation. Young school girl saves child from rattlesnake. Young school girl saves life of old lady. Didn't believe a word of it. Now I do. You're going to Mexico with me."

"Adair MacKenzie!" Mrs. Sherwood exclaimed. "Will you please lay your cane aside, take off your coat, put your hat down and have a chair before you go sweeping Nan off her feet with your scatterbrained ideas."

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"Nan, don't worry, darling," she turned toward her daughter and laughed. "This man is really quite harmless. He is Adair MacKenzie, our cousin. Remember, the one we wrote to some years ago when we were in such trouble. He can't help being like this. He's always been so."

"Well, well, well!" Adair grinned rather winningly at Mrs. Sherwood. "I must say, Jessie, you haven't changed either. Still think you can manage me, do you? Alice," he turned toward his daughter now for the first time, "this woman you see here is the only woman who ever thought she could wind me around her finger."

Mrs. Sherwood and Alice exchanged sympathetic glances at this. Alice, too, if her father only knew it, had her ways of managing him. Nan's mother knew this instinctively and liked Alice.

Nan liked her too. She was tall, slender, with blond curly hair and deep blue eyes. She was pretty and happy looking. And she liked Nan and hoped against hope that her father could work out his plan to induce Nan and her friends to come to Mexico with them. She sat quietly by while he plunged into the matter.

"Come here, Nancy," he commanded when he had taken off his coat. Nan walked across the room and stood in front of him. "You want to go to Mexico?"

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Nan hesitated. She had never before thought of going to Mexico.

"You want to go to Mexico? Yes, or no?"

"Why, I can't." Nan hesitated as she answered.

"No such word. Never say can't to me. Don't like it. Why can't you?" Adair MacKenzie frowned at Nan.

"Why, sir, I have friends coming to stay with me for a few weeks. I can't run away from them." Nan hardly knew what to say.

"You like them?"

"Of course."

"Are they as nice as you?"

"Nicer."

"Don't be modest. They couldn't be. When are they coming?"

"I'm not just sure. Perhaps next week."

"That's all right then. They'll come with us. We'll all go to Mexico together. Now, that's taken care of."

It was on this decision, that Bess had entered the room so unexpectedly.

CHAPTER II

YOU'RE GOING WITH ME

"But do you think the others can go?" Bess asked anxiously when Adair MacKenzie and Alice had driven off in search of Mr. Sherwood. "To bring him home where he belongs when he has visitors," Adair had said.

"What do you think, Momsey?" Nan referred the question to her mother. The three were in the kitchen where Mrs. Sherwood was bustling about preparing a company dinner.

"The good Lord only knows," Mrs. Sherwood shook her head as she sifted more flour on her biscuit dough and then kneaded it lightly and expertly. "I can only tell you two girls this. When Adair MacKenzie sets out to do something, he usually does it. He has a way about him that almost always wins people over to his side."

"Yes, but to Mexico. He wants to take us all to Mexico and he doesn't even know us!" Bess couldn't believe it, not even after seeing and hearing the old Scotchman. "And if I can't believe it," she questioned, "how in the world will the others when they haven't even seen him or heard him talk?"

"Don't you worry, Bessie," Mrs. Sherwood looked affectionately at this girl who was almost a second daughter to her. "They'll be both seeing him and hearing him talk before long now. If I know Adair MacKenzie at all, he'll be at work on this thing before another day is up. And if he's one-half the man he used to be, you might just as well begin packing tonight."

"You mean to say you are sure we will all go?" Bess was incredulous.

"Yes, you'll go and have the grandest time you ever have had," Mrs. Sherwood said confidently. "There never was another man like Adair MacKenzie."

"Then I'm going?" Nan had, despite her cousin's assurance, been somewhat doubtful. She knew that her mother had wanted her to stay at home this summer, that she had been lonesome without her daughter the summer before and was planning all sorts of little surprises for this vacation.

"Go! Of course you're going!" Mrs. Sherwood nearly dropped her biscuit dough in her surprise at Nan's question. "And I shouldn't be a bit surprised if your father and I were to go at least part way with you. Adair said something about it. Aye, but he's a thoughtful soul."

So it came about that Rhoda Hammond, Grace and Walter Mason, Amelia "Procrastination" Boggs, and Laura Polk, all school chums of Bess and Nan, in the days that followed, received telegraphic invitations to spend the summer with Nan in Mexico.

While each of them is laying her plans, packing her clothes and wiring "Santa Claus", as Laura Polk immediately dubbed Cousin Adair, let's briefly review the adventures of Nan Sherwood and her friends up to this point.

Nan was born in Tillbury, a pleasant little town, some distance from any big city, and her early school days were spent with Elizabeth Harley, the only one of Nan's many friends who has followed her through all of her adventures.

In the first book of the series, "Nan Sherwood at Pine Camp" or "The Old Lumberman's Secret" Nan and Bess are pals at Tillbury High School. Here Nan is extremely popular with all of her classmates and excels in sports. She and Bess have grand times together, though the Sherwoods live on a reduced income while Bess, the daughter of one of Tillbury's wealthiest families, has everything that money can buy.

The first big disagreement the girls ever have comes in the opening chapters of this book when Bess, having decided to go away to an exclusive boarding school on the shores of Lake Michigan,

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tries to induce Nan to go with her. Though Nan wants with all her heart to go, she absolutely refuses to ask her parents because she knows that they cannot afford to let her. She is happy later at her decision, because on the eve of it, she discovers that her father has lost his job in the Tillbury Mills. Everything looks extremely dark for the Sherwoods. Momsey Sherwood is ill and Papa Sherwood, because of his age, is complete at a loss as to know where to turn for a job.

However, when things are darkest, Mrs. Sherwood receives two letters. One from Scotland informs her that she is sole heir of a fortune in Scotland, and the other, from her cousin Adair MacKenzie, whom we have already met, promises her aid until such time as she can collect on her inheritance. With this, Nan's parents leave for Scotland and pack Nan off to Northern Wisconsin where she spends an exciting year in the lumber country with an uncle and aunt. Here, in chapter after chapter that are full of thrills for Nan, those about her, and the reader, the plucky young girl solves a mystery that, in the end, clears her uncle's title to a valuable piece of property.

In the next volume of the series, "Nan Sherwood at Lakeview Hall" or "The Mystery of the Haunted Boathouse" our young heroine goes off to school with Bess. And there never was a nicer school anyplace than Lakeview Hall. Situated on a bluff overlooking the lake it's like an old castle. Mrs. Cupp, assistant to Dr. Beulah Prescott, is the keeper and the girls, early in the volume, learn to respect her, if not to admire her. Here, they make the acquaintance of a number of new friends.

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There are Grace Mason and her brother Walter, children of a wealthy Chicago family; Laura Polk, a red-headed girl whose lively imagination and ready tongue are constantly getting her into difficulties; Amelia Boggs, a serious book-loving soul with a roomful of clocks; and finally, Linda Riggs, a snobbish, spoiled child, who is extremely jealous of Nan and her well-deserved popularity.

Last, but not least, there is the boathouse ghost around whom is woven a mystery that brings Nan and Walter Mason together in such a way that they develop a keen admiration for one another. This book is chock full of adventure, excitement and mystery and Lakeview Hall is the center of it all.

Her friendship with Grace and Walter bring about her next big experience, a visit to Chicago. In "Nan Sherwood's Winter Holidays" or "Rescuing the Runaways" the Lakeview Hall crowd spends Christmas vacation in Grace Mason's palatial Chicago home. The story of Nan's meeting with a very famous movie star and her solution to the mystery surrounding the strange disappearance of two young farm girls who have come to the city to go into the movies is recounted in this volume.

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Next, Nan and her friends go off on a visit to a western ranch, the home of Rhoda Hammond, a school chum. Here the northern girls get their first taste of what it is to live in the wide open spaces of the west. The story of lost treasure that is told in this volume of the series, "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch" or "The Old Mexican's Treasure" is one that no admirer of plucky Nan Sherwood would want to miss.

The year that follows this western adventure is a pleasant one at Lakeview Hall and at its end, we find Nan and her friends trekking off to Florida and Palm Beach. So, in "Nan Sherwood at Palm Beach" or "Strange Adventures Among the Orange Groves" in a background of wide sandy beaches, beautiful graceful palms, and a hotel that overlooks the sea, a villain who has tried to cheat one of Nan's many acquaintances out of her fortune, comes to a well-deserved end, and Nan emerges a heroine once more. At the end of this volume, we find that Walter and Nan are becoming more and more fond of one another, and we see the Lakeview Hall girls teasing them about it again and again.

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In the sixth volume, Mrs. Sherwood's Scotch connections bring about an invitation to Nan to visit Scotland and the family estate of her mother's people. Bess is heartbroken that her friend is going away without her. However, she tries to conceal her disappointment and joins with Nan's other friends in planning a grand farewell party. The party proves to be a surprise all round and the great day ends with an announcement by Dr. Prescott that she is taking a party of six girls abroad to see the king and queen of England crowned! Such excitement! Such last minute rush! Such fun! Never was there a happier, more exciting, more adventurous crossing of the ocean than the Lakeview Hall crowd enjoyed on the S. S. Lincoln. And the whole is rounded out in the last chapter with Nan as a lady-in-waiting to the Queen at the coronation. How this all came about is a story that all Nan Sherwood fans will want to read.

It was the part his little cousin had played in the coronation that made Adair MacKenzie resolve to hunt her up. It was this that brought him to Tillbury and the cottage on Amity street on the day the present volume opens.

"Good biscuits!" Adair MacKenzie bit off a piece of their lightness the evening the present story opens. They were all sitting at the Sherwood dinner table. There he sat, chewing reflectively, as he glanced down the table at young Nan.

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"So you helped crown the good queen," he remarked, "And it didn't go to your head. You're a good lass. You Blakes," he turned to Mrs. Sherwood now, "were always a bunch of modest creatures. That's why I like you. Now, Bessie there," he pointed to Bess who had stayed for dinner, "she's not so modest, but she's kind and loyal. She's a little spoiled, but she'll get by."

Bess blushed all shades of the rainbow at Adair's frankness. Used to being babied and somewhat

pampered at home, his outspokenness troubled her. She felt strangely like crying. Nan caught her eye and smiled encouragingly. Mrs. Sherwood patted her hand beneath the tablecloth. And Alice, well, Alice was a dear, for she turned the conversation toward school, and both Nan and Bess utterly forgot themselves in telling of the horse show in which they had both taken part during the last week at school.

"So you think you can ride, eh?" Adair MacKenzie was secretly pleased at both of the young girls. "Well, we'll see. I'll put you each on a Mexican mule and let you try to climb a mountain and see what happens." He chuckled at the thought.

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Alice laughed merrily at this. "Well, you'll never get me on one," she vowed. "Once was enough. Instead of the mule pulling me up the narrow path, I pulled the mule up. I never worked harder in my life."

"Oh, my sweet, you never worked at all." Adair shook his finger at his daughter. "But you'll work this summer—if that old housekeeper of ours keeps her resolution not to go down to that dirty hole which we call a hacienda. The words are hers," he explained to Nan and Bess.

"She once, when she was a very young girl, spent a summer on a sugar beet farm here in the north. A lot of Mexicans worked on it. They were miserably treated and poorly paid. As a result their huts were like hovels. She saw some of them and now she says that wild horses couldn't drag her into that country down there. She'd rather see me starve first. But I'll get her yet." Adair MacKenzie smiled as though he liked opposition. "I'll show her who is boss," he ended.

"Of course you will, daddy," Alice agreed. "But now tell us, when are we going? How long are we going to stay? And whom have you invited?"

This last question put Adair MacKenzie in a corner and he knew it. Really, a very kind and extremely impulsive soul, when he went on these summer jaunts for pleasure he was apt to go about for weeks, inviting all his friends. As a result, no matter how large the house was he rented, it was always too small, and no matter what preparation Alice made for guests, they were always inadequate.

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Now, as he sat thinking, a mischievous light came into his eye. "There is only one that I've invited," he teased, "besides these girls that will interest you."

"And that is—?"

"Walker Jamieson, that smart-alecky reporter that we met in San Francisco a couple of years ago. Remember?"

"Remember? Of course I remember and he wasn't smart alecky. He was kind and sweet and—" But Alice didn't finish her sentence, for she became conscious of the fact that all the eyes around the dinner table were on her. She blushed prettily.

"Anyway," she justified herself, "he'll be a help in handling you, for he's smart, almost as smart as you are, daddy."

"A reporter! You mean to say a real newspaper reporter will be down there with us?" Nan couldn't contain herself any longer.

"Yep, a no good reporter." Adair MacKenzie tried hard to look disdainful as he said this, but he didn't succeed very well and both Nan and Bess guessed that he had a genuine regard for the "young scamp" as he called him. "Got to have someone around," he muttered as he drank his coffee, "to help handle you women, even if it's a young scalawag who spends all his time tracking down stories for your worthless newspaper."

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"Stories!" Bess and Nan were wide-eyed.

"Now, see here," Adair shook his finger in the direction of the two young girls, "reporters are no good. They're a lazy lot that hang around with their feet on desks pretending to think. Think! Why, I never knew one yet that had a thought worth telling, let alone writing.

"This one that you are going to meet is no better than the rest. M-m-m, and no worse either," he conceded as he noted the expression on Alice's face. "I asked him to come along because he has a knack of making things lively wherever he is.

"Soon's he gets those two big feet of his down off his desk, he makes things hum. That's the way he is, lazy one minute, full of action the next. If there's absolutely nothing happening, he knows how to stir things up. I rather like a man like that—not that I like him," he added hastily, "but if we're going to go across the border this summer, got to have someone like him around. Might just as well be Jamieson as anyone else."

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"And will he write stories while we're there and will they be in the paper?" Nan was reluctant to let the conversation about the young reporter drop.

"Never can tell anything about people like him," Adair MacKenzie shook his head as though he would be the last person in the world to predict anything about reporters. Could he have looked into the future he would have shaken it even more violently, for in the next few weeks Walker Jamieson, with the help of Nan and the Lakeview Hall crowd, was to uncover in Mexico one of the biggest stories of the year.

CHAPTER III

ADAIR MACKENZIE SPEAKS UP

It all started in Laredo, Texas, just after Nan and her guests had been met by Adair MacKenzie, Alice, and that amazing young newspaper man, Walker Jamieson.

"Got everything?" Adair MacKenzie asked gruffly when the bevy of pretty young girls, all in their early teens, had stepped, one after the other, from the streamlined train that had brought them from St. Louis. They had met in that city, all except Rhoda whose home, as those who have read "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch" will remember, was in the South. She, therefore, had joined the party at beautiful San Antonio. From there on, the girls had all been together.

"I-I-I guess so," Nan answered her eccentric old cousin slowly as she looked about first at her friends and then at the suitcases and bags that the porters were setting on the station platform beside them.

"Looks it." Adair MacKenzie agreed laconically. "Got almost as many bags as Alice here and I thought that she carried more junk than any other woman alive. So these are the girls. H-m-m." He looked at the Lakeview Hall group in much the same manner that he had appraised Bess just three weeks before.

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"Let's see," he began, and Nan's eyes twinkled as she realized that he was not going to keep his conclusions to himself any more than he had before. "You're Laura," he said positively, picking the red-headed girl out of the crowd as though he had studied a photograph of her until he couldn't possibly mistake her features.

"And that red hair's going to get you in trouble sometime," he continued his characterization. "Got a temper now. I can see that. A ready tongue too, I'll wager. But you'll get by if you can go on laughing at yourself. You've got a sense of humor. Keep it."

"Yes, sir," Laura answered as meekly as she could. She had already been warned, on the train, by Bess as to what to expect, so this frank analysis of her character did not take her altogether by surprise.

"And you, Miss," the old Scotsman went on around the circle of girls enjoying himself hugely as he characterized his young cousin's friends, "you," he was looking at Amelia as he spoke, "are the one that has all of those clocks. You're too serious. You'll learn down here in this lazy country that time just doesn't matter. Ask anybody to do anything for you and he'll nod his head slowly and mutter, if he's got enough pep, 'Si, si, señor, mañana!' He'll do anything in the world you want him to do, mañana, and mañana never comes.

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"However, you and I will get along. I like you. You are punctual. It's a virtue. Never been late for anything in your life, have you?"

Amelia hardly knew what to answer, for Adair had made time seem both important and unimportant.

"Speak up," the old man looked at her kindly now. "Don't be modest like my young cousin here. Well, never mind," he passed Amelia by as he saw that he had embarrassed her beyond her ability to speak. "I'll take care of you later," he ended before he turned to Rhoda.

"From the West, aren't you?" he questioned the proud brown-eyed young girl. "Can tell in a minute. That carriage, the way you hold your head, your clear eyes. Even if I hadn't heard that Western accent, I would have known." Adair MacKenzie was proud of his ability to read character, and as he went from one of the young lassies to the other, he was pleased with himself and pleased with them, for their quiet acceptance of his outspokenness.

"A city girl. Just a little too shy." Grace's turn came last, and she had been dreading it. "You've got to learn to stick up for your own rights," he had struck home here, he knew, and though he realized that Grace could take it with less equilibrium than any of the rest, he wasn't going to spare her.

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"Say, 'boo,' to you," he went on, "And you'll run. Isn't it so?"

Grace said nothing, but nodded her head.

"Try saying 'boo!' back sometime," he advised in a quieter tone than he had used to any of the other girls, "and see what happens. If the person you say it to doesn't run, stand your ground and say it again, louder. But be careful," he patted Grace on the shoulder, "and don't scare yourself with your own voice."

At this everyone laughed, including Grace, and Alice MacKenzie took her father by the arm and started toward the station. "If you don't look out, father," she warned, "I'll say 'boo!' to you and then you'll jump."

"Oh, go along with you," Adair MacKenzie pounded his cane on the wooden platform, and then shook it at his daughter, "If you don't behave yourself, I'll give you one last spanking that will hold you until you are as old and gray as I am."

For answer, Alice laughed provocatively up into his face.

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"Now, come on, you girls," Adair frowned as best he could under the circumstances, "we've got to get along. And you too, you get a move on," he pointed his cane, with this, at a tall, lanky blond young man.

At this, Nan and Bess, Rhoda and Grace, Laura and Amelia with one accord turned their eyes on Walker Jamieson.

"It's real, girls." Walker grinned down into their faces. "It moves and speaks, eats and sleeps just like the rest of the world. It does everything but work." So saying, he winked quite openly at Alice and lengthened his steps so that he walked beside her father.

"First truth I've ever heard you utter," Adair MacKenzie tried to sound brusque, but didn't succeed very well. The truth was, of course, that he was intensely pleased with the prospect of spending his summer with this crowd of young people. And, though he would be the last person in the world to admit it, he was intensely flattered that this brilliant young newspaper man was in the party. "Not that he came," he thought to himself as he noted, with some satisfaction, the regard with which Walker seemed to hold Alice, "to keep me company." He sighed deeply as he finished the thought. Alice was his only child.

"Got everything?" Adair MacKenzie repeated the question with which he greeted the girls as they all approached the customs office. "Baggage checks? Tourist cards?"

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At this, they all opened their purses and rummaged around in them.

"Shades of Glasgow." Laura murmured into Nan's ears. "Seems good to be going through this red tape again, doesn't it?"

Nan nodded. She felt much the same as she did the day they had first stepped foot on foreign soil, an unforgettable experience that they all had talked over again and again since that morning in May when the great boat had been moored to the dock and they had walked, one after the other, down the gangplank to set their feet in Scotland for the first time. The adventures that had followed had made their vacation the most exciting of their lives as those who have read "Nan Sherwood's Summer Holidays" all agree. Now, as they all walked forward toward the offices of the Mexican officials, Nan wondered idly what further adventures were in store for her.

"Señorita, your bag, señorita."

"Why don't you answer when you are called?" Walker Jamieson dropped back into step beside Nan. "Lady," he prodded Nan with his elbow, "the handsome young Mexican with the neat little mustache that is running after us, is calling you."

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"Me?" Nan's voice had a surprised ring to it. "Am I Señorita?"

"None other, for months to come, now." Walker Jamieson answered. "You are Señorita Sherwood and you had better answer when these Señores call or they will be so much insulted that they will never recover."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Nan looked genuinely regretful as she turned to the tall thin native that had been following her.

"It is nothing," he dismissed her concern with a wave of his hands, "but the Señorita has dropped her purse. May I give it to her?" He bowed gracefully as he presented it, and Nan felt that he couldn't possibly have presented the finest gift in the world with more grace.

However, before she could possibly thank him, he disappeared. She turned to follow the others into the offices, rummaging through her purse, even as they had done, as she went.

"Why, it's gone!" Nan looked first at her purse and then in the direction in which the obliging young Mexican had vanished.

"Uh-huh, we should have guessed," Walker Jamieson shook his head sadly. "Dumb of me. What did he get?"

"My visitor's pass!" Nan exclaimed. "Now, what will I do?" Involuntarily, they both looked toward Adair MacKenzie who was just disappearing through the door. Then they laughed.

[31]

"I don't know, kid," Walker liked this youngster that Alice had already filled his ears with tales about. "But you're in for it. It's tough, these days, getting duplicates of the things. Shall I break the news to the ogre," he nodded in Adair MacKenzie's direction. "He'll explode, but you've just got to take it."

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE AT THE BORDER

"Here, here, what's eating you two?" Adair MacKenzie came bursting forth from the door he had entered just a few moments before Nan's encounter with the Mexican. "H-m-m, lost your pass, I'll wager." With the uncanny instinct of many peppery old gentlemen, Adair MacKenzie as soon as he saw the baffled expression on Nan's face, jumped immediately to the right conclusion.

"Might have known that would happen. Should have taken care of them all myself. Can't depend on women and girls. Always tell Alice that. Ought to have a safe place to keep things. Old pouch my mother used to strap around her waist was a good idea."

Nan couldn't restrain the smile that came to her eyes at this. She had known one person in her life who tied a bag around her waist. That was grim old Mrs. Cupp, assistant to Dr. Beulah Prescott, principal at Lakeview Hall. Legend had it that Mrs. Cupp had a dark secret the key to which she carried in the black bag which someone, in days long before Nan and Bess descended on Lakeview Hall, had seen. Whether or not it was so, Nan didn't know, but at Lakeview Hall, the words "Keep it a secret" were generally expressed by saying "Put it in the black bag."

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"Laughing at me, Miss!" Adair's roar brought Nan out of her reveries. She jumped, and looking up into his face, she winged her way from Lakeview Hall on the shores of the Great Lakes back to Laredo, Texas and the immediate problem of the lost visitor's pass.

"I said you should take care of your things the way I do," he roared again. "See," he pushed his hand inside his topcoat pocket, "Always know where my things—" the end of the sentence was lost in a sputter, as Adair MacKenzie searched frantically in pocket after pocket for his visitor's pass. It was gone!

"W-w-why, somebody's picked my pockets. Can't allow this. Where's a policeman? You, you, why don't you do something instead of standing there and laughing?" Adair shook his cane at Walker Jamieson who was grinning broadly at the spectacle of the old man fuming and sputtering now, not at his own negligence, but at the inefficiency of a government that would allow such things to happen. His tirade against Nan and her carelessness were utterly forgotten.

But it wasn't necessary for Walker to do anything. Adair, in his outburst, railing against governments in general now, calling down the wrath of the gods on the heads of all policemen, and expressing himself most forcibly on the subject of newspaper men in particular, attracted a crowd. Shortly, English and Spanish words were being flung this way and that and everyone was arguing, but what it was all about no one seemed to know.

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"Why, daddy, what has happened?" Alice having heard the excitement from her seat in the office where her father had left her had worked her way through the crowd, and now put a restraining hand on his arm.

Immediately, he was quiet. "I'm sorry, dear," he looked down at her shamefacedly, "but these blundering Mexicans have lost not only that poor young girl's," he pointed to Nan with his cane, "visitor's pass, but mine too. It's an outrage! That's what it is, an outrage. And I won't stand for it."

"Oh, Walker," Alice turned to the young reporter now, "What shall we do?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss," the voice was that of a Texas Ranger with a big ten-gallon hat who had watched the whole scene with some amusement, "but if you'll step right over to the offices there" he nodded in the direction of the door from which Alice had emerged a moment before, "Mr. Nogales will take care of you."

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"Thanks," Walker acknowledged the information, grinned, as though he was sharing a joke with the stranger, took both Alice and her father by the arm, and, with Nan, worked his way out of the crowd.

"It's a difficult problem." Lozario Nogales gave a slight Spanish accent to his words as he spoke to the Americans who, a few moments after the scene above, were ushered into his office. "You see, it's like this—" he spoke slowly and fingered a pencil as he chose his words, for English did not come any too easily to him.

"Nonsense! No difficulties at all." Adair MacKenzie was always impatient with slow speech, "all you have to do is write out another of those cards for each of us. Take you a minute. They're nothing but a lot of silly red tape anyway. If I had my way about it, there would be no passports, no customs, no visitors' passes, no anything that impedes free movement of people across the borders. It's all foolishness the way you Mexicans do these things." Thus, with utter inconsistency, Adair MacKenzie, in a moment's time placed the whole burden of border regulations in the laps of the Mexicans.

"But Señor," Lozario felt that he never would become accustomed to the ways of these Americans, and of this American in particular, "there are the rules."

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"Rules! What rules?" Adair stormed further, then he caught Alice's eye and capitulated, "Well,

what are we to do?"

"It's simply this," Mr. Nogales was more than grateful for Alice's presence which gave him at last an opportunity to speak, "there has been a good deal of smuggling across the borders in the past few months, and your American government has made new rules about the issuing of duplicates when passes are lost."

"Smuggling?" Walker Jamieson now spoke up for the first time since the party entered the office. "Smuggling what?"

"Well, the American gentleman knows that immigration laws prohibit the free passage of certain nationalities into the United States."

Walker nodded. His work in San Francisco had brought this fact most forcibly to his mind again and again, for there he had worked often among the Chinese and the Japanese and numbered among them many close friends. These people admired him and respected him greatly. They thought that because he was a newspaper man, he could do anything in the world for them that he wanted to do.

As a consequence, they were constantly coming to him with tales of wives or mothers or children that they wanted to see, but could not get into the United States because of the immigration laws. [37]

"And the señor knows that these people somehow or other manage to get across the border in spite of these laws?" Mr. Nogales continued. He liked this young man.

"Yes." Walker knew that too. Often he had been amazed while covering his beat in Chinatown to meet the very mothers, wives, or children he had been asked to "get here for me, please, Mr. Jamieson" a few days after being asked.

However, as he threaded through the dark streets of the famous San Francisco Chinatown this surprise always wore off. The ways of the people he was among were so silent and mysterious, even to him working among them and calling them "friends", that he had grown to take such sudden appearances for granted.

"Well, just lately," Mr. Nogales went on, "there have been even more than the usual number of persons smuggled across. Your government and mine has been working hard on the problem of putting an end to this. One means of stopping it has been to check most thoroughly the issuance of all duplicate visitor's passes."

Nan was beginning to see light in the whole situation now. Immigration laws and the smuggling of aliens across the border was something she had studied about in social science classes at Lakeview. This scene in the Laredo offices was a school lesson brought to life. [38]

Nan vaguely remembered, as she stood there listening and watching, that Laura had once had a special report to give on this particular subject. She remembered because it was at the time the girls were planning a big spread down at the boathouse, and Laura had been so excited about the whole thing that she had gone to class utterly unprepared. In the few minutes before the assembly bell rang Nan helped her out, and so Laura had managed to struggle through the social science hour.

Nan turned. She wished that Laura and the rest were here now, but she knew that they were waiting in an outer office.

"Then you think," Walker Jamieson's words brought Nan back to the present plight of herself and her cousin Adair, "that there is a regular trade in visitors' passes, that the pickpocket who got ours wanted nothing else?"

"You had no money stolen, did you?" Mr. Nogales queried.

"Uh-h-h-" Adair MacKenzie had been silent for a long while for him. Now he rummaged through his pockets even as Nan checked on the contents of her purse. [39]

"Just as I thought," Mr. Nogales nodded his head, as the two agreed that all their money was there. "Your visitors' passes are the only thing missing. Just a moment, please, I'll see what can be done." With this, he disappeared into the office of his superior, and Adair MacKenzie followed him.

Nan, Alice, and Walker Jamieson looked hopelessly at one another as Adair disappeared from their view.

TELL US ABOUT THE HACIENDA

"What did you think?" Laura inquired afterwards when the girls were all settled in a hotel close to the border for the night. "That the walls of that inner office would just cave in when Mr. MacKenzie started bellowing."

"Why, Laura Polk, how disrespectfully you talk!" Bess exclaimed from her place in front of the dressing table where she was brushing her hair. "And Mr. MacKenzie is our host too. If it weren't for him we wouldn't be down here now. At this minute we'd probably be on the shores of a lake near Tillbury."

"Oh, Bess, you know I'm not one bit disrespectful, really," Laura retorted. "I like Mr. MacKenzie real well and you know I do. I'd give anything in the world to be able to roar the way he does." There was genuine longing in her voice as she spoke. "Just imagine," she continued, "how handy that roar would have come in the night we routed the ghost. I just think," she continued to play with the idea of making use of Adair MacKenzie's roar, "how handy it would come in, if we were to meet Linda Riggs.

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"Couldn't we manage," she was lying prone on the bed, and, as this new idea came to her, she cupped her chin in her hands and looked off into space, "to have your cousin around sometime when Linda Riggs was present. I'd love to have him analyze her the way he did us today. Such fun!" Laura's eyes danced merrily at the thought.

"And then I'd like to have her open her mouth to protest," Laura continued, "and have him roar at her. Oh, I'd give a million dollars, a trillion dollars," she amended generously, "to hear that roar."

"You and me too," Bess joined in. "By the way, have any of you heard anything about her lately?"

"Not I," Nan answered, "and I must say the less I hear about her and the less I see of her, the better. There was a rumor, you know, at school that she was going to be allowed to come back this fall."

"I know it," Bess somehow always managed to hear all the rumors, "and I can't for the life of me understand why Dr. Prescott would ever let her reenter. Certainly, she's no credit to Lakeview Hall, or to any school for that matter. If I were a principal I wouldn't let her in my school. In fact, if I got the chance at all, I'd just slam the door right in her face."

"Oh, Bess, do you ever sound as though you meant it? Cousin Adair should hear you talk now. He thinks that Laura has a temper. He should hear you sometimes." Nan laughed at her pal.

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"I know it, but I think I'm more than justified. She's certainly caused us plenty of trouble from the very first time we ever met her. I'll never forget how she embarrassed us on the train that took us to Lakeview the first time."

"Nor how Professor Krenner took our part," Nan added.

"Nor how you outwitted her and drove up to school in the back of Walter Mason's car as though you were a princess returning to her palace," Laura giggled. "There never was a freshman created more of a stir than you did that night. Boy, did we ever put our heads together in corridor four and decide that we would have to put you in your place right away," she continued slangily.

"And did I ever hate you, Laura Polk," Bess laughed now at the recollection. "You embarrassed me so about that lunch box that when I went to bed that night I cried myself to sleep."

"Poor Bessie," Laura sympathized. "You were such a proud little thing that I never in the world thought I'd ever be able to get along with you."

"Get along with Bess!" Nan exclaimed, "if you had ever heard what Bess said about you that night, you would have been surprised that she ever spoke to you again."

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"What did you say, Bess?" Laura looked positively impish as she looked at Bess's reflection in the mirror.

"Oh, I don't remember." Bess was obviously concealing the truth.

"You do too," Amelia joined in as she wound the pretty little travelling clock that had been given her the week before.

"If you don't tell, I will," Nan was enjoying the situation as much as the rest, for she saw that Bess was not really embarrassed.

"Go ahead then and see if I care," Bess retorted, giving a few final strokes to her hair.

"Well, you said," Nan began slowly, "that that homely red-headed Polk girl was just as mean as she could be!"

"Did she say that?" Laura laughed heartily. Even in those days she would have been the first to laugh at herself. Now she could laugh doubly, for the homely red-headed girl had, since then, blossomed out into a pretty, fair complexioned curly headed miss with a very pleasing personality.

And so the girls continued for some time to talk over events and happenings that are recounted in other books of this series until Laura turned to Nan, "Anyway," she said, "if we may return to the present and Laredo, Texas, will you please tell us just how your cousin managed to extract those passes from the authorities this afternoon? I respected his abilities to get what he wanted from the moment mother capitulated and let me come down here with what she called, 'a perfect stranger,' but I never respected them as much as I did when I saw that white uniformed official bowing you people out of that office as though you were the President's party itself."

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"Wasn't he just grand!" Nan's eyes were alight at the recollection. "That man was none other than a special aid to the Mexican consular office here in Laredo, and he nearly fell all over trying to help us after cousin Adair ceased his storming and told those people who he was. I never saw anything like it in my life."

"It was 'Si, señor, this,' and 'Si, señor, that' until Alice and Walker and I began to think that we were really somebody, if only by reflected glory."

"Well, you certainly looked like somebody very important when you came out," Bess agreed. "I wondered for a moment whether I had really heard alright when you went in."

"Then you did hear us?" Nan laughed.

"All Mexico did," Laura put in. "Really, at first we thought another revolution was taking place. Grace here was looking around for someplace to hide herself. Amelia was clutching her watch to her with a look of determination which said as plainly as anything 'no foraging rebel is going to get this' and Rhoda looked as though she wished she had brought her trusty six shooter along. And then when we had gotten ourselves all worked up to the point of accepting the inevitable, who should come round the corner but you and Mr. Jamieson, Alice and her father!"

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"You sound as though we disappointed you," Nan remarked.

"Oh, not at all." Laura hastened to correct this impression. "I don't believe Mr. MacKenzie has ever disappointed anyone in his life. He just couldn't. Not with that cane, that roar, and that honesty which stops at nothing. He's a dear. Now tell us, Nan, all you know about this place we are going to."

"I've done that a thousand times since I met you in St. Louis," Nan responded as she pulled off her dress and slipped her arms into the lounging robe that the Lakeview Hall girls had given her at a surprise party in her honor more than a year before.

"Oh, no, you haven't," Laura denied. "We made you spend most of the time telling us about this angel of a cousin that appeared out of a clear sky and offered to take us all to Mexico. Doesn't sound real even now when we're here."

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"There's one thing about it," Amelia added, "if one can't have rich relations oneself, the next best thing in the world is to have charming friends who have them."

"Here, here!" Laura raised a protesting hand. "You're out of order. The first thing you know Nan will be thinking we're fond of her."

"Oh, you old ducks," Nan looked at them all fondly. "Don't you know that cousin Adair knew that if he didn't invite all of you that I wouldn't come at all? Now, let's forget all of this gratitude stuff. It embarrasses me."

"All right then," Bess agreed, "but you really haven't told Rhoda anything at all about the hacienda, Nan."

"I don't know anything myself," Nan admitted after some hesitation. "I've tried and tried to get cousin Adair to tell me something about the place, but he just won't say anything. I'm not sure whether he knows and won't tell or whether he doesn't know himself. At any rate, he's being extremely mysterious about the whole thing. Says that we didn't see anything when we saw Emberon, that this place that we are going has that beat all hollow. Now what do you people make of that?"

"Dungeons, secret passage, weird wailing of bagpipes, that's what Emberon had," Laura summarized. "If this Mexican hacienda has anything better to offer, I'd like to see it."

[47]

"And so would I," Nan agreed. She almost resented the idea that anything could possibly be any nicer than the old Blake estate in Scotland. "And listen, he says this further, that if we think we had adventures in Scotland and England, we just haven't seen anything yet. What in the world do you suppose he means?"

"If Doctor Prescott said that, or Mrs. Cupp, or your father or mine," Rhoda answered, "I might possibly hazard a guess as to what was meant, but there's no telling about this cousin of yours, Nan."

"No, he's as unpredictable as the seasons, Alice says, and the only thing we can do is wait." Nan sounded as though waiting was the hardest thing in the world to do.

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING ABOUT MEXICO

"What's this?" Laura questioned the next morning when she came upon Amelia in her hotel room reading diligently from a book.

"Oh, nothing." Amelia barely looked up.

"Come on, tell aunty," Laura teased. "Nobody else is up yet and I've simply got to talk to someone."

"You mean there's no one else about, so you'll talk to me. Well, I like that!" Amelia returned to her book as though she were really indignant.

"You know I didn't," Laura sounded very conciliatory—for her. "It's just this; I've got the whims-whams something terrible. Did you ever have the whim-whams, Amelia?"

"Can't say I did," Amelia answered. "At least I didn't call them any such name as that."

"Then you know what I mean?" Laura looked very serious.

"You mean," Amelia turned the open book over on her lap and answered Laura's question, "that you have awakened early in a hotel in a strange city, that you want like anything to go off exploring, that you know you can't, and that the next best thing you can find to do is to annoy someone else who can't go either."

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"My dear professor," Laura assumed as serious a mien as possible, "you have hit the well-known nail squarely on the head. It must be that you have the whim-whams too. Now what is that you are reading?"

"Well, if you must know," Amelia gave in, "It's a guidebook to Mexico."

"Ah, what could be better." Laura herself reached for the book. "Let's see what this country across the street from this hotel is like."

"It does seem funny, doesn't it," Amelia said, "that when we look out our hotel windows we are looking into a foreign country. It doesn't look any different. It doesn't sound any different. And it doesn't—"

"Smell any different," Laura finished, "and that's the most surprising thing of all, because according to Mr. MacKenzie, Mexico is just the smelliest place on God's green earth."

"Did he tell you that too?" Amelia asked. "Really, when he finished the tirade against the country that he delivered to me after dinner, I began to wonder why in the world he ever brought along five such nice girls as we."

"Five? What's the matter, 'Mealy, can't you count before breakfast? There are six of us."

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"I said five *nice* girls," Amelia insisted. "He might have had one of several reasons for bringing you along."

"Such as—" Nan had come into the room just in time to hear this last.

"Oh, he might have wanted to make the world a better place for the rest of us to live in by losing Laura, making her a target for the revolutionists, feeding her to the bulls, or just leaving her here as food for the fleas," Amelia responded airily, and then she put her arm around Laura's shoulder as though to show her that she didn't mean a word of what she was saying.

"They do say," Grace added as she joined the group, "that the fleas here are man-sized. That reporter told me last night that the reason they give us mosquito netting to put over us at night is that the fleas and the mosquitos wage a nightly battle as to who is going to carry off the Americans."

"And you believed him?" Laura laughed.

"Well, not exactly," Grace answered, "but I did carefully tuck my netting all round me last night."

"He told me lots of things about Mexico, too," Nan added, "and I don't know which of them to believe. This is a queer country we are going into, full of so many strange legends, so many different kinds of people that any wild tale at all might be true."

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"That's what I was thinking," Amelia agreed, "when Laura came into the room this morning. This guidebook here is full of all sorts of queer tales."

"Such as—?" Nan queried.

"Oh, you people in there," Bess called from another room, "wait until Rhoda and I come before you talk any more about Mexico. We want to hear too."

"All right, slow-pokes," Nan called back, "but you'll have to hurry. We're supposed to be downstairs for breakfast with Cousin Adair in exactly one-half hour."

At this, Bess and Rhoda came into Amelia's room and the girls, all dressed in sports clothes, settled themselves to learn something about the country they were going to visit.

"It says here," Nan began, for she had long ago lifted the guidebook from Amelia's lap, "that Mexico is a Latin-American country south of the United States of America. The Gulf of Mexico is to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west."

"Oh, we know that," Bess interrupted impatiently, "tell us something that is different."

"Well, how's this?" Nan queried, "Mexico is a land of great contrasts. About sixty percent of its population are Indians who live in a backward civilization that weaves its own clothes, grinds its own corn, does everything for itself by hand. The other forty percent is advanced and modern. The first can neither read nor write. The latter attends modern schools and universities. [52]

"Nothing in Mexico, in its history, its climate, its people, or its landscape is dull or monotonous."

"That's better," Bess approved. She was not one to care much for facts or figures.

"Oh, there are more interesting things than that in the book," Amelia reached for it. "Here let me read you something that I found this morning."

"Just a second," Nan held on to it, "How in the world do you pronounce these words with all their z's and x's. No wonder there are so many people that can't read or write. I wouldn't be able to write myself if I lived here. Imagine living in a place called I x m i q u i l p a n or X o c h i m i l c o." She spelled them all out because she couldn't possibly pronounce them. "They must all be Indian words dating from the time of the Aztecs," Nan went on. "Look, they all have beautiful meanings.

"Chalchihuites is translated into 'Emeralds in the Rough', Tehuacan, 'Stone of the gods', Chiapas, 'River of the Lime-leaved Sage', and Tzintzuntzan, 'Humming Bird'. And here's a place I want to go, Yecapixtla or 'Place Where People Have Sharp Noses'." [53]

"What a funny place that must be," Laura laughed with Nan, "I'll bet they all spend their time minding one another's business."

"They probably have a factory there," Nan went on, "for turning out people like Mrs. Cupp and they have catalogues showing the sharp, sharper, and sharpest noses."

"And when a school principal wants to hire an assistant that will see everything and hear everything he pays top price and gets the sharpest," Laura liked the idea. "We ought to go there," she ended, "if it's only to get a postcard so that we can send it back to Mrs. Cupp with the words 'Wish you were here'."

"Oh, Laura, you old meany," Nan laughed. "You know she isn't half as bad as you make her out to be."

"No, she isn't," Laura agreed. "Lakeview Hall certainly wouldn't be complete without her. Why, down here in Mexico—well, on the border of Mexico—when I'm going farther and farther away from her all the time, I can almost believe that I'm fond of her. But don't let me talk about it," she pretended to sniff as though she was going to cry, "or I'll be getting homesick for her." [54]

"Small chance of your ever getting homesick for anyone," Bess remarked, "but let's hear what it is Amelia wants to tell us about and then go downstairs, I'm almost starved."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Amelia," Nan handed over the book, "I didn't mean to monopolize it." These Lakeview Hall girls, together for so many years under all sorts of circumstances, were still polite to one another and thoughtful about little things. They teased one another, laughed at one another's faults, and quarreled sometimes among themselves, but they were always eager to forgive and more than anxious to please. This was why they had been friends for so long. They were never really jealous of one another and were always ready to praise anyone in the group who did anything outstanding.

"It's all right, Nan," Amelia answered as she reached for the book. "I merely thought that this story of the founding of Mexico City might be fun to read. It's short, Bess, so we'll be downstairs in just a few minutes. Here it is.

"When the Aztecs, a people that inhabited this part of Mexico long before the coming of the white man from across the water, were wandering from place to place in search of a spot on which to establish themselves, their head priest had a vision. [55]

"In it, he saw their War God and heard him telling them to go on and on until they found an eagle on a cactus growing from the rock. The cactus, the War God said, was the heart of his treacherous nephew who had waged war against him and lost. As punishment, he had been put to death and his heart was torn from him and thrown into the lake. It fell upon a rock among the reeds, and from it grew a cactus so big and strong that an eagle, seeking a place to build his nest, had made his home upon it.

"The Aztecs heeded the words of their War God as told them by the priest. For years they wandered, until finally, one morning very early, their long search was rewarded. They came upon the eagle on the cactus! His wings were extended to the rays of the sun and in his claws he held a snake.

“So it was here that they built their city and even to this day, the cactus and the eagle, holding a snake in his beak, is Mexico’s emblem.” With this, Amelia closed the book.

“So that’s why I’ve been seeing that symbol on so many Mexican things all these years,” Nan commented. “I’ve wondered what it meant, but was always too lazy to look it up. How strange the history of this country is that we are going into! I wonder what will happen.”

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“Probably everything,” Laura said, “so, now I think we’d better go downstairs and eat, fortify ourselves so to speak for any emergency.”

“Guess you’re right,” Nan laughed. And with this, Nan and her friends all hurried down to breakfast and to the beginning of another day in their Mexican adventure.

CHAPTER VII

[57]

BESS SMELLS A ROMANCE

“Well, how are the charming señoritas this morning?” Walker Jamieson dropped his feet from the chair next to him and rose as Nan and her friends entered the lounge of the hotel.

“Let’s see, one, two, three, four, five, yes, there are six of you still. There was no victory for the mosquitoes last night I can see. I had an idea,” he nodded his head slowly as though he had been seriously considering the subject, “that all would go well after my joust with the man-sized monster that forced its way into my room. Boy, was it a big one! It had a million legs like tentacles that wound themselves around me so that if it hadn’t been for my trusty Excalibur, none of us would have been here this morning. It was a fight.” He shook his head as though the recollection was more than he could bear.

“Yes, we can see it was.” Alice, too, had been waiting for the girls to appear. “We can see the marks of the bloody battle all over your face.”

“Can you really?” Walker Jamieson grinned down at the girl who was just a foot shorter than himself. “Well, they are all for you ladies,” he pretended now to doff a big sombrero and sweep it across in front of him in the most approved style.

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“What’s all this nonsense?” Adair MacKenzie joined the party. “Can’t stand silliness any time, and least of all before breakfast. Now, get out into that dining room and eat.”

At this, the whole party moved. “Don’t intend to spend the summer in Laredo,” Adair muttered as he followed them.

Breakfast was a silent meal—silent that is, save for Adair’s sputtering into his coffee. At its finish, he pushed his plate back, called the waiter and gave him an extraordinarily large tip, and turned to his young cousin.

“Well, Nancy,” he said agreeably, “How are things with you this fine morning? Ready to move on? And you, Bess, and all the rest of you, are you all right? Now, let me tell you all a secret,” he went on as he realized how quiet everyone had been throughout the meal, “I’m not really such a bad old soul. Oh, I lose my temper at times. I admit that,” he said generously, “but I’m not bad, not bad at all.” He shook his head as though he was entirely satisfied with himself and the world in general.

“And you there, Jamieson, you’re not bad either,” he went on.

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Walker nodded his head as though he acquiesced entirely and Alice beamed on everyone. It was nice to have everyone in such a happy frame of mind, she thought, and then, for luck, crossed her fingers.

“And now, daddy,” she ventured while he was still in his expansive mood, “What’s on the program for today?”

“Oh, lots of things, lots of nice things,” he looked very pleased with himself. “First off, how soon can you all be ready to move on? We should be moving along to Mexico City, a grand place, one of the most interesting cities I’ve ever visited. What say you, Jamieson?”

“Eh, what?” Jamieson had been quite bowled over by the old man’s sudden change in mood and had been wondering whether it would be the right time now to ask whether he could kidnap Alice for part of the morning. He was trying to signal her to ask her opinion, when the question was addressed to him. Now, he was at a complete loss, for he had heard nothing of the conversation that preceded the query.

“I say,” Adair repeated his question patiently, “isn’t Mexico City a grand place?”

"Yes, yes, a grand place," Walker answered absently. Had Alice understood what he was signaling? He couldn't be sure. What was she telling him with her lips. Was it "Better wait" or "Better not." "What?" The question came out audibly without his realizing it.

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It was Nan, the darling, who saved the day. She had been watching the frantic efforts of Walker Jamieson to communicate with Alice and noted his lack of success. She, too, had been trying to read Alice's answer and was as startled as Walker when his "what?" was voiced. Now, like a "veteran" (Walker used the word later when he promised to buy her something, anything from a gorgeously colored serape to an jade bracelet for coming to his rescue) she filled the breach.

"I said," she affirmed, looking at Walker as though she was answering his question, "that we can all be ready to leave about noon, if it pleases cousin Adair." She turned to her cousin somewhat diffidently as she added this last. The truth was, of course, that she and her friends could have left in an hour, in a half hour, but it was fun trying to help Walker and Alice out.

"Let's see," Adair took out his big gold watch and considered. "Noon. That gives us a few hours to make a good start on our way before dark. Could you make it by eleven?"

Nan looked at Walker. "Eleven-thirty." She read his lips.

"Eleven-thirty," she smiled up at her cousin.

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"You little beggar, you," he tweaked the pink ear that showed just beneath her brown bobbed hair, "you'll be able to barter with those Mexicans like a veteran. It's your Scotch blood." He looked proud of her as he turned to the others, "Well, Nan here says 'eleven-thirty', so eleven-thirty it is. Now get out, all of you, I've got some business to attend to, and I don't want to see any more of any of you until it's time to leave. No, not even you," he added as he looked at Alice.

They all strolled out of the dining room together and Walker executed a few fancy little steps for Nan's benefit, as, when they reached the elevators, he and Alice went on past them to the doors and out.

"Why, Nan Sherwood, it's a romance. Walker Jamieson is in love with Alice MacKenzie. I'll bet you anything." Bess's face was all alight as she closed the door of Nan's room. "It's just thrilling. Did you see the way the two of them walked away together. Why, they were so glad you said you couldn't be ready until eleven-thirty! I just know they were!" Bess was fairly bubbling over with excitement. "Didn't you see it at all?"

"See what?" Nan pretended innocence.

"Why, how glad they were, of course," Bess seemed impatient with Nan's inability to see a romance when it was right under her nose.

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"Oh, Bess, you imagine things," Nan answered. She didn't want Bess to be aware at all that she had tried to help Alice and Walker out.

"Imagine things! You're just blind, that's all," Bess was very proud of her discovery. "They are in love with one another and they'll get married in Mexico. You'll be the maid of honor and we'll be the bridesmaids and everything will be just grand, won't it?"

"Bess, Bess," Nan laughed, "how you do jump to conclusions! Have you ever considered that the bride has to have someone to give her away and have you tried to imagine cousin Adair giving Alice away?"

Bess was all soberness immediately. "No, I didn't think of that," she admitted. "Oh, what can we do about him?" she puckered her brows as if Adair was an immediate and very difficult problem. "If we could get him right after he has had a good breakfast," she laughed, "maybe he would be as nice as he was this morning and then I'm sure everything would be all right."

"Or," she continued, as a new and better idea came to her, "they could elope. Wouldn't that be exciting, Nan? And just think how mad your cousin would be. No, that's not so good either. Mr. MacKenzie would probably disown Alice and then they wouldn't have all his money."

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"Bess!" Nan exclaimed, "how you do run on."

"Yes, I know," Bess agreed, "but it's such a perfectly entrancing subject. She's a darling and so is he. Why, he's almost as nice as Walter Mason," she added slyly.

Nan ignored this last. "Walker is nice, isn't he?" she said. "And he and Alice do look dear together."

"He's swell," Bess said slangily. "He's tall and handsome and full of fun. Do you know, I think sometimes that Mr. MacKenzie does like him, for all the way he calls him 'lazy' and a 'no-good reporter.'"

"Of course he does," Nan agreed, "and Walker likes him too. I just know it."

Bess looked at Nan questioningly at this latter bit of information. Did Nan know something she didn't know?

"Anyway, we'll just have to wait and see what happens," Nan tried to dismiss the subject.

"I suppose so," Bess sighed, "but it would be such fun to be an attendant at a wedding."

"Oh, Bessie," Nan ruffled her friend's hair, "you're such a romantic soul. I'll bet that you think that if worse came to worse and cousin Adair insisted that Alice marry someone else, Walker would ride up on a charger and carry Alice off the way young Lochinvar did in that poem we learned back in the fifth grade. Remember?"

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"You mean the one about Lochinvar coming up out of the West, 'through all the wide world his steed was the best,'" Bess laughed.

"Yes, that's the one," Nan assented. "Remember how we loved that thing and how we used to say over and over again the stanza that followed the one where he asked the bride to dance with him

'One touch to her hand, and one word in her ear
When they reach'd the hall door, and the charger stood near;
So light to the croupe the fair lady he swung,
So light to the saddle before her he sprung!
She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush, and scaur;
They'll have fleet steeds that follow, quoth young Lochinvar.'"

"And then at the end," Bess went on, "there was this,

"There was racing and chasing, on Cannobie lea,
But the lost bride of Netherby ne'er did they see.
So daring in love, and so dauntless in war,
Have ye e'er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?"

[65]

"Oh, Nan," Bess laughed when she had finished, "when I was a kid I thought there couldn't possibly be anything more romantic than that."

"Nor I neither," Nan admitted, "And I thought of it often when we were in Scotland last summer. But do you know, Bess," she giggled, "that Young Lochinvar of today would have to dash up in a car—"

"Yes, or in Mexico it might be a burro," Bess laughed heartily at the thought.

"Say, what are you two making such a rumpus about," Laura stuck her head in through the door. "First thing you know, they'll be locking you up as a couple of laughing hyenas, because you are making such a racket."

"Come on in, Laura," Nan invited, "We've just got a silly streak, that's all. Bess, here, had a couple of crazy ideas that she aired. She's all right now. You can come in," she finished reassuringly. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," Laura answered in such an unusual tone that Nan knew immediately something was wrong.

"Come, what is it?" she asked again, going over to Laura and closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER VIII

[66]

TROUBLE FOR RHODA

"Oh, it's Rhoda," Laura admitted when the door was closed. "Nan, something terrible's happened and Rhoda is in her room crying her eyes out. Won't you come and see if you can't do something for her."

"Of course," Nan started for the door at once. "But what's happened?" She and Bess asked this last together.

"Rhoda just received a telegram from her father asking her to come home at once."

"Why?"

"Oh, girls," Laura herself was almost in tears, "Rhoda's mother is seriously ill and they don't know whether or not she will live until Rhoda gets there."

"Go downstairs," Nan took command of the situation at once, "and find cousin Adair. Tell him what's happened and ask him what to do. I'll go to Rhoda. Bess, you had better come too," she continued. "Somebody will have to fix her bags so that she can leave at once. Now, don't any of you cry in front of Rhoda, we've got to help her to be as brave as possible. Maybe it isn't as bad

as it seems." With this Nan and Bess and Laura set about to help their friend and, for the time, all thoughts of their Mexican journey were forgotten.

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Mrs. Hammond, Rhoda's mother, had entertained the girls a couple of years previous to the present story, on the Hammond ranch in the West. They all remembered her as a beautifully graceful, sweet woman. Blind for many years, she had not let her affliction crush her spirit and was, perhaps, one of the happiest, nicest people they had ever known.

Those who have read "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch or The Old Mexican's Treasure" will remember Mrs. Hammond too and remember well her first meeting with the girls.

"I'll never forget it," Nan had told her own mother again and again. "As we rode up to the veranda of the low-roofed ranch house Mr. and Mrs. Hammond stood there on the porch waiting for us. She was a tall lovely person. I liked her the moment I saw her. As I came up the steps behind her friend, Mrs. Janeway, she took hold of me and asked 'Who is this?'"

"Before I had a chance to answer she ran her fingers lightly over my face, even feeling my ears and the way my hair fluffed over my forehead and the way my eyebrows were. Then, without any hesitation and before I had said anything at all, she said, 'Why, this is Nan Sherwood that I have heard so much about.'" [68]

"When I asked her how she knew, she laughed the prettiest laugh I've ever heard, outside of yours, and said that she knew because Rhoda had written home about me and because she was a witch. She knew the others by touch too. Oh, she was such a nice person and so good to us all the while we were there!"

"She never once said a thing about her blindness. She seemed to take it for granted and never excused herself on account of it.

"I only hope that, if ever anything terrible happens to me, I will remember her and be as sweet and uncomplaining about it as she is."

The other girls had felt the same as Nan. All had left Rose Ranch with a very warm feeling for Mrs. Hammond and they were all better girls for having met her.

In the days that followed their return to school that year they sent her a gift along with their bread-and-butter notes. Ever after that, boxes Rhoda received from her Western home always contained some sort of goodies specially marked for Rhoda's Lakeview Hall friends. So Mrs. Hammond had become a well-beloved friend to them all.

Now, when the telegram came telling of her serious illness, they all felt personally concerned. [69]

"Oh, Nan," Laura came into the room where Nan was helping Rhoda dress and comforting her as much as possible, "I can't find your cousin anyplace. He seems to have gone out on business and he didn't leave word with anyone as to where he was going."

"Well, we've got to find him, that's all." Nan was not one to give up easily in any circumstances. "Have you tried to locate Walker Jamieson?"

"Yes, and I can't find him or Alice either. You don't know where they were going, do you?"

"No." Already Nan was regretting that she had helped Alice and Walker out. She felt that she needed them now, very much. "I tell you what you do, you call up the railway station and find out what are the best possible train connections that Rhoda can make. Then reserve her a compartment. After that call those offices where we were yesterday and ask whether cousin Adair is there or is expected."

"By the time you finish, Rhoda will be ready and we'll be downstairs at the telegraph desk. We are going to wire her father so that he can have someone at the station to meet her."

At these instructions, Laura flew across the hall to her own room to make the calls, for she wished to keep things as quiet as possible around Rhoda. In the meantime, both Amelia and Grace had heard what had happened and came to help. [70]

The girls were all sticking together in trouble even as they always did in pleasure, and it was a great comfort to completely bewildered Rhoda.

Now, as Nan completed the job of helping Rhoda dress and Bess finished packing her bags, there was a gentle knock on the door and a gentle voice inquired, "May I come in?" It was Alice.

"Walker's gone for father," she said, "And Laura's asked me to tell you that there's a train out in a half hour. Is everything ready?"

Rhoda nodded her head, but said nothing. She was trying hard now not to cry.

"So you know where cousin Adair is?" Nan looked across the room at Alice.

"No, but Walker will find him and have him here in no time at all," Alice replied quietly and confidently.

She had hardly finished the sentence, when those in the room heard the firm tread of Adair MacKenzie in the hall and heard his voice boom out, "Porter, porter, come here, and take these bags."

It was good to hear him, good to hear his decisiveness. Everyone in the room felt better as soon as he opened the door.

"Here, here, what's all this?" He looked at Rhoda's red eyes. "Come, girl, buck up," he patted her roughly on the shoulder. "Ready, are you?"

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"You're going by plane. It leaves in fifteen minutes and there's a taxi waiting downstairs. That red-headed girl, what's her name, got you a compartment in a train, but we've cancelled that.

"Now, that good-for-nothing newspaper friend of my daughter's is downstairs putting through a long distance call so that you can talk to your father before you leave here.

"You can tell him that this is a private plane and that it will practically drop you in your own back yard. Do they have back yards where you come from?"

Rhoda nodded. How good everyone was being to her.

"Now, now, don't thank me," Adair MacKenzie forestalled her thanks. "Help a nice girl like you out any time I can. Ready? You better go downstairs. You've just got time to talk to your father before you make the plane. You'll find everything comfortable there.

"Come, you, Nan," he motioned to his cousin, "You're the only one that can come along with us. Don't want a lot of fuss. See the rest of you later." With this, he hurried Nan and Rhoda out of the room and down the elevator so quickly that Rhoda, in doing things, got control of herself, just as Adair MacKenzie had known she would.

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The talk with her father was comforting, but not encouraging, and it was with a heavy, heavy heart that Rhoda Hammond waved good-by to her friends at the airport a few minutes later.

Nan stifled a sob as the plane taxied across the field and rose into the air. Adair MacKenzie looked down on her. "There, there, child," he said gently, "Things will turn out all right and we'll make this up to the girl sometime later."

Nan caught her upper lip between her teeth and tried to smile up at him. "Please, please, make everything right." It was a prayer that she breathed.

CHAPTER IX

RESOLUTIONS

[73]

It was a sad little party that drew out of Laredo that afternoon. The thoughts of Nan and her friends were all with Rhoda. At every turn they wondered where she was and what she was doing.

Only Adair MacKenzie's insistence had made them depart from the city on the border at all.

"Got to be on our way now," he had said brusquely when he and Nan had driven up to the hotel after seeing Rhoda off. "Now, get busy, you," he ordered the girls after they had heard the details of Rhoda's departure from Nan. "Can't stay around here any longer. Sick and tired of this place. Nothing but a hole in the wall. Don't like it. Don't like the people. We're leaving. Get busy, I say." He tapped his cane impatiently on the floor of the hotel veranda. "I mean you and you and you." He pointed with it to each separate member of the party.

The girls jumped. Alice jumped. And Walker Jamieson jumped. Everyone got busy and in an hour's time they were all sitting on the veranda, dressed for traveling, waiting for the car to come.

"What are you doing here?" Adair MacKenzie appeared in the doorway. Short and somewhat stocky with a face that was perpetually tanned and dressed as he was in a white suit and large white panama hat, he looked like a permanent part of the scene about him. Nan, as she looked at him felt proud. Despite all his blustering, his ordering of people around, and his abrupt manner, he was kind and gentle at heart. This, she knew, was the reason for his success. This was why everyone who had ever known him liked him and loved him.

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Now, characteristically, he followed his abrupt question with a piece of information that laid bare his softness and unfailing thoughtfulness.

"Get inside, all of you," he ordered, "there are long distance calls coming through for each of you from your parents. Can't have you mooning around," he muttered, "waiting for mail in order to find out whether or not your mothers and fathers are well. You, Nancy, your call is waiting now. Just talked to Jessie myself in Memphis. She's fine, just fine. Never felt better in her life she says. Might have known it in the first place. The Blakes are strong people."

With this, he walked away. "No nonsense, now," he grumbled as he disappeared and each of the girls went in to talk from a telephone booth on the southern border of the United States to her parents in the north.

[75]

How exciting it was to talk over that great distance! How good it seemed to the girls to hear their mother's voices! Nan talked to both her father and mother in Tennessee, and as she did, she imagined just how they looked, the expressions on their faces when they said certain dear, familiar things and the look in their eyes when they laughed. It was almost like having them in the same room with her.

As she hung up, a wistful expression crossed her face, one that Adair MacKenzie, standing off to one side of the room noted. "What's the matter, Nancy?" he asked in a softer tone than Nan had ever heard him use.

"Lonesome?" Adair questioned further.

"Oh, a little bit," Nan smiled. "Sometimes, I miss Momsey a great, great deal." As she spoke her thoughts slipped back to those first days at Pine Camp recounted in the first volume of the Nan Sherwood series when it was so hard to fight off the wave of homesickness that came over her.

"Not going to back down on me and go home, are you?" Adair MacKenzie asked the question half in fun and half in seriousness.

"Oh, no," Nan laughed. "I couldn't do that."

"That's the spirit!" Nan's cousin applauded. "Never back down on anything you set out to do. When you start a thing, finish it. That's the way people get places. Made me what I am. Never started a thing yet I didn't finish."

[76]

Nan looking at him, believed it. He had the air about him of one that accomplishes things. You could see it in the way he walked, the way he talked. "Doesn't make any difference," he continued, "what it is, a school lesson, a vacation, a housekeeping task for your mother. If you begin it, finish it." He said this last so emphatically that Nan looked about her half expecting to find something that she should finish right away.

"Doesn't make any difference," he went on, "how hard the thing is or how much you want to do something else. Do the thing you first started and do it as well as you possibly can. Understand what I mean?" Nan's cousin looked at her very intently for a moment and then he ruffled her pretty brown hair with his rough hand. "Of course you do, child," he smiled at her. "You're as bright as they make them."

"Dad, oh, dad!" Alice MacKenzie joined the two. "You're wanted. The car's ready and the driver wants to know when we're going to start."

"Start!" Adair MacKenzie, the soft mood having slipped away from him now, roared. "Haven't I been waiting around here for an hour now for that old sluggard. And then he has the effrontery to send word to me that he's waiting! The dolt! I'll fix him. I'll fix him, if it's the last thing in the world I do! Thinks I'm a softy, does he? I'll show him!" With this, Adair MacKenzie went fuming from the room.

[77]

Fifteen minutes later Nan Sherwood and her friends, Walker Jamieson, and Alice and her father were riding along the road toward Mexico City.

"Got this telegram just before we left," Adair MacKenzie felt in his pockets for the yellow paper, "It's from that Hammond girl." He turned it over to Nan who read aloud to the others.

"Arrived safely at San Antonio. Plane there ready to take me on. Called home again. Mother holding her own. Love. Rhoda."

Nan's voice was husky as she finished. She folded the telegram slowly and thoughtfully, thinking of the struggle that was going on at Rose Ranch and remembering her own concern years back over her own mother's health.

"There, Nan," Bess laid a gentle hand on her friend's. "Don't look so worried. I'm sure things will turn out for the best."

"Oh, Bess, if they don't," Nan half whispered in return, "It will leave Rhoda and her father all alone. It will make things so hard, for everyone just worships Mrs. Hammond."

[78]

"I know," Bess's voice was heavy too, "but don't think of those things." The role of consoler was new to Bess, but instinctively she was saying just the right thing. "Mrs. Hammond just has to get well, and so she will. I feel sure that what I'm saying is true. Oh, Nan, don't cry," Bess's own voice was full of tears.

"Here, here, what's happening back there?" Adair MacKenzie turned from his place next to the driver and frowned at the girls. "Can't have this. No blubbing on this trip."

Nan smiled a wan smile at the word.

"Thought you were a brave girl," Adair went on. "Now, dry away those tears," he ended, and turning, resumed his work of instructing the driver as to how to drive.

It was Laura who unthinkingly started them all off again.

"Makes you think, doesn't it," she remarked, "of the number of things you overlook doing for your mother when you're around her? Will I ever be good," she continued, "when I get home. I'll wash the dishes, set the table, run to the store, do anything and everything without question."

Laura sounded so serious and so unlike herself in her seriousness that even Nan had to smile, as she agreed. "That's just the way it makes me feel," she said. [79]

"Oh, Nan," Bess protested, "and you're always so good to your mother. I'm the one that's mean. Why, I never do a thing around the house if I can help it." And Bess spoke the truth. The daughter of a family that had plenty of money, Bess was a pampered child. As a general rule, she had little regard for either of her parents. Whatever she wanted, she asked for without regard for cost. What she couldn't get from her mother, she frequently managed to get from her father, and the two were well on the way toward spoiling her utterly when she went off to Lakeview with Nan.

There, away from home among strangers in a place where she had to live up to certain well-defined rules, Bess had improved considerably. Those that have watched her since her first appearance in "Nan Sherwood at Pine Camp" have seen a change come over her gradually. She is a little more thoughtful, a little more considerate of other people, but she still has a selfish streak which at times like the present confronts her so that her conscience pricks her sharply.

"When I get home," Bess spoke more quietly than was her wont, "I'm going to do a little reforming myself. I'm going to pay more attention to what mother has to say. I'm going to be a better daughter." [80]

"And I am too," Laura agreed.

"And I," Grace and Amelia said this together.

So even while Rhoda Hammond in a plane that was winging its way toward her western home, was remembering little, dear things about the mother she was so fond of, her friends were thinking of her and making resolution after resolution about their own conduct toward their parents.

CHAPTER X

 [81]

FIRST MEXICAN EXPERIENCE

The days that followed were punctuated by telegrams received from Rhoda.

"Arrived safely." That was the first one. It told nothing at all of her mother's condition.

"Mother's condition very serious. Not much hope." That was the second and the girls scarcely had the heart to go on with Adair MacKenzie's party. Privately, they gave up hope entirely, but Adair tried to keep their spirits up. "Never can tell about these things," he said after reading the message.

"Some improvement. Pray. Love. Rhoda." The third one read, and everyone felt better.

Then for two days, there was no word, and everyone's hope just dwindled away to nothing. During these days, it was Walker Jamieson with his knowledge of Mexico and its ways that put what life there was into the party.

The eight hundred miles over the new Pan-American highway from Laredo to Mexico City was through gorgeous tropical and mountain scenery, and all the way Walker regaled the girls with stories and legends about Mexico and its history. [82]

He told bloody stories of bandits coming down out of the hills, attacking travelers, kidnaping them and then robbing them, or holding them for huge ransom. He told of warfare between the Mexicans and the Indians back in the hills. He told of lost tribes who still worshipped the Sun God, talked their native tongue, still lived in the way those who had built the pyramids had lived.

Alice listened breathlessly to all he had to say. Nan and her friends hung on his every word. Adair MacKenzie listened and grunted noncommittally.

From Laredo to Monterey, he told these stories and from Monterey to Villa Juarez until everyone, whether he would admit it or not, felt deeply the spell of Mexico.

Then from Villa Juarez to Tamazunchale, across rivers that were bordered by heavy tropical foliage, everyone except Adair MacKenzie was more or less silent absorbing quietly the beauty about.

"Listen!" Nan had the temerity to interrupt one of Adair's outbursts against their chauffeur.

Surprised by the command, Adair chuckled and kept quiet. Nan had heard the song of a tropical bird. Its call was picked up by another on the other side of the road. The chauffeur slowed down and then, at Adair's command, stopped.

[83]

For a few moments everyone listened, and then Nan pushed open the door of the car and got out. The others followed. To the right and to the left of them the luxuriant growth made the place like nothing else they had ever seen before. The birds that flew out of the thicket were gorgeous things in brilliant colors. The butterflies that drifted from flower to flower were lovely too. But the biggest surprise of all was the orchids.

"Why, they grow wild!" Bess was amazed. The only ones she had ever seen before had been in the window of a florist's shop on Madison Avenue in Chicago and in a shoulder corsage worn by Linda Riggs at a school ball. This last had made Bess exceedingly envious, despite the fact that Linda had been reprimanded afterwards, by Dr. Prescott, for wearing it. And now, here they were growing all about her, wild! Bess could scarcely believe her eyes.

Walker Jamieson laughed at her. "You like them?" he asked. "Didn't know, did you, that they grew any place outside of a hothouse?"

Bess shook her head. It was the first time in her life that she had ever really been moved by nature in any form. The others felt the same. The air seemed quiet and heavy and yet full of all sorts of strange noises too. Grace was timid in the face of all the strangeness and held on to Nan's hand.

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Nan's eyes were big and wondrous. It was like tropical jungles that she had read about. It was like something she had never even dared hope to see. She was quiet. Silently Adair MacKenzie watched her, and felt pleased with himself that he had shown it to her. In regarding her, he felt almost as though he himself had created it for her special benefit.

She caught his glance, looked up at him and grinned. "Wish I could take a piece of it home with me," she said.

"You can." Walker Jamieson sounded as though that would be the simplest thing in the world.

"How?" Nan asked in the tone of one who didn't believe a word of what she heard.

"Easy." Jamieson's eyes twinkled, for he knew that she thought that this was only another bit of his foolishness. "All you've got to do is get a camera and take a picture. Then you'll have it for life."

"But I can't," Nan was serious too now.

"Why?"

"First, I've no camera and secondly, I don't know how to take pictures."

"Oh, we'll take care of that," Walker Jamieson waved these difficulties aside as though they didn't amount to anything. "I've got a camera in the car, and, if you want, I'll show you how to get the best results. I'm in your debt anyway," he whispered.

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"Do you mean that about the camera and everything?" Nan was incredulous.

"Mean it? It's a promise, isn't it?" Walker drew Alice into the conversation.

She nodded her head happily. She knew, if Nan didn't, that Walker had made a hobby of photography and just the year before, had won a prize in a national show.

"We'll begin, just as soon as we get back in that car," Jamieson promised further. "When we get to Mexico City, we'll buy some more films and the camera is yours to do with as you will until we return to the States."

So, because of an impulsive wish and an impulsive promise, Nan began almost immediately to develop a hobby that, even before her Mexican adventure was over, was going to have amazing consequences.

From Tamazunchale to Mexico City, the drive was quite another experience. The road now was hewn out of sheer mountain rock. The car climbed and climbed, until the girls' ears felt strange and Bess declared that she could hardly breathe. She forgot this, however, when they, upon Alice's insistence, got out again. All around them, huge mountain peaks rose to great heights making them all, except, perhaps, Adair MacKenzie, feel small and insignificant.

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Straight down below them they saw rivers and waterfalls that looked small and white and unimportant, like a thread that some mighty hand had dropped carelessly in the greenness. Then they got in the car, went down the mountainside again, and they came to a lovely white village in a fertile green valley.

Here they stopped and ate.

"Can't understand this jargon," Adair MacKenzie laid the menu that had been given him down and looked utterly disgusted.

"No sense in their making it like this," he continued as though it was a personal insult that anyone should presume to speak or write any other language than English. "Can't see how they

can understand it themselves.”

In the end, it was Walker Jamieson who did the ordering. “How about some nice mode de guajolote?” he grinned at Nan and her friends as he put the question. “It’s turkey to you,” he explained when they laughed, “stuffed turkey to be exact and a choice bit here. With it, we’ll have tortillas, the Mexican substitute for bread, and frijoles, the favorite Mexican bean. Sound all right?”

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The girls nodded as they tried to find the items on their own menus. And Adair MacKenzie grunted that he would take the same.

The meal wasn’t entirely a success. Nan and her friends enjoyed it, but Adair MacKenzie grumbled throughout despite all that Alice could do to mollify him.

“Never mind, daddy,” she said at last, “in a couple of more days we’ll be at the hacienda—”

“Yes, and that housekeeper of ours better be there, or I’ll fire her.” Adair was off again.

Alice restrained a smile. For twenty years now, Adair had been firing the housekeeper and for twenty years she had been running him and his house just as she pleased. It was a joke that the motherly old lady and Alice shared.

“She’ll be there,” Alice tried to reassure him, “and so will that Chinese cook that we have heard so much about.”

Nan and the rest looked up from their turkey, half expecting a story, but Alice said nothing further. They finished the meal in silence and followed Adair to the car.

Then, by way of Zimapan, an attractive hillside village, remembered ever afterwards by the girls for its huge cacti, some more than thirty-five feet high, they continued on toward Mexico City. They passed through Tasquillo, and then over a sandy road between other tall cacti to Ixmiquilpan, a picturesque town where native Indians were tending sheep and spinning along the streets.

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Here Nan took a picture, the first of many she was to take, of the girls as they stood in a market where they had just bought some gayly woven baskets. The sight of the Indians brought more stories to Walker’s mind and so, in the few miles that lay between them and their stopping place for the night, he told more tales.

He told stories of buried treasure left by the Aztecs in deep underground chambers, of turquoise and jade that was more lovely than any the modern world has discovered. He told of gold so plentiful that it had no value, of great temples that American Museums were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to rebuild.

He knew all the stories, because, since his early childhood, spent in California where Mexican labor was plentiful because it was cheap, he had been interested in the country.

When, on the third day of their journey, they approached Mexico City, Walker Jamieson was in a particularly expansive mood, one designed to keep their minds off the question of what word they would find from Rhoda in the capital.

“Below you, ladies and gentlemen,” he said with a great sweep of his arm, “you see Mexico City, the capital of this surprising republic of Mexico. There you will find romance, adventure, everything.”

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CHAPTER XI

A LEGEND

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“Mexico City,” he went on, as though he were a guide introducing a party of tourists to its first sight of a city, “lies, as you can see from here, in a mountain valley on the Great Central Plateau. Constructed on a former lake by those Aztecs who once made of this whole region a grand and glorious place, it was called by them ‘Tenochtitlan’, an Aztec word meaning ‘Belonging to the property of the Temple.’

“When the Spaniards conquered Tenochtitlan, they found grand palaces and elegant homes under the shadow of the mountains that lie all about. They found gardens more beautiful and more highly cultivated than any they had ever known. They found wealth and splendour such as not even their vivid imaginations had ever constructed. They found everything,” he finished dramatically, “and they drove the people who had conceived it out, and they took it unto themselves, and it went to ruin. You see now, the modern city, and as you go through its streets, you will find everywhere evidences of all these changes living side by side with the new that the

present generation is in the process of building up.”

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Walker Jamieson had started his little harangue half in fun, but as always when he talked about the old city, he grew serious as he went on. Now, as he noted the half scowl on Adair MacKenzie's face, the look of interest on Alice's, and the attention of Nan Sherwood and her friends, he paused.

“How am I doing?” he directed the question to the group in general.

Adair MacKenzie grunted.

Alice beamed, her eyes full of pride in him.

And Nan and her crowd nodded their heads for him to go on.

“So, my public adores me,” he said in a mocking self-satisfied tone that caused Alice and Nan to laugh aloud.

With this he wrapped his guide's cloak about him again and went on.

“As you go about,” he said, “and look up from day to day at the mountains that surround you, you will soon be able to name them all from Chiquihuite, ‘the basket’, to El Cerro Gordo, ‘the fat hill’, but there is none that has a more fascinating story than La Sierra Madre over there to the west.” He pointed as he spoke. “That's the famous one with the two volcanoes, Ixtaccihuatl, ‘the white woman’, and Popocatepetl, ‘the mountain that smokes’.

“At one time, before the great Cortez conquered the country, these volcanoes were worshipped as deities. There were days set aside for their veneration, feasts in their honor, and elaborate ceremonies.”

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“Just imagine,” Laura interrupted, “having a feast in honor of a mountain.”

“Strange, isn't it?” Walker Jamieson agreed. “But wait, I have even stranger things to tell you.”

“I have no doubt.” The remark was Adair MacKenzie's who, whether he would admit it or not, was really enjoying himself thoroughly.

“Ixtaccihuatl had a wooden idol representing her in the Great Temple and Popocatepetl a representation of dough of amarand and maize seeds. These idols you will see in the great museums of the city. The legend that surrounds them, if you will bear with me, goes something like this.

“Ixtaccihuatl was the beautiful daughter of a proud and powerful Aztec Emperor and his only child. As such, she was heir to his throne and watched and guarded throughout her youth. Her father adored her, but as he grew old and weak and his enemies began to wage war against him, he realized more and more how difficult it would be for a woman to hold together his vast and wealthy empire. So he set out to find a husband worthy of his daughter, worthy of the splendour that would be hers after his death.

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“He called to his aid all the proud young warriors of his tribe and offered his daughter in marriage and his throne to the one among them who would conquer his enemies.

“This Popocatepetl that you see yonder went into the fight. He had long been in love with the beautiful princess.

“The war was long. It was cruel. It was bloody. But Popocatepetl endured to the end. Ah, but he was proud and triumphant when he saw that it would surely be he who would return to claim the princess whom he loved.

“But alas, his triumph was short-lived. His enemies, having failed in battle, stooped to the lowest form of deceit. They sent back to the Princess the false news that her beloved had been killed. She languished and became ill of a strange malady that not even the smartest witch doctors in the realm could cure her of. She died.

“Popocatepetl's grief was more than he could bear. He wished to die too, so he caused to be constructed a great pyramid upon which he himself laid the beautiful Ixtaccihuatl. Next to it, he built another. There, he stands, holding a funeral torch.

“The snow has enfolded her body and covered that of the man that would have married her, but it has never covered the torch which burns on, a symbol of the love of Popocatepetl for Ixtaccihuatl.”

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“And the smoke,” Nan said quietly when she saw that he had finished, “of the volcano is the smoke of the torch's flame.”

“Smart girl,” Walker Jamieson slipped into a lighter mood now.

“And they believed that story?” Bess sounded incredulous.

“Yes, O doubtful one,” Laura answered the question, “and they had feasts for the couple. Didn't you listen to the beginning?”

“Hm-m, they probably weren't edible,” Adair MacKenzie suddenly remembered the meal he had found so distasteful a short time before.

Walker winked at Alice who patted her father on the arm, "Never mind, dad," she said, "there'll be food that you like later on."

"Too late then." Adair MacKenzie was not to be mollified now. "Be all burned up before then by these confounded Mexican chiles. Must have a million varieties. Find them in everything. Afraid even to order ice-cream. Probably comes with a special chile sauce on it. Somebody ought to teach these Mexicans how to eat. Do it myself if I had time. Always think that when I come here. Teach them that and how to build roads," he added as the car bumped over the highway. [95]

"Anyway, we're coming into some sort of civilized city, now." He looked about himself with some degree of satisfaction, for as Walker had proceeded with his account of the legend of the two famous volcanoes, the car had been progressing toward the city. Now it was on the outskirts and Nan and Bess, Grace and Amelia and Laura were craning their necks so as not to miss one single sight.

"How nice it would be," Amelia remarked to the group after she had missed something that Walker had pointed out on the side of the road opposite to the one she had been watching, "to have a face on all sides of your head so that you could see all ways at once."

"Well, all I can say is," Laura returned dryly, "that you are doing pretty well with the one that you have. You might have missed the old flower woman back there, but you are certainly making up for it now." With this she laughed and pushed Amelia's head, that was now blocking her own line of vision, out of the way.

"Such pretty young girls," Nan remarked as the car stopped at a crossroad to let a half dozen Mexicans cross the street. [96]

"Aren't they though?" Bess agreed. "One of them looked just like Juanita. Remember?"

Of course Nan remembered the girl that had been involved in the hidden treasure plot that was recounted in the story "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch." The thought of her now brought Rhoda back to mind and her mother, and with it a return of the anxiety they had felt at not having heard recently from their friend.

CHAPTER XII

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LINDA RIGGS TURNS UP

Adair MacKenzie was quick to note the change in their mood. "Wells Fargo and Co., Madero 14." He gave instructions to the chauffeur, and then turned to Nan. "It's the American Express of this country," he explained in a tone that indicated that they had no right to call it other than the "American Express". "We'll pick up mail there. You see."

"What have you done to the old man?" Walker Jamieson questioned as he helped Nan out of the car a few minutes later. "Why, Alice," he continued, assisting her too, "he's practically putty in her hands."

"I know," Alice smiled as she took Nan's arm and walked along beside her. "It is amazing and I'm almost jealous. I thought that I was the only one in the world that could manage him." She looked fondly in the direction of Adair MacKenzie who had already passed through the door and was at the counter inside demanding his mail.

"See, what did I tell you?" He asked triumphantly when they all entered together. "There's a whole bunch of mail here. See." He held up a truly large package of letters, letters from home for each of the girls. As they all crowded around him, he teased them by delaying the process of handing them out. [98]

"Let's see, this one looks interesting, mighty interesting." He lingered over the address. "But the writing isn't very clear."

Alice reached for it as though to help him out. He raised his arm high. "No, it's not for you," he shook his head at her. "This mailman always delivers his mail to the proper person. Now, stand back all of you, while I look again."

"This is as bad or worse than it is at school when they distribute mail, isn't it?" Laura nudged Nan. "But look, isn't the old duck getting a kick out of it all?"

Nan nodded. There was only one thing that she was really impatient about. She wanted to know now, right away, whether there was any word from Rhoda. She felt as though she couldn't stand it a moment longer not to know.

"Please, Cousin Adair," she begged, "is there anything there at all from Rhoda?"

"Yes, father, tell us quickly," Alice chimed in.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Adair MacKenzie was immediately all contrition. "H-m-m, wait." He leafed quickly through the pack.

"Yes, there is something," he admitted at last. "It's addressed to Nan." With this he handed a yellow telegram over to her. "Take it easily," he advised, while they all waited anxiously for Nan to open it. She tore the seal, pulled the message out, dropped it in her nervousness, and then when it was restored to her hands, read it slowly to herself.

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At long last she looked up. "It's—" she caught her breath before she could continue—"all right. Rhoda's mother is going to get well." Saying this, she passed the telegram over to Bess and Laura, and then, before she realized at all what was happening, her eyes welled up with tears.

"Why, Nan, darling!" Alice exclaimed, "don't cry. Everything's all right now. Come," she drew from her own purse a pretty white handkerchief and wiped Nan's tears away, "you'll have us all in tears."

Nan took the handkerchief away from her and wiped her own eyes, hard. Then she smiled. "Don't mind me," she laughed. "I'm just an old silly. Please, cousin Adair, what's in the rest of that package."

"Yes, what's in it?" Even Adair MacKenzie sounded as though he had lost possession of himself for a moment. Now, he collected himself again and took the party in his hands, as he had had it before. "Too much stalling around here," he grumbled to no one in particular, and then went on with the distribution of the mail.

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The letters from home were fun to get, fun to read, and fun to share. Each one was read and re-read a dozen times by the girl that received it, and then it was passed around and enjoyed by all the others. There were letters from their mothers and fathers and letters from their friends. There was a round robin from their pals at school.

Though all of them had news, this last had the choicest bits.

"Do you know that," it began, "Professor Krenner and Dr. Beulah Prescott are going to be married before the summer is over?"

"Nan," Bess stopped Nan who was reading the bit aloud to the others, "is it true? Did I hear you right?"

"I guess you did," Nan's eyes looked merry now. She of all the girls had been the only one who knew that this announcement was coming. Beloved by Dr. Beulah and the best student and most wide-awake person that had ever come to Dr. Krenner's attention, she had been in their confidence before school had closed.

The romance between the Principal of Lakeview and one of its most scholarly instructors had blossomed the summer the two had escorted the present group of girls on their European trip. Professor Krenner joined the party in London, just before the coronation. There he and Dr. Prescott learned of the million and one things they had in common. Nan knew of this, knew too that the wedding was to take place in the chapel at Lakeview just before school opened. Already, she had planned to attend.

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Now, she went on with the reading of the round robin. "Do you know," she continued, "that the old boathouse where we had that grand party on Bess's twenty-five dollars, is going to be pulled down and a big new one built?"

"That the dormitories are being redecorated and that corridor four where we have rooms is going to have all the walls done over and that serapes will look especially nice hanging on them?"

"And that, and this is the biggest piece of news of all, Linda Riggs is someplace in Mexico?"

"No!" the exclamation was Bess's. If it was possible to say that one girl in the room disliked the proud Linda more than the rest, Bess was that girl.

"I hate her. I just hate her." Bess had said vehemently many times. And well she might, for often in the days that followed the registration of Bess and Nan at Lakeview, Linda had purposely embarrassed and humiliated them. At first, Bess, because she naturally coveted wealth, and Linda was a very wealthy girl, had tried to make friends with "Her Highness" as Laura dubbed Linda. But her efforts always ended disastrously.

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Nan, as all those who have followed the fortunes of the young girl know, time and again tried to help Linda. Once or twice she was instrumental in saving her life. But despite this, whenever Linda was in a position to do so, she managed to belittle Nan, to snub her rudely, to make her just as uncomfortable as she possibly could.

So Nan and Bess had particular reasons for disliking the girl who had even been expelled from school for one bit of meanness that caused an explosion which might easily have cost the lives of many of the Lakeview Hall students. Linda, in other words, was cordially hated by most of the students of the fashionable boarding school.

Now, the news that she was in Mexico brought consternation to the group.

"It's just as I've always said," Bess fumed. "It's impossible to go anyplace without having her turn up."

"Probably likes you and just won't admit it." Laura could well afford to add fuel to the flame. Linda generally avoided her.

"She doesn't like me and you know it, Laura Polk," Bess exclaimed. "Why she had to come down here when there's all the rest of the world for her to travel in, I don't know. But you can just be sure of this, no good will come of it." [103]

"Sh! Bess," Nan warned as she looked over to one side where Adair MacKenzie, Alice, and Walker Jamieson were deep in consultation.

"I'm sorry, Nan," Bess lowered her voice, "but I just don't seem to be able to control myself when that girl comes to mind. She's caused us so much unhappiness that I can't stand her."

"I know," Nan was genuinely sympathetic, "but don't you worry, we probably won't see her at all. Mexico, after all, is a pretty big place."

"Yes, it has twenty-seven states, besides the Federal District and the Territory of Lower California." Laura quoted the guidebook glibly.

"Doesn't make any difference," Bess said firmly. "If she's anywhere in the country, there's no escaping her. We'll meet her." She ended positively.

How truly Bess spoke, the crowd was soon to find out, but the circumstances and the far-reaching results must be left to other chapters.

CHAPTER XIII

 [104]

NAN TURNS PHOTOGRAPHER

"Well, what's on the program this morning?" Adair MacKenzie was in a genial mood the day after the telegram had informed the girls that Rhoda's mother was going to recover.

He had had a good night's sleep and a generous well-cooked breakfast in the fashionable hotel where he had chosen to take his brood. Though he had complained about the coffee in no uncertain terms, as is the custom of most Americans traveling in foreign countries, the rest of the food had seemed good and now he acted as though he was entirely at the disposal of his guests.

"What do you say, Jamieson?" He turned to the young newspaper man. "Got any ideas?"

"Only those that we talked over at Wells Fargo's yesterday." Walker Jamieson assumed a mysterious air.

"Oh, that, that has to wait until the afternoon," Adair MacKenzie looked mysterious too.

"Then we might just explore the city, take the buses and street cars and find out how the natives get around. We might let the girls get a glimpse of The Cathedral, one of the most important in all of the Americas. It was built over the old Aztec Templo Mayor and it took two and a half centuries to build." [105]

"Two and a half centuries to build a church!" Laura exclaimed.

"What can you expect?" Adair MacKenzie asked in a tone that indicated he was not the least bit surprised, "of a nation that has 'mañana' for its motto?"

Walker Jamieson laughed heartily at this. "Well, maybe you are right," he admitted, "but I don't think you'll find your interpretation in any guidebook. They say merely that the Indians contributed a third of the cost and all the work and that 'many died each day due to the long hours of unaccustomed strenuous work.'"

"That's right, they'll never admit they are wrong," Adair shook his head as though this fact grieved him deeply. "Never be afraid, you Nan," he pointed his finger sternly at his young cousin, "to admit you are wrong. Best medicine in the world. If you are wrong say so. It's good for you." Adair MacKenzie had a habit of talking thus in circles, agreeing with himself over some great truth. Now he nodded his head with great satisfaction as though he himself made a practice of admitting his mistakes. [106]

Walker looked at Alice. Alice looked at Walker. They both laughed. Both knew that the old man had never in his life admitted that he had made a mistake. Both at this moment thought him charming and lovable.

"Well, shall we leave The Cathedral out then?" Walker Jamieson was always willing to give in in

little particulars. "There's plenty else to see, palaces, parks, markets. Why, there's a whole new city to explore."

"Won't leave anything out," Adair MacKenzie looked at his watch as he spoke, "but we've got to do everything up in a hurry. Haven't got much time to stay in this city. Got a telegram this morning from the caretaker at the Hacienda. Expects us there within the next couple of days."

"Oh, daddy," Alice laughed. "That's the way you always are. Always wanting to move on just as soon as we arrive at a place."

"And you," he twitted, "mañana is always good enough for you. You're just a lazy beggar. Now, what do you want to do today."

"Oh, everything, just everything," Alice looked as though she would like to do it all and do it now. She had that happy faculty that some people have of always having a good time no matter what happens. [107]

Nan had it too. The word "bore" which slips so easily from the tongues of many young people who really shouldn't know what boredom is, had never crossed her lips. Life seemed too full of adventure, too full of a number of things to do for her to even think of applying it to herself. Linda Riggs might have used the word, but never Nan, and never Alice.

"Well, there's your answer," Adair MacKenzie turned to Walker when Alice answered that she wanted to do "just everything." "It's a typical woman's answer. Now, do what you want to with it."

"O-kay." Walker Jamieson assumed the responsibility willingly enough. "Now, listen here," he turned to the girls and assumed a serious air and a stern one that unfortunately didn't impress them at all, and said, "we've got just about four hours in this day to do with as you want to do."

"Four hours!" Nan exclaimed, "why, how short the days are here! It's only nine o'clock now, or is Amelia's watch slow?" She had been looking at Amelia's wrist as she spoke.

"I said four hours." Walker repeated, still sternly. [108]

"He said four hours." Adair MacKenzie was equally stern.

"Then, why don't you get started," Alice teased.

"Come on, here. We are." Walker pretended that he was angry and that Alice's remark was just the last straw. He took her by the arm and with the others following after, they all left the dining room, walked through the lounge and then out into the morning sunshine.

The four hours flew by. They shopped in the busy Mexican markets, bartered with natives, dressed in brilliantly colored blankets and huge sombreros, bought serapes, beautiful Indian pottery, some opals that were sold by the dozen, handwoven baskets and a million and one little things that Walker declared would fill a trunk.

Nan took her camera along and snapped pictures of everyone, pretty Mexican señoritas selling flowers, little Mexican boys who were boot-blacks, proud of the American slang they had learned in the movies, and whole families complete with shawls, squatting over low fires making tortillas for whomsoever would buy.

She took pictures until in her enthusiasm she forgot herself entirely and asked Adair MacKenzie if he would please hold a little Mexican baby while she photographed it. [109]

As soon as the question was out of her mouth, she realized that she had made a mistake.

What a torrent it brought forth! Adair MacKenzie blustered as he had never blustered before. He would see himself tied and hung before she would ever find him even touching one of those kids. Why, the idea. Did she think he was an ambassador of good will, that he was down there to kiss babies and wear serapes to show that he was just one of the people. Did—d—did she think he was—why, what did she think he was? He stuttered in his surprise.

Finally, Nan and Walker and Alice and all the rest broke down in laughter, for Adair MacKenzie was certainly outdoing himself.

With this, he stopped in amazement. And they were laughing at him! "No respect any more at all," he muttered and then he laughed too.

"You, Walker, you," he took the remaining bit of his impatience out on that able young man, "you've no sense at all in that head of yours. Let the girls get out of hand all the time. Now, I'm going to take charge of the party. Had enough of your nonsense. Come on, you," he turned to Nan and the rest with this, "there'll be no more pictures today. We're going back to the hotel now." [110]

"And then what?" Alice ventured to ask.

"You'll see. Just wait. You'll see. This is my party now." So, he right-about-faced and went striding from the market with the others following him.

CHAPTER XIV

SMUGGLERS

"A bullfight, Bess, we're going to a bullfight," Nan exclaimed as she and Bess dressed for the afternoon excursion with Adair MacKenzie.

"Why, Nancy Sherwood, I never in all the world thought you were the bloodthirsty creature that you are," Bess laughed at her pal.

"Oh, you are just the same, Elizabeth Harley," Nan returned. "When Cousin Adair told us at the luncheon table what we were going to do this afternoon, you were just as excited as the rest of us."

"I know it," Bess confessed. "But I expect to hold my ears and close my eyes through the worst parts. They do say they can be very gory spectacles with blood streaming all over everything."

"That's right," Nan admitted. "It scares me to think of that part, but I want to see it anyway." As the girls talked, they dressed, combed their hair, and then tidied up the room.

"Ready?" Laura stuck her head through the door and asked. "Amelia and Grace are already downstairs. We better get started, or Grace will be backing down. Really, I think she's scared to death, but is afraid to admit it. Me, I'm going to love this."

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"Me, too," Nan admitted. "I can hardly wait. I've read about them so often. Remember the lecturer at Lakeview who had all those slides about bullfights in Spain. I've wanted to see one ever since then."

"Yes, Mrs. Cupp was so angry over that. She didn't think it was the proper sort of thing for young ladies to see. She thought it would coarsen them," Laura finished primly. "Wait until we get back to Lakeview, will we ever have some tales to tell her that will make her hair stand on end! She'll have to go to bed for a week to recover."

"Oh, Laura," Nan laughed, "you sound as though you'd be brave enough to tell her all about it yourself."

"Well, if I'm not," Laura joined in the laughter, "because we aren't exactly bosom pals, you know, she'll find out. Nothing escapes her."

"Truer words were never spoken," Nan agreed as she adjusted her hat in front of the mirror. "Come on, now, I'm ready. Are you, Bess?"

"Just a second." Bess was rummaging through her purse. "There's everything here except the thing I want."

"Looks almost like an over-night bag," Laura commented as Bess poured the contents out on the dresser.

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"What in the world are you looking for?" Nan asked somewhat impatiently. Bess never could find things in her purse because she had a habit of saving everything and never cleaning the pocket-book out.

"Oh, my passport—I mean my visitors' pass." Bess really did look worried. "I had it this morning. I know I did."

"All I can say is," Laura commented dryly, "if you've lost that, you might just as well go out and drown yourself, because if you don't, Mr. MacKenzie will roar so loud when you tell him that the earth will just open up and swallow us all."

"I know it." Bess was almost in tears. She didn't like to be roared at. She took scoldings harder than anyone else in the crowd, because at home she had always been made to feel that what she did was right.

"Bessie, you're such a silly," Nan laughed. "You've got the wrong pocket-book. That isn't the one you had with you this morning. You had the little black one and that's over there on your trunk. Remember, you put it there when you came in so that you would be sure to know where it was when you wanted it again."

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Bess laughed too now. "Isn't that just like me, always hunting for something and always finding it just where it ought to be?"

"I do that too," Laura sympathized as they three left the room. And so does everyone, but Bess had a habit of getting confused and impatient as soon as things went wrong and using all her energy in getting excited. Nan generally remained calm and found things. Laura was calm too and that because she never took anything very seriously. If she couldn't find one thing, another would do, and so she always went happily on her way.

Bess was thinking of this, as Nan pushed the button for the automatic elevator. "But you couldn't have substituted anything for the visitors' pass." She directed her remark to Laura as though they had been talking over the thing she was thinking about.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Laura laughed. "Or, is it a secret? You know what happens to people in this country who go around talking to themselves? They throw them to the bulls. Now, come on, Bessie," she finished. "You may be a harum-scarum child, but we love you. Cheer up."

At this, the elevator jolted and settled to its place on the first floor and the three girls stepped out to find Adair, Alice, Walker Jamieson and the rest all waiting for them. [115]

"Thought you had cold feet, and were backing out." Walker Jamieson greeted them with this sally as they all walked down the entrance stairs and out to their waiting car.

"Look!" Nan pointed at a street car they were passing.

"At what?" Laura questioned.

"Oh, you were too late," Nan answered while she adjusted her camera so that it would be ready for her to take pictures when she wanted to. "There was a sign on that car which said, 'Toreo.'"

"What does that mean?" Grace questioned.

"Bullfight, darling, that's where you are going now," Laura answered. "See, there's the sign that Nan saw again. It's on the front of that bus that's stopped across the street. This must be a holiday. Practically everyone seems to have dusted off his best sombrero and come out on the streets."

"It's a holiday everyday here." Adair MacKenzie turned around to join in the conversation. "Saw a calendar of festivals posted in the hotel lobby. No end to it. No wonder the people never get anything done."

"I saw that too," Walker Jamieson remarked. "Saw something else posted on a bulletin board that was interesting. It was a warning to everyone to take good care of his visitor's pass. Right beside it was the announcement of a reward being offered to anyone who could give information as to the whereabouts of one Antonio Mazaro, an American citizen and former aviator, who is suspected of being an accomplice in an international smuggling ring." [116]

"They must be the smugglers Mr. Nogales told us about at the border," Nan remarked.

Walker Jamieson said nothing further. The truth, was, however, that he had just an hour before received an assignment from a big New York newspaper to cover certain aspects of this smuggling ring story, and he was already wondering whether or not it was going to be possible for him to go on to the Hacienda as he had planned.

"These Mexicans will never catch anyone, much less a band of American crooks." Adair MacKenzie looked around again. "Need a couple of good G-men down here, if they're going to find out anything at all."

"Think so too," Walker agreed, "they are sending some down, I understand."

"You got your nose in the story?" Adair MacKenzie asked abruptly, and everyone looked at Walker, waiting for his answer.

CHAPTER XV

A BULLFIGHT

"Oh, always interested in whatever goes on," Walker answered off-handedly. "You know how it is. See a story breaking, you want to be in on the kill. Just can't help yourself. Gets in your blood, after you've worked on any paper for a while." [117]

"Back four years ago, I went up into northern Canada for a vacation. Chose that spot because I thought it would be far away from newspapers and stories of all kinds. I guess I was feeling rather disgusted with everything and wanted to get away, so when an old newspaper buddy who had struck out a claim for himself asked me to go up and do a little prospecting for gold with him, I jumped at the chance.

"It looked like an ideal set-up. We were to go alone to his cabin which was miles away from civilization and stay there for the summer. We stocked up with plenty of food, some books I had been wanting to read for a long time, and took a radio along.

"I had a book I wanted to write, something I had started and never found time to finish. Oh, it [118]

was nothing," he added as Nan and the rest looked impressed. "All newspaper people think that some day they'll write a book that will take the world by storm.

"Well, I thought I would finish that, do some prospecting and just have a nice quiet time for myself. The chap I was going up with was a nice sort of fellow, quiet like myself.

"We went by train as far as we could go, and then got an old Indian to paddle us the rest of the way in a canoe. It was nice going. We took it leisurely, stopped and fished along the banks of the river, and camped for three days in a gorgeous spot that seemed as remote from civilization as any place could possibly be.

"Things went along quite perfectly until one night—this was after we had been in the camp for a couple of weeks—there was a radio call 'Plane carrying doctor and infantile paralysis serum to Canadian outpost in Northwest down. Position approximately'—Oh, I've forgotten what it was now, but it was not far from our camp.

"The next morning we were up at daybreak and by the next afternoon we had located the plane. The pilot was dead, but the doctor, though suffering from a broken leg and shock, was still living. After we had fixed him up, we spent the night trying to get the plane's radio to the point where it would function, so that we could get the news back to civilization. [119]

"But things were so radically wrong with it, that my pal finally decided that he would set out for the nearest outpost, traveling as we had when we came, walking and by canoe. In the meantime, the doctor was fretting and stewing because he couldn't get to the station that was in such urgent need of medical aid, so partly on this insistence, partly because I'm a stubborn fool when I start out to do anything, I kept tinkering around with the radio.

"Finally, the thing came to life, and we were able to get in touch with the outside world. You know as well as I what happens in such cases. It wasn't long before I was up to my neck, sending exclusive stories back to my old sheet and then, when another plane came to take the doctor and brought with it a whole flock of reporters, I was swamped with work.

"I grumbled, but I loved it, and when the story died down and I was called back to work on an assignment that I was more than proud to accept I was like a kid with a new toy. Never so glad to get back into harness in my life.

"I feel now, a little the way I did then. Mexico and the land of mañana spelled romance and rest to me in the city room where I do my daily stint. But now I want neither of them. I smell a story." [120]

With this, he sniffed the air as though he was actually trying to get the direction of the scent. Alice laughed and held her hand on the handle of the door. "Maybe you do," she said, "but you're not leaving us today, at least not this minute. Walker Jamieson, we're headed for a bullfight and you're going along with us whether you want to or not."

There was no protest, and Walker was glad afterwards when he pieced the little sections of the plot together that he hadn't struck out on the trail of the story before that memorable bull-fight.

"And what's the man with the wheelbarrow doing in the parade?" Nan asked the question of Walker Jamieson.

They were all sitting now in the huge arena, "Plaza de Toros," the most important bull-fighting ring in all Mexico. The place was packed and Nan thought as she looked out over the people that she had never in her life seen such a gay colorful crowd, nor one in such an excited mood.

They were sitting on the shady side of the ring, "Sombra" it was called, the seats of which cost twice the price of those on the sunny side, or "Sol."

It was four o'clock exactly and the cuadrilla or parade that precedes every bull-fight had just entered the arena. Everyone was standing up shouting, waving his sombrero, and cheering for his favorite. [121]

"That's a secret, not to be divulged until later," Walker answered Nan's question.

"I didn't know it would be like this," Grace, generally so quiet and shy, said. Her face was all alight and she was waving the pillow that had been bought for her to sit on, as were all the rest of the girls and women in the place. Laura was waving hers too, and so were Bess and Nan and Amelia.

Down in the ring below them the parade was marching around. First came a man on a spirited horse that pranced and danced and bowed its head to the ground again and again as the rider circled the ring. Then followed the matadores or bullfighters themselves in brilliant costumes that proclaimed to everyone that they were the heroes of the hour. It was for them that pillows were waved and cheers echoed back and forth across the ring.

"Oh, they're gorgeous, simply gorgeous," Nan was carried away with the excitement. "What are they called?" she pointed her finger to a number of men now riding on horseback and directed her question to Walker. [122]

"And look, what are they?" Laura turned to him at the same time. She was pointing to men in white suits, red sashes, and caps who came in on mules.

"One at a time, please," Walker laughed at their excitement. "Nan's first. Those men on

horseback are the picadores. Watch them later. And you, Señorita," he turned to Laura, "you asked about the wise monkeys, 'monosabios' we Mexicans call them. When the fight's over they'll drag out the dead bull."

"Oh!" The exclamation was Grace's. She had forgotten that a bullfight meant that there would be blood and killing.

Walker looked at her questioningly and then at Alice. "Here was a girl," the glances they exchanged said, "that would have to be watched at the killing."

Now, below them, the horseman leading the procession bowed before the judge of the bullfight, the formation disbanded, and the ring cleared for the entrance of the first bull.

It came in, charging from a door that was opened below the ring, went bellowing madly across the arena, and charged straight into a target that maddened it further.

Now the prettiest, most graceful part of the whole spectacle began. [123]

Two helpers carrying lovely bright capes stepped from the side into the arena. One of them waved his cape, attracting the attention of the bull which came rushing toward the bright moving object. The helper danced gracefully aside. The bull turned and rushed at him again, putting his head down and going for him with his horns. But the man was graceful and daring and teasing and avoided him.

Now the other helper waved his cape and was equally provocative and the bull went for him with the same lack of success.

So they played back and forth, tantalizing the bull, attracting it with one cape and distracting it with another until it was thoroughly maddened.

Then the rider came in on his horse and the rider and the horse teased the bull further. So it went until the climax when the third and most important part of the fight began—the actual killing of the bull.

CHAPTER XVI

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END OF THE FIGHT

The ring was in a furor when Bess clutched Nan's arm. "Look, Nan, look," she said. "It's she. It's Linda. Look, Nan."

Nan's eyes were riveted on the ring, where the bullfighter with his spear was waiting for a propitious moment to plunge it into the mad bleeding animal that was lunging at him.

"Just a minute, Bess," Nan hadn't heard what her friend had said. The horror and cruelty and yet the excitement of the scene before her was holding all her attention.

Down there before her the bullfighter was fighting a championship fight. He was playing with the bull, teasing him toward him and then skillfully dancing away. The end was imminent. The fighter was waiting only for an opportunity to make the clean, quick plunge that would finish the fight with one stroke.

Now, the moment seemed near and everyone, Nan and her friends, and the more than twenty thousand other people in the great ring stood up, cheering for the finish. [125]

The fighter closed in and then drew back to make the lunge, but there was blood on the ground beneath his feet and he slipped. The bull gave a mighty roar and went toward him, his horns lowered. The fight had turned. There could be only one possible end now. Death for the fighter.

But wait. That fighter is clever. He gracefully pulls aside so the menacing horns glance across his arm. He jumps up from the ground, pulls his arm back, and before the bull has had a chance to recover from his surprise, that fighter is, with one mighty thrust, plunging the spear straight through the bull's heart.

There, it's over now. The fighter has fought the fight that will surely bring him the trophy, a pair of little gold ears. The throng, wild with excitement, throws hats, scarfs, pillows, everything loose that it can lay its hands on into the ring as the hero of the hour slowly walks around and bows with arms thrown out wide as though to embrace the whole cheering multitude.

Everything is gay and happy now. Even the man that follows after the hero and picks up the hats, scarfs, and pillows that litter the ground and tosses them lightly back to the owners above is laughing. Yes, even the man that pushed the wheelbarrow in the grand opening procession is happy, basking in reflected glory, as he trundles his burden around the ring, sprinkling sawdust [126]

over the blood spots.

It was not until the monosabios, "wise monkeys", came to drag out the bull, destined now for food for a nearby hospital, that Bess again tried to attract Nan's attention.

"Nan, I tell you that that's Linda Riggs down there below us," she said insistently this time. "Look at the way she's tossing her head and talking to that man that's next to her. You would think that he was a prince, a handsome prince, the way she is acting."

"Why, Bess, you're right. That is Linda." Nan at last drew her eyes away from the ring and looked at the girl Bess was pointing to.

"Yes, and I'm sure she saw us a while ago," Laura contributed. She too had been watching the girl that the Lakeview crowd had grown to dislike so cordially. "You know the way she always looks around her to see whether there is anyone she really ought to be decent to, anyone that might be able to do something for her. Well, she did that when she first came in. I saw her, but I wasn't going to say anything because I didn't want to spoil the fun we were having."

"I'll bet she sneered when she saw us," Bess said. "She's always hated us and especially since we had the laugh on her on the boat last summer."

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"Oh, Bess, that wasn't exactly a laugh," Nan protested. "The girl almost drowned."

"Yes, and you went and saved her. And what thanks did you get?" Bess could always be indignant when she thought of Linda Riggs. "You should have let her alone. I would have. I would have enjoyed seeing the waves wash her over-board. I would have looked over the rail and laughed when I saw her screaming and waving her arms and trying to keep herself from going under."

"You little fiend!" Nan exclaimed. "How can you say such things?"

"Because they are true," Bess retorted. "People like her shouldn't be allowed to clutter up things. She makes everybody that knows her unhappy, so what good is she anyway? Her father is always trying to get her out of trouble. Look at her down there now. You can see by the way she's holding her head that she's mean and proud and deceitful."

"Bess, be quiet!" Nan warned. "You'll have everyone looking at you. Linda is a little prig and she does make trouble and I don't like her any more than you do, but there's no use making things unpleasant because she's happened to turn up here where we are. Forget her."

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"Forget her!" Bess exclaimed. "You can't forget a thorn that's forever sticking in your flesh. Trying to forget her doesn't do any good. She always makes trouble. It's best to watch her so that you will be prepared for what happens."

Perhaps Bess was right. Certainly, if at other times Nan and Bess had been more watchful they might have been able to avoid trouble. But Nan always believed that there was some good in everyone and she was always trustful. She felt often that Linda, because of her wealth and the fact that her mother was dead and her father tried to give her everything she wanted, was not entirely to blame for her actions. And Bess, well, Bess's attitude toward Linda had changed considerably since their first meeting.

Then Bess had thought that the daughter of the railroad magnate would be a nice person to have for a friend, for Bess was decidedly impressed by her wealth, by the way she ordered people around, and the way she dressed. Bess had even written home in the first days at school and told her mother that she didn't have at all the proper kind of clothes to wear, if she was going to chum around with people that amounted to something. She had Linda in mind when she wrote it, Linda's clothes and Linda's social position. But Linda had soon shown Bess that there was no room for her in her world.

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Girls that Linda called friend, if there was any such word in her vocabulary, had to bow to all her wishes. She liked them only if they thought everything she did and said was right. No girl could be her friend and have a will of her own. No girl could be her friend and have other friends too. Linda wanted to be the very center of everyone's attention. As a consequence she had no real friends at all.

Bess never analyzed this to herself, but after one or two attempts to go around with Linda, she gave up entirely and grew to dislike her very much, as all the readers of the Nan Sherwood series know. She disliked her particularly because of the mean things she had done to Nan, for if Bess had no other outstanding characteristic, she did have a sense of justice that was almost as strong as Nan's.

This she had although her sympathies were not as deep nor as understanding as Nan's. Bess was apt to accept or reject things and people on account of appearances. Nan never did this. She liked everyone and had always had some sort of sixth sense that made her look beneath surfaces and find the true person. Thus she made friends with all sorts of people.

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This was the reason that Nan led such an adventurous life. This was the reason everyone liked her. Everyone called Linda snobbish. A few people called Bess the same. But no one ever thought of applying the word to Nan.

And Nan seldom talked about people. So now, as the girls sat in the arena in Mexico City waiting for the next bullfighter to come into the ring, Nan was doing her best to quiet her friend.

"There's no reason whatsoever to get so excited," she said in an undertone to Bess. "She's sitting way down below us so we won't have to even talk to her when we go out. We'll be up the stairs and out the exit before she does. We'll probably never even see her again while we're here."

"That's right," Laura agreed, talking in a whisper too. "And though you might think that you could prepare yourself for what might happen if you did encounter Linda, you never could. No one ever knows what that girl might do. And, Elizabeth Harley, you're not smart enough to guess." Laura being Laura with her red hair and her love for battle couldn't resist adding this thrust.

"Well, I could try anyway," Bess retorted.

"Say, what are you people all talking about so quietly?" Amelia leaned over and asked now. "Why, you didn't even pay any attention when Mr. Jamieson took Grace out." [131]

"Took Grace out!" Nan exclaimed, noticing now for the first time that two in the party were missing. "Why?"

"She almost fainted when she saw all the blood streaming from the bull, so just before he was killed, Walker Jamieson took her by the arm and said they were going for a walk and would be back soon."

"I don't blame her," Bess said emphatically. "I would have fainted myself—"

"—if you had been watching the bullfight instead of Linda Riggs," Nan supplied the end of the sentence.

"I guess you are right," Bess laughed. "That girl certainly does have a habit of getting in my hair. I'm always on pins and needles whenever she is around."

"There, Bessie," Nan tried to smooth her friend's ruffled feelings. "Just you sit quietly and watch the next fight and you'll feel better. We'll see that Linda doesn't cross your path."

"She hadn't better," Bess replied and then did try to devote herself to watching the next fight on the program.

CHAPTER XVII

A HASTY DEPARTURE

"Sit quietly and watch a bullfight!" Adair MacKenzie had heard Nan's counsel to Bess. "Never heard of such a thing. Never saw such a thing happen. Couldn't possibly sit quietly and watch a bullfight. Too exciting. Too much blood and gore. No place to bring a woman." [132]

Adair had been upset by Grace's fainting spell and now he was sorry he had ever brought the girls here. Already he was casting about in his mind for something else to do that would wipe the memory of the unpleasantness of the spectacle out of their minds. He was oblivious of the fact that none of them outside of perhaps Nan and Amelia had witnessed the fight with their whole attention. He didn't yet know the story of Linda. The fact that her presence distracted them consequently had gone unobserved.

"Got your things? Come on. We're going now." Abruptly he made up his mind and plunged into action without further ado.

"But father," Alice demurred. [133]

"Don't 'but' me," Adair answered. "We're going to get out of this outlandish place right away. Can't have you all fainting on my hands. Ready?" He was already halfway out the row and effectively blocking the view of the ring of all the people who had seats behind his party. But it didn't matter to him. In fact, he was so concerned with his own immediate problem that no one else in the world existed. Now he turned around again to see if the girls were following him.

"Fine spectacle for civilized people to put on," he muttered. "Hurry, you people. Can't be all day getting out of here."

"That's right." The voice that agreed with him was an American voice and it startled him. Adair looked up. "What's that?" he asked the question gruffly.

"I said, 'that's right,'" the stranger answered. He was sitting about three rows behind where Adair was standing.

"What do you mean?" Adair looked more belligerent than ever.

"I mean you can't be all day getting out of here." The voice in back answered positively.

"W-w-why, you old—old—old," Adair spluttered. He could think of no epithet appropriate and yet forceful enough to call his critic in the presence of the girls. So his spluttering died away as he brandished his cane and just stood and looked.

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"Daddy, daddy," Alice put a soft hand on his arm. "Do come. We are blocking the view."

"Nothing to see down there anyway," Adair returned. "These Americans," he went on talking loudly and looking back at the man above him, "come down here and think they can run everything. Want to tell us to move on. Who do they think they are anyway?"

"Sh, daddy." Alice was worried for fear her father would start a fight, even while she was secretly amused that he was accusing a fellow countryman of doing the very thing that he was guilty of. "We must get down and out so that we can find how Grace is," she added tactfully.

"Well, I'm hurrying just as fast as these Mexicans will let me," Adair answered. "I always said they were the slowest, most inconsiderate people in the world."

Adair was wrong in what he said, and he knew it. As he was now sputtering about them being inconsiderate, so often he had sputtered because of their patient consideration for other people. Then he had said that they were too polite.

However, Adair prided himself on his willingness to change his mind. "Only dunces never contradict themselves," he often said.

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Now, Alice and the girls were themselves moving along as fast as they could behind him, so, though he continued to mutter and even brandish his cane at others whom he suspected of calling at him in Spanish, he was soon safely out in the aisle and they all hurried up the stairs and out.

"O-o-oo, but that was close," Laura's eyes were dancing at the recollection of the scene in the stands as she and Nan stepped out into the street.

"Wasn't it though?" Nan was laughing too, now, though at the time, she, like Alice, had been worried for fear Adair would come to blows with the American.

"Two Americans come to blows at a bullfight," Laura said, "and the bullfight is forgotten."

"That's just what I was afraid of," Nan whispered. "These people in this country are so hot-headed that I was afraid there would be a general riot, before we got out of there. They were all worked up so over the first fight that they would have entered our private little fray without any question."

"That's what I thought too," Laura agreed. "And did you see the expression on Bess's face?"

"No," Nan returned, "but I can just imagine what it was like. She hates scenes of any kind. I do too, but this one was almost funny. Cousin Adair is so quick tempered that he glides in and out of trouble with the greatest of ease."

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"Doesn't he though?" Amelia contributed. "It fascinates me when I see one of his explosions coming. Every time he opens his mouth, he gets in deeper."

"That is funny when you see it happen to someone else," Laura agreed somewhat ruefully. "But when it happens to you, if you have a sensitive soul, like mine, it's pretty embarrassing." Laura was in earnest, for her quick tongue often did its work before she had a chance to stop it. "Oh Laura," her mother had more than once shaken her head over her daughter's failing, "you need to count to a hundred at least when you feel your cheeks flushing and your head getting hot with anger. And you need to button your mouth up tight, or you'll always be terribly unhappy."

Laura thought of this now, and giggled.

"Well, I don't know what's so funny," Bess remarked. She still felt irritated at what had happened. "Maybe if you had seen Linda Riggs looking around at us, you wouldn't be giggling the way you are. I wish I could have just gone right through that floor."

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"But it was concrete and you couldn't." Laura pretended to be very practical.

"That is, not without hurting herself," Amelia appended.

"Oh, it isn't funny." Bess was genuinely upset. She would have hated the scene anyway, and when it occurred in Linda's presence, she hated it doubly. "You should have seen the look of pity and disgust and triumph on her face when she saw that it was our party that was making all the fuss," Bess went on, growing more vehement the more she talked. "It was positively humiliating."

More than any of the others, Bess cared about what other people thought of her. Always conscious of herself and eager to make a good impression, she was always upset when things went wrong at all. When they did not run just according to the way she thought they should, in public especially, she felt like hiding her head and running. "It's the way I am and I can't help it," she retorted once when Nan accused her of being over-sensitive, and so she never made the proper effort to overcome her failing.

"Who cares what Linda thinks?" Laura said airily as Walker and Grace joined the party, and the incident was forgotten, for the moment, while everyone made a fuss over Grace.

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"You're just a sissy," Laura teased. "See a little bit of blood and you go off in a faint. What will you do when we start dissecting things in biology at school next fall?"

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"I don't know." Grace looked worried as though she was going to have to do the dissecting right away.

"Tut! Tut! We'll worry about that when the time comes," Adair MacKenzie answered as though it was his problem to be handled in due course. "How are you now?" He looked at Grace closely while he asked the question. "Feeling all right again, are you?" He spoke gently, as he might have spoken to Alice, his daughter, and a warm feeling of sympathy toward him went through all those standing around.

"Why," Nan said afterward, and Bess had to agree, "I believe he was irritable up in the stands because he was worried about Grace."

"I suppose so." Bess was much less tolerant of other people's failings than her friend. "But that was no excuse for him to get all riled up. I can't forget the way Linda looked."

"Bessie, forget it." Nan spoke sharply. "It's not important at all. It doesn't matter what Linda thinks of us. And it is important that we not criticise Cousin Adair. After all, we are his guests."

"You are right," Bess agreed. She could, on occasion, be generous in yielding when she knew she was in the wrong.

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As they talked these things over, the whole party walked toward the waiting car. Again, it was a voice from the United States that arrested them, but one more softly spoken than that they had heard in the grandstands.

"I beg your pardon," it said. Nan and her Lakeview Hall companions looked up startled. The speaker who had accosted them was accompanied by none other than Linda Riggs!

CHAPTER XVIII

[140]

LINDA PERFORMS AN INTRODUCTION

"I beg your pardon." Linda Riggs' companion spoke again, "but could you direct us to Avenida Chapultepec?"

Before anyone could answer Linda rushed over to Nan and took her by the arm. "Why, Nancy Sherwood!" she exclaimed as though Nan was the best friend she had in the world. "I'm so surprised to see you here. When did you arrive? Isn't this city just perfectly gorgeous? More quaint, don't you think, than anything we saw in Europe?"

Nan was at a loss as to what to say. Deep within her she was entirely out of patience with the situation. Linda was being disgustedly affected. She was talking slowly, dragging her vowels and gesturing with her hands, acting as a person twice her age might act and even then be nauseous. But Linda disregarded Nan's coolness.

"And you, Bess," Linda turned to Elizabeth Harley. "Imagine seeing you here. Isn't it all too romantic for words, a whole crowd of Lakeview Hall people meeting in this far-off corner of the globe. The most astounding things do happen, don't they?"

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"Yes, they do," Laura remarked dryly, looking Linda up and down as she did so.

"And you, Laura Polk. Why, you are all together, I do believe." Linda acted as though she had made a brilliant observation. She was having a difficult time, even for her, in the situation, for her effusions were being received rather coldly to say the least.

"I'd like to have you meet my friend, Arthur Howard," she went on, forcing Nan to introduce her and her companion to her cousin and Alice.

"Hm! Glad to meet you." Adair MacKenzie said abruptly. "Got to be going now. Sorry, don't know the way to Avenida whatever-it-was-you-said. Can't keep any of these streets straight in my mind. They're all mixed up." With this, he summarily herded his daughter, Nan, Laura, Bess, and Amelia toward the car where Walker Jamieson and Grace who had gone on alone together were waiting. Linda and her companion were thus left behind.

"Nan," Grace hardly waited until the girls were in the car beside her before she asked the question, "was that Linda Riggs that you were talking to out there?"

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"None other," Laura answered. "And why are you giggling so, Bess. A few moments ago you were all hot and bothered about Linda and now you're laughing. Will you please make up your mind about what you're thinking."

"Oh, it's so funny." Bess was off again. "Did you see the way she looked when Mr. MacKenzie walked away so suddenly. I do believe that she thought we would fall all over her the way she was falling all over us. Oh, dear, did that do my heart good!" Bess sounded positively gleeful.

"Mine too." Laura was laughing with her.

"And do you remember," Bess went on, "how, when Mr. MacKenzie analyzed all of us when he first met us, we wished that some day he would have the chance to do it to Linda. Well, that wish almost came true down there. I do believe that if we had stayed a moment longer he would have done it. I was hoping—"

"Elizabeth Harley! I thought you didn't like Cousin Adair," Nan, too, was tickled at the whole situation.

"Oh, I do now," Bess capitulated. "I just love him. Do you know that's the first time since we've known her, that we've seen her as embarrassed as she makes us sometimes. How I wish we had stayed just a moment longer."

"What's this about your just loving someone?" Adair turned around to join in the conversation.

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Bess blushed.

"Well, all I can say is," he went on when she failed to answer. "I hope it's not that girl back there that we just met that you're being so enthusiastic about. Don't like her at all myself. No character. She's snippy. She's deceitful. Can't even talk without putting on airs. Can't stand her. Hope she's no friend of yours." He turned to Nan as he said this last.

Nan shook her head and said nothing further. She felt, and rightly so, that it was unnecessary to discuss Linda among people who did not know her. This was a consideration that Linda would never have shown Nan. In fact, time and again, Linda had purposely attempted to blacken Nan's character in front of strangers. This was one reason that Bess, loyal as she was to Nan, disliked Linda so much.

"Can't tolerate people who are affected," Adair MacKenzie went on blustering as the car drove out into the street. "And didn't like that man she was with either. He didn't have a very honest look about him."

"But he was nice-looking." Bess let the words out before she realized what she was doing, and the wrath of Adair MacKenzie descended upon her.

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"Nice-looking! That's all you think of. Nice-looking, bah! Can't judge people by their looks. It's what's in their eyes and their hearts that counts. Have to see that before you can accurately decide what they are. Anybody can dress up and make a good appearance. You, Bessie," he lowered his tone at a look from Alice, "you've got to learn something about true values before you get much older. You're a nice sort of girl, but you put too much emphasis on money and worldly goods. You'll have to be taught sometime that they are not so important as you think.

"That goes for all of you," he ended, sweeping them all with his glance. "You've all had easy lives, so you don't know yet, really, what's worth while and what isn't."

"Now, that girl back there," he resumed his talk after a few moments of silence, "she has no conception what-so-ever of worth. What's her name, anyway?" he asked.

"Linda Riggs," Nan answered.

"Not the daughter of the railroad king?"

"That's right." Nan nodded her head.

"Knew him, when he was a young fellow," Adair paused, remembering his own youth. "He was a nice chap then. Can't understand how he could have reared such a poor excuse for a daughter. We belonged to the same college fraternity. He was president of it at one time I think. Always helping people out. Everybody liked him. That's how he happened to get on in the world the way he did. Met up with someone who had lots of dough and no son to carry on the family name. Riggs seemed to fill the bill, so the wealthy old codger took him into his business and taught him the ropes.

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"Riggs wore well, and when the old man died he inherited the fortune. Sounds like a fairy story, but those things happen. Jamieson here must know the tale."

Walker nodded in agreement. "Do. Interviewed the old bird one time under particularly difficult circumstances. There was a big railroad merger story about to break, and nobody wanted to talk. I got wind of it through a hot tip from a stooge in New York. Tried everything in order to get the story, and finally in desperation went to Riggs himself. It was rumored that he had the controlling interest in the stock. I had to go through a dozen secretaries before I finally got to him.

"Then he didn't want to talk either. However, some little thing I said in passing, captured his fancy, and before I knew it, I was laying all my cards on the table and he was putting them together so that they made sense. When we were finished, I realized that I had one of the biggest stories of the year and was about to grab my hat and run out to put it on the wires, when he put out a restraining hand. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but I must ask you to keep this quiet for twenty-four hours longer. If you promise, I assure you that no one else will get the release until your paper

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has the scoop all sewed up.'

"In a way I was up a tree, because I knew that if the story had leaked out to me, someone else was very likely to get wind of it too. I hesitated. He stuck out his hand as though to shake mine and he did it in such a frank friendly fashion, that I agreed to what he asked, even though I knew it was a dumb thing to do under the circumstances.

"But there was something about the man that inspired confidence and regard."

"Lived up to the agreement, didn't he?" Adair said positively.

"Sure did," Walker assented, "and under difficulty too. Just as I suspected, some other paper did get wind of the story and sent one of their ace men out to get the details. Riggs let him in, quizzed him to find out what he knew, excused himself, and then called me to tell me that the time was up, that I'd better shoot the yarn right through if I wanted to scoop the rest of the dailies.

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"Well, after he did that, he went back into his office and told the other reporter the whole story he had told me. It took him three hours to tell it, and when my competitor came out of the office our extras were already on the street."

"That was the Midwestern merger, wasn't it?" Adair questioned.

"Right!" Jamieson agreed. "Remember it, don't you? But you chits," he turned his attention to the girls who had been listening with their customary attention to his tale, "you wouldn't remember. You were hardly out of your cradles then. Nan here was probably still creeping around in rompers. Bess, well, Bess probably didn't creep, that was too dirty for her, but she was probably beginning to put her hands up to her father and saying, 'gimme'."

This brought a laugh from everyone, including Adair MacKenzie.

"Can't understand," he returned to the question of Linda, "how a girl with a father like Riggs could be such an obnoxious person."

"Oh, there are lots of explanations," Walker answered. "I happen to know that his wife died when the girl was just a baby. He was all broken up and turned to the child for comfort. Guess he lavished all his attention on her and spoiled her."

"Sounds plausible," Adair agreed, and then looked at Alice. "See how I ruined my daughter with kindness," he twitted. "Let her get out of hand completely. Now I can't do anything with her."

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"Want to get rid of her?" Walker winked at Alice, as he asked the question.

"What's that?" Adair was startled.

"Oh, nothing, dad," Alice frowned at Walker. "Where are we going now?"

"Don't know." Adair took out his watch as he shook his head. He frowned. "Guess we can make it though," he continued, laughing with the others at his own inconsistency.

CHAPTER XIX

FLOATING GARDENS

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"Xochimilco or place of flowers. How lovely," Nan spoke softly in the presence of the beauty before her.

Adair MacKenzie in his desire to introduce the girls to something that would make them forget the bullfight had brought them to one of the prettiest places in all Mexico. Now, he was looking exceedingly pleased with himself.

"Oh, daddy," Alice too was thrilled at the spectacle before them. "Many, many times I've heard of the floating gardens of Mexico and I've always wanted to see them."

"Well, there they are," Adair said as off-handedly as possible under the circumstances. "Now you see them."

They laughed at his matter-of-factness.

"If you will allow me," Walker Jamieson who had deserted the party immediately after the car had been parked, now brought a canoe he had rented and paddled up one of the many canals before them to a stop at their feet. He stood up and held out his arm to Alice.

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"Fair lady, you come first." He said as he helped her in and assisted her to a seat opposite him.

"And now, Nan." So one after the other he helped the members of the party to places in the large canoe.

"H-h-hm," Adair MacKenzie cleared his throat as he seated his bulk. "Now, I'd say this is more in keeping with what young ladies should like. How about it?" He addressed his question to Grace who was beaming beside him.

She nodded in agreement.

Everyone was completely happy as Walker pushed the canoe off. So the rest of the afternoon was whiled away in paddling lazily through the flower-bordered canals.

"Why are they called floating gardens?" Nan addressed her question to Walker who seemed a fountainhead of information about all sorts of things.

"Simply because they float," Walker answered as he disentangled his paddle from some lily stems along the side.

"But you can't actually see them move," Nan said as she peered earnestly at one of the many islands.

"No, you can't, now," Walker agreed. "But there was a time, Miss Curiosity, ages ago when these beautiful gardens actually did float from place to place, a time when you didn't know from one day to the next just where you'd wake up and find a certain particularly beautiful one."

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"Why?" The subject was an intriguing one and Nan wanted to know all about it.

"Oh, they say," Walker continued quietly, "that the earth of the gardens lies on interlacing twigs. Naturally before the water filled in as it is now, these twigs moved with the current and carried their burden of earth and flowers along with them.

"This was always a beautiful spot," he continued, "even back before the Aztecs found the eagle on the cactus and conquered the region and settled their capitol. When they did all this and found themselves with leisure on their hands, the nobles made of this place a playground, and the Aztec papa and mama came here with the Aztec child for Sunday picnics.

"Today, if I hadn't been as energetic as I am," he paused and grinned at the snort that this brought forth from Alice's father, "a descendant of these same Aztecs, who still, by the way, speaks the tongue of his forefathers, would have been plying this gondola. The Aztecs still live around here and still preserve many of the ancient customs of their people."

He rested the paddle on the side of the canoe as he finished and, as water dripped from it making little rings in the canal, he sat idly dreaming. The canoe drifted along and came to rest under an over-hanging willow. No one spoke. It was a magic moment, for the sun was setting and sending low rays over the water. Tropical birds were singing full-throated songs and in the distance they could hear, faintly, the sound of music.

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Finally, Alice spoke. "It can't be very different," she said, "than it was centuries ago. For the same exotic flowers ran wild here then that do now, and the same birds sang. How queer that makes me feel. Century after century has unrolled and yet this is the same."

"I know." Walker looked across at her. "Makes you feel, doesn't it, that time isn't so important after all, that a philosophy in which 'mañana' is the all-important word is perhaps not such a bad one after all."

"Here, here," Adair MacKenzie broke the spell. "Don't go preaching that mañana business to these girls. They are lazy enough as it is. Look at them now, will you?"

In truth, the girls did all look comfortable and lazy, entirely at peace with themselves and the world and not at all like the busy energetic beings that they were at school.

"The world doesn't seem real, does it?" Nan looked at Bess as she made this observation.

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"No," Bess answered. "Not real at all. This, I believe, is the most romantic spot we have ever been in."

"Yes," Nan agreed idly, and for some reason or other her thoughts drifted back towards home and school and then to Walter, Grace's brother.

"I've been meaning to tell you," Grace broke in on her train of thought as though she knew what had been going on in Nan's mind. "Mother said in that letter I got at Wells Fargo's this morning that she had consented to let Walter go on a motor trip through the West and Mexico with his Spanish teacher."

"Yes." Nan's voice betrayed her interest, and she was conscious as she spoke that all the girls were suddenly more alert. The piece of news was one they were interested in too.

"It seems," Grace went on, pleased that she had the attention of everyone, "that every year he takes a group down through this district so that they can hear Spanish spoken by the people whose tongue it is. Walter likes Spanish and so he's going along with them."

"When will he be here," Bess asked the question which she knew Nan wanted to ask but wouldn't in face of the interest that everyone was showing in the matter.

"Oh, mother wasn't sure," Grace answered. "It all depends on so many things. They'll be gone the whole summer and will linger at the places the boys seem to like the best. It seems that the teacher leaves the itinerary almost entirely up to them."

"Sounds like fun." Nan tried to be casual and general as she spoke, but she didn't altogether succeed.

"What's all this about?" Adair MacKenzie had caught the drift of the conversation. "Who is this Walter anyway?"

"He is Grace's brother," Nan answered.

"Yes?" Adair was not to be put off so easily.

"And he went with us to Rose Ranch a few summers ago and met us in London with Grace's mother and dad last year." Nan thought it would be better for her to answer the questions.

"Hm-m-m. Think I understand." Adair appeared to be devoting much thought to this "understanding" business for he said nothing further for a while. Finally, as though he suddenly remembered what they had been talking about, he returned to the subject.

"Why can't the young hoodlums—I have no doubt but what they are young hoodlums, all boys are—stop at the hacienda with us for a few days?" he asked.

Grace's face beamed at this. "Why, how nice!" she exclaimed, "but just think, there will be five of them at least."

"What of it?" Adair dismissed this as an objection. "Got lots of room. We'll make a party of it when they come and serve them a real Mexican meal." Adair seemed to have forgotten entirely that he personally despised Mexican cooking. "Hot tamales, tortillas, everything." He waved his hand grandly as though the whole world would be at the disposal of the boys for the asking.

"Like boys anyway," Adair went on. "Girls are a nuisance. Always fainting. Oh, it doesn't matter," he glossed over this last part of conversation as he saw the blood mounting to Grace's cheeks. "Just like to have boys around." He ended rather weakly. "Now, let's see. It's getting pretty dark, better move on." He motioned to Walker who obediently took the paddle in hand and began the leisurely journey back.

CHAPTER XX

GOOD-BY TO MEXICO CITY

"Oh, yesterday was a grand day!" Nan stretched her arms wide and high as she sat up in her bed the next morning.

"Yes, wasn't it?" Bess rolled over in her bed and looked at Nan. "It was just full of surprises. I don't know what I liked the best."

"I do," Nan said promptly.

"What?"

"Oh, Cousin Adair. I think he's a darling."

"He'd probably roar a mighty roar if he heard you say that," Bess laughed at the prospect, "but you know, I quite agree with you, even if it isn't my friend that he has invited to stop at the hacienda."

"But Walter's a friend to all of us," Nan protested.

"Yes, yes, of course," Bess agreed. "He's a friend to all of us and a particular friend to you."

"Bessie, if this big pillow wasn't so soft," Nan looked at the pillow she was holding in her hand speculatively, "I'd heave it over at you so fast that you wouldn't know what had struck you."

"That's all right, Nancy," Bess laughed. "I understand. You don't like to be teased."

"Wasn't it fun last night?" Nan changed the subject completely.

"What was fun?" Bess could remember so many nice things that she really didn't know which one Nan was talking about.

"Dinner on the bank of the canal at Xochimilco," Nan answered promptly. "I'll never forget it. The lights. The flowers. The music. Who would ever think to look at him and hear him talk that Cousin Adair would be romantic enough to think up anything like that?"

"I know it." Bess idly watched an insect that was buzzing around the room. "I was much surprised. Then I began to wonder if it wasn't Walker Jamieson's idea after all. You know he has a clever way of suggesting things to your cousin, so that when your cousin decides what to do it appears as though he thought up the idea originally."

"Why, Bess." Nan appeared to be horrified at the thought.

"Oh, you know it's so." Bess looked over at Nan. "It's lots of fun to watch him do it. Do you know, sometimes I think that he's almost clever enough to make Mr. MacKenzie think that the idea of his marrying Alice was his, Mr. MacKenzie's I mean, originally. Do you suppose?"

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"Bess, if you don't stop speculating about that, I don't know what I'm going to do to you." Nan laughed. "You know you might spoil everything by talking about it," she ended seriously. "For all you know the idea has never once entered Walker Jamieson's head."

Bess hooted at this. "Don't you ever think that," she said finally, "because it isn't true and you know it isn't."

"Say, what are you two people doing in bed at this hour?" Laura stuck her head in the doorway and inquired. "Don't you know that it's long past time to get up."

"Oh, bed's so nice," Nan answered, "I just hate to get up."

"Well, all I can say is," Laura finished before she closed the door, "the temperature downstairs is slightly chilly, and if you know what's good for you, you'll be out of there in a jiffy."

"Right-o." Nan jumped up at this bit of information. "Hi! Laura," she called after her friend, "come back here a minute. Was there any mail this morning," she asked as Laura's red head reappeared.

"Nothing for us," Laura answered, "but your cousin got something that made him blow up. That's why I'm telling you to hurry. I gather from certain orders I overheard him giving the chauffeur that he wants to start immediately, if not sooner, for the hacienda."

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"Really?" Bess asked, as she too jumped out of bed. "You mean we are going to leave Mexico City today."

"That's the impression I'm trying hard to convey," Laura responded. "And I think that if you two lugs want any breakfast at all, you better get a hustle on." With this she closed the door definitely and disappeared.

Needless to say, Nan and Bess hurried as they had not hurried for a long time. "Getting ready for an early morning class in the winter has nothing on this," Bess laughed as she tied a bright three-cornered scarf around her neck and pulled it in place.

"I'll say it hasn't," Nan agreed, quickly tying the laces in her white oxfords. "A lick and a promise and we're ready to go." With this she bounded across the room and opened the door wide for her friend.

"Such energy!" Bess exclaimed as though horrified. She was never one to be as exuberant as Nan. She was always more dignified and more correct. Nan was more natural and more full of fun. She did what she liked to do, for the most part, simply because it was fun. Bess was more apt to do things because other people did them. Nan was a leader, and Bess, the follower. That was, perhaps, the reason they had been friends for so long. They were alike in some respects, but totally different in others.

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Now, as they came down the broad stairway of the big hotel lobby together, this difference was most plain. Adair MacKenzie, pacing up and down the lobby even as he did in his office when he was at work, stopped to look at them.

"She'll get by," he thought with satisfaction as he noted Nan's bright face and free, graceful walk. "'bout time you two made your appearance," he said aloud and assumed a grim appearance. "Finished a day's work myself already. Guess it's another to get you people started."

"Started?" Nan questioned.

"Can't stay here all the time." Adair answered her question. "Anyway, I just got word that the housekeeper is arriving tomorrow and I've got to get down there and have things straightened around before she puts in an appearance. These ornery housekeepers, you know, have to be babied. If you don't, they leave every time you turn around. Someday, someone will invent a robot that will do the work, and then—"

"You won't have a housekeeper to scold anymore, daddy," Alice interrupted and finished for him.

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"Serve her right," Adair answered as though the housekeeper would be the loser. "Can't see that she's any good anyway."

"So we're leaving." Walker Jamieson joined the rest in the lobby. He had been out for an early morning walk and looked fresh and full of life as he came in. "Got your camera, Nan?" he turned to her when he spoke.

"Upstairs," Nan answered.

"Let's take a few pictures," Walker suggested. In the face of Adair's morning state, this seemed a daring thing to suggest, and Nan looked at Adair to see his reaction. He seemed not to be listening.

"Run along," Alice gave Nan a little shove. "Dad's going to be busy for the next half hour or so, finishing up some business here, so if we hurry, we can take all the pictures we want to."

At this Nan did go upstairs for her camera. She was anxious enough to, but she had hesitated because she never liked to be the one to arouse her cousin.

Now, she almost petted the camera as she returned with it. She loved it and was already looking forward to the day when she could own one herself, for she had made up her mind, since Walker had been giving her instructions to learn all she possibly could about taking pictures. This was the reason she took pictures of everyone and everything she saw until Walker declared that the authorities would be questioning her on suspicion that she was a spy of some sort. [162]

"Me, a spy?" Nan laughed at the thought.

"Well, you do look harmless," Walker agreed, "but then strange things do happen, especially to people who spend all their time taking pictures. How many have you got now?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nan laughed.

"Come on, 'fess up'," Walker urged.

"Let's see there must be a dozen rolls upstairs," Nan admitted. "It will cost a fortune to develop them, won't it?"

"What do you say to my buying some developer and pans and whatever else is needed and taking them along to the hacienda with us?" Walker asked. "We could develop all your films there then, for practically nothing."

"I'd like that," Nan agreed enthusiastically, "but I thought you had some big story you were going to work on down there." "Oh, that can wait." Walker Jamieson acted as though stories did wait for people and laughed at himself while he did it. "Anyway it will only take a jiffy to teach you all I know about the photography business." [163]

"All right then," Nan agreed.

So it came about that Nan and Walker went to the hacienda supplied with everything to develop pictures. How fortunate this was! But then that story belongs to later chapters.

"Well, eagle eye, how's the camera working this morning?" Laura inquired as Nan and Walker went out into the lovely patio of their hotel. "Want to take some pictures of me draped around one of those tall white pillars?"

"Do one of you strung from that balcony, up there, kid," Walker offered generously.

"Thank you, kind sir," Laura replied graciously, "but since I'm going to need my neck for a little while longer, I must refuse—with regret of course."

"On second thought, perhaps that is best," Walker agreed. "It would be a shame to spoil this lovely scene this fine morning."

"It is pretty, isn't it?" Nan looked about her with great satisfaction. The patio or courtyard so familiar to Spain is a part of the Mexican scene too, and this one where Nan was taking pictures was particularly lovely with its gay flowers, deep green foliage, and pond all surrounded by the pinkish colored walls of the hotel itself.

"Oh, but I hate to leave all this," Nan remarked when the pictures were taken and she and Laura and Walker were returning to the hotel lobby. [164]

"And so do we," the other girls chorused, as the party all came together.

"Ah, you go, but you return." Walker sounded quite poetic as he said this. "And then, remember, you have no conception of the adventures the hacienda holds in store for you."

"Have you?" The girls looked suspiciously at Walker, when Nan asked this question.

His answer was a mysterious look.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HACIENDA

"That must be it over there," Walker Jamieson pointed to a low rambling building nestled among the hills, as the car swung around a curve in the road.

The party had, despite sundry irritating delays, left Mexico City in the middle of the forenoon, and now, as evening approached they did sight the hacienda, their destination and proposed home for the summer.

"About time," Adair MacKenzie said curtly. "Hundred miles from Mexico City. Humph! That's what they told me in Memphis. Hundred miles maybe, as the crow flies, but on this treacherous piece of bandit-infested highway it's at least two hundred."

He looked about him, as he finished, as though he was daring someone to gainsay him. No one accepted the dare.

"What's the matter?" he surveyed the silent group. "All worn out?" Again, there was no answer.

"Say, you," he looked directly at Nan now, "are you backing down on your old cousin? Don't know what's happened," he continued. "Can't even get anyone to fight with me any more." He really sounded pathetic. [166]

At this, the whole group broke down in laughter.

"What is this?" Adair laughed too now, but his face bore a puzzled expression.

"Nothing, dad." Alice wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Don't say nothing to me, child." Adair brandished his cane as though he was going to take Alice over his knee and spank her. "What were you trying to do," he jumped to the correct conclusion immediately, "give me the silent treatment?"

Alice nodded her head half guiltily, half roguishly. The idea had been hers.

"Your mother tried that years ago," Adair reminisced. "It didn't work then, and it's not working now. It's better to give me an opportunity to explode," he advised. "Volcanoes have to erupt or something terrible happens."

"That's what I said, sir." Walker Jamieson agreed with the old man.

"You mean to say, to sit right there and say," Adair exploded "that you had the gall to liken me to a volcano?" [167]

Walker nodded his head in agreement.

"You-you-you, why, I like you!" Adair thrust out his hand and shook that of the young reporter. "You say what you think no matter how dire the consequences. Maybe you're not such a bad reporter after all." He said this as though he was making a great concession.

"Yes, sir. No, sir." Walker hardly knew what to say in the face of all this unexpectedness.

"Now, come on here," Adair turned around and addressed this to the driver. "Can't this old jallopie do more than 15 miles an hour even when it sees its berth in the distance." He too, pointed to the white buildings that stood out from the green foliage around them.

"Not a bad looking place, from here." He went on contentedly. "Supposed to be one of the finest in the district, but you never can tell about such comparisons. Been fooled too many times to believe much of what I hear now. Take everything with a grain of salt.

"Hear that, girl?" He turned to Nan. "Best always not to believe what you hear. Discount at least fifty percent and then draw your own conclusions. That right, Jamieson?"

Walker nodded his head in complete agreement. It was one of the first lessons he had learned as a cub reporter. [168]

Now, as they talked, the car climbed a steep hill. At the top, they turned to the right and came upon the hacienda.

"How perfectly lovely!" Alice's face was all aglow as she caught her first real glimpse of the place. The buildings were in Spanish style of a stucco material of a color bordering on the pink. There were iron balconies, large windows, and a courtyard or patio complete with palms, a fountain, and seats.

The girls had thought that there could be nothing in the world so pretty as the patio in their hotel in Mexico City, but here already was one that surpassed it.

"Humph!" Adair MacKenzie was as pleased as the others at his first sight of the place, but more cautious than they and more reluctant to let his real feelings be known, he let his "Humph!" be his only comment as he descended from the car and walked with the others through the archway into the courtyard.

There crowds of natives awaited the arrival of the new master, and the overseer of the place hurried forth to greet him.

"Eet ees a pleasure, señor," he said as he took Adair's hand and bowed deeply. The rest in the party smiled and hung back at this bit of Mexican courtesy. Walker grinned broadly. [169]

"You, Señorita, are next," he whispered in Alice's ear. "Are you prepared to have your hand kissed by a servant who would consider it an honor to die in your service?"

"Be still," Alice murmured, and then smiled as the overseer did come forward, take her hand and bow deeply. "Buenos días, señorita," he greeted her. "May your stay here be as pleasant to you as your honoring us with your presence has been to us."

"Come on, now," Adair was always impatient with the elaborate courtesies of the south, impatient probably because he never felt at ease with them. "I always suspect," Alice laughed once when she and Walker were talking about Adair's abruptness, "that he's more than a little afraid that some day some one of these strangers will break down and kiss him on the cheek."

"I wonder what he would do?" Walker paused in speculation.

"You might try it yourself, sometime, and find out," Alice retorted.

"Do you want to have me ousted bag and baggage from your presence, fair lady?" Walker questioned, but Alice never had a chance to answer, for just at that moment her father came upon the two and demanded all their attention.

Alice smiled over this in recollection now as they went through the door of the main building and into a spacious entrance hall with its big winding stairway, its high-beamed ceiling, and its pretty tiled floor. Walker caught the smile and guessed at its origin, but he said nothing as they were all escorted up the broad steps to their quarters. [170]

"Ours, all ours?" Bess questioned when the Lakeview Hall girls were conducted to a suite of five rooms overlooking on one side the patio and the other, a river, broad fields, and mountains in the distance.

"Si, si, Señoritas," the smiling Mexican maid, Soledad, who was to be theirs during their stay, hadn't understood the question, but "Si, si," seemed the proper answer. Now she bustled about trying to help them until her curiosity as to what was going on downstairs got the better of her and on some slight pretext she left.

"Just think of it!" Bess exclaimed when she had disappeared. "A whole suite of rooms of our own, a maid, and everything, oh, everything we can wish for. It's a magic country and Adair MacKenzie is the presiding genie."

"Well, he is in one way," Laura admitted dryly. "When he waves his wand things happen."

"Yes, and he goes up in smoke," Nan added.

"Right," Laura laughed, "and there's no one that can do it more expertly." [171]

Alone now, the girls went from one to another of their rooms enjoying everything. Even Grace, accustomed as she was to luxury, was greatly impressed. She had never been in a house like this before.

The rooms were big and spacious with heavy oaken furniture, thick rugs, tapestries, and beds so high that it was necessary to climb up a little ladder in order to get to them. Each room had big double windows opening out onto the patio.

Bess stood out on hers and looked down on the courtyard below where maids were already busy setting a table under a tree centuries old. "Do they ever serenade people here," she directed her question toward those inside.

"I hear that they do, sometimes," Nan called back. "But you have to wait for a clear night, with a sky that's blue as blue can be, a moon big and silver, shining low over these pretty buildings, and stars that are bigger and closer to earth than any you have ever seen."

"Why, Nan Sherwood," Bess came into the room now. "Where did you learn all these things?"

"Oh," Nan shrugged her shoulders, "this atmosphere gets into your blood and you just can't help yourself. There is only one regret that I have." [172]

"And that?" Bess couldn't imagine anyone having any regrets at this time. The world seemed just perfect to her now.

"That Rhoda isn't here with us," Nan replied promptly. She had been thinking of Rhoda a great deal in the past few days that had been such fun.

"I know," Grace agreed with Nan softly. "I have been thinking of her too. We should be hearing from her now in a few days because in those last letters that we sent we told her to direct all future mail to this place."

"I wonder how you get your mail here," Laura said. "Do you suppose a Mexican caballero comes dashing up on a donkey, sweeps his hat in a wide arc toward the ground, and then deposits the bills and things as though they were special messages from the king of Spain?"

"Oh, Laura, don't be silly," Bess was taking her romance seriously and didn't want it to be spoiled with laughter. "Do you suppose," she turned to Nan now, "that all those people that we saw down there in the courtyard live on this estate."

"Probably those and many more," Nan assented, "but we'll have to wait for the tour of the estate that's been promised before we know for sure. And there are a million other things, at least that I want to know about."

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"Me too," Laura agreed, and the rest chimed in, for this Mexican hacienda was something that captured the imagination of all of them.

CHAPTER XXII

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STUBBORN FOOLS

"Oh, Bess, you should see yourself now," Nan laughed the next morning. It was early and the girls were all mounted on mules as they passed through the archway of the patio and out into the gardens with their huge palms and brilliant flowers and birds.

"Feel like a fool myself," Adair grumbled as he tried to adjust his position on the beast he was riding. And truly, he was a ridiculous figure.

"Well, dad," Alice pretended that she was trying to mollify him, "you just weren't made to ride a mule. Nor were you," she looked at Walker Jamieson's long dangling legs as she spoke.

"Nor you either," Walker retorted laughing. "You're too little. Hey, you," he broke off his conversation with Alice quickly and called to Nan, "don't do that."

"What?" Nan asked innocently.

"You know. Don't look so innocent."

"Nan Sherwood!" Bess guessed at what Walker was driving at. "You're not taking pictures of us in *these* outfits are you?"

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"She not only is, but she has," Walker answered before Nan could say anything. "I saw her sliding that little camera back into its case."

"Nan, please," Alice joined in the protest, "have mercy on us and think how our children and grandchildren will laugh if they ever see pictures of us riding mule-back. We're all perfect sights."

But Nan had already taken the pictures, so the protests came too late. Now it was Adair MacKenzie who diverted their attention. "Get along there. Get a move on, you slow poke." Adair was kicking the sides of his mule with real force. But the mule was accustomed to such treatment and he only raised his ears lazily, turned his head slowly and looked at his rider sleepily. Then he stopped, dead in his tracks.

"Get along there, get along, I say," Adair kicked the mule again. "Can't you understand plain English?"

"Understands only Spanish, I guess, Mr. MacKenzie," Walker said. "Try that on him."

"If he can't understand English, the best language in the world, he can't understand anything," Adair was as stubborn as the mule he was on, but for once all his railing, all his sputtering, all the ordering that he could do, didn't accomplish a thing. The mule just wouldn't move.

"Here you," Adair called ahead to their guide who had philosophically shrugged his shoulders at the outburst of the new master, and sat now, on his mule on the trail above waiting for the party to move on. At the call, he ambled back to see what was wrong.

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"Hey, you," Adair was impatient with everyone and everything now. "Get a hustle on. It's today we want to see this blasted estate, today. Not mañana."

The guide understood one word, 'mañana.' His face broke into a broad grin. "Si, si, señor. Si, Señoritas." He was more than glad that these strangers could speak his language. Now, he broke out into a voluble explanation, all in Spanish of course, as to how to treat a mule.

Walker stood off laughing heartily at the whole situation. Adair MacKenzie did not understand one single word of what was being said to him, but it was coming forth so fast that he could neither interrupt nor stop the flow. For once in his life he looked utterly helpless.

Alice was as amused as Walker. "Poor dear," she said, "to think that he should come all of this way to be baffled by a mule and a man whose philosophy says 'tomorrow', we will do it 'tomorrow'."

Adair saw their smiles. It was more than he could stand, more than any man could stand. Awkwardly, he dismounted from his beast, walked around in front and shook his ever present

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cane at him. The beast did nothing but blink.

"Why, wh-wh-why, you good-for-nothing, senseless, no-count, beast you," he burst forth in a torrent, "if you think you can stop me, you're mistaken. You'll go up there if I have to carry you and you'll not take a picture of that either," Adair turned to Nan with this last. It was somehow much more satisfying to explode to Nan than to either the beast or the Mexican.

"No, cousin," Nan answered as seriously as she could.

"And don't be meek either." He brandished his cane again. "Never get anyplace like that." There was no satisfying the man now. Neither agreement nor disagreement could placate him. Nan kept still.

It was Alice finally, who smoothed his ruffled feelings and got him back on the mule. "Now, daddy," she said quietly, "if you'll just sit quietly and wait, the mule will go, but you can't beat him into action the way you do me." Saying this she laughed up at him. He stooped over and kissed her.

It was nice to see this father and daughter together. They seemed to understand one another perfectly. Adair, explode as he might, could never frighten Alice. She knew how soft-hearted and kind he was underneath all his crust. She had known from babyhood that he wouldn't intentionally, for all his angry outbursts, hurt anyone. [178]

Now, having smoothed his ruffled feelings some, she let Walker assist her back on her mule. The party moved slowly along the narrow stony trail while huge limbs of great palm trees waved slightly above them.

Reaching the top of a high hill on the estate they looked out over the countryside.

"What's that?" Laura, ever curious, indicated a point in the distance, something that showed black against the sky and that clearly had been built by man.

Walker drew forth his field glasses and directed his glance toward the object. "Can't be sure," he rendered his verdict after some thought, "but think it might be a pyramid. There are several in the district you know. Perhaps the most famous of them all is the one that a hunter down from New York discovered three or four years ago. It's rather inaccessible, but such an old one that some old codger in the East with a lot of money on his hands donated a considerable sum to have it opened."

"What did they find?" Nan asked.

"Oh, lots of dried up bones." [179]

"That all?" Nan sounded disappointed.

"Well, not exactly," Walker admitted and then stopped. He enjoyed teasing these youngsters.

"Well, what did they find then," Nan persisted.

"Some jewels. Some gold. Some exceptionally fine pottery."

"And—" Nan saw that he was still holding out.

"Some poison spiders that killed three members of the excavation party. Now you satisfied?" Walker grinned down at her.

"Well, yes," Nan agreed. "But I still want to visit a pyramid sometime."

"Visit those in Egypt," Walker advised. "There's nothing more impressive."

"You been there?" Nan questioned. The path was wide enough so that they could ride now with their mules side by side.

"Yes, years ago, with my father," Walker answered. "He had a bad case of the wanderlust, so whenever he could scrape a few dollars together, off he would go to some outlandish place."

"Taking your mother with him?"

"Oh, sometimes. She went up into Alaska when he went to pan gold from the streams. She went down into South America when he went as an engineer on a big industrial project. And she went when he set out for Russia after the revolution, but after that she gave up." [180]

"You must be like your father," Nan commented.

"Oh, a little," Walker admitted. "But I haven't quite got the wanderlust as much as he has. He could go into raptures over anything that was far away from him. I've been thinking of him a lot today, riding over this estate. He spent some time down here in Mexico, and never grew tired of extolling the country. This was after my mother died."

"Though we are not entering the country at all that he was fondest of, I've been thinking of his descriptions of it, especially after seeing that pyramid in the distance."

"It was down in Oaxaca and was called, I believe, Tehuantepec. It took days to get there by horseback, according to his account, and the route was through tropical jungles more dense than any others in the world. You see my father never saw mediocre things," he explained by the way.

"The City itself lay on a river by the same name in a gorgeous tropical setting surrounded by orchards and many gardens, all shaded by flowering trees and palms.

"The population was largely Indian, a tribe that had its own language and preserved its own traditions, but it seems that above all this particular tribe was known for its beautiful women, more independent, more lovely, and more beautifully dressed than any of the women in other tribes.

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"He described them as being tall, well-built, and industrious. Their dresses consisted of long full skirts made of bright colors with a deep white flounce at the bottom, that swept the ground and covered their bare feet. The blouse was short and square-necked and for adornment they wore much jewelry, earrings and long heavy chains hung with ten and twenty American gold pieces.

"They had a graceful carriage, walking straight and firmly with an ease that only those women who have been trained to carry things on their head have. These people, he said, carry their flowers, fruit, and foods to the market in painted gourd bowls perched firmly on the crowns of their heads.

"Ah, yes, those people were perfect, more perfect my father said than any he had ever come across. But then, my father," Walker admitted boyishly, "always did tell a grand tale."

"So that's why you became a newspaper man," Nan concluded.

"Yes, I suppose so," Walker admitted. "You know this taste for queer places and queer things is often bred right in your bones."

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"Say, what are you two talking about back there?" Adair MacKenzie suddenly became conscious of the fact that two in his party were paying no attention whatsoever to him and his troubles with his mule. Had he had a horse, he would liked to have galloped back beside them, but with a mule there was no galloping. As it was he turned the mule's head sharply.

It was just too much. The mule was tired of his burden anyway, so before anyone realized at all what was happening, Adair was deposited firmly on the ground and the mule, with more intelligence perhaps than he had been given credit for, was gazing at him soberly.

CHAPTER XXIII

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IN A PATIO

"Are you hurt? Daddy, are you hurt?" Alice cried, but even as she did, tears of laughter were rolling down her cheeks. She had never in her life seen her father in such a ridiculous position, which was saying something, for Adair MacKenzie had a knack of getting himself in more absurd situations than anyone else in the world.

"Stop your blubbing." Adair was thoroughly irritated this time. "I'll conquer you yet." He scolded the mule. "Think you can vanquish Adair MacKenzie, do you? I'll show you." But to all of this scolding that fell dully on the tropical verdure about them, that sounded harsh and out of place in the soft greenness of the scene, the mule never blinked an eyelash.

"Daddy, are you hurt?" Alice repeated her question as she took hold of one arm while Walker Jamieson took the other.

But their offers of assistance went unappreciated. Adair MacKenzie merely shook off their hands, used his own to push himself up, and then stood, brushing himself off while he continued his tirade.

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"Now, you're going home, and you're going to stay there." Adair spluttered off into the kind of scolding that he might have given an erring child. With this, he about faced and walked, leading the mule beside him the three miles back to the hacienda.

It was a quiet party, but one full of suppressed mirth, that wound its way back over the path. The Lakeview Hall girls could scarcely contain themselves until they got in their apartments.

"It was just perfect." Laura laughed heartily.

"Did you see the way he looked, and the way the donkey looked?" Amelia asked.

"They just stared at one another until I thought that cousin Adair would beat the beast with his cane."

"I thought of that, too," Bess said. "But I guess he's too kind-hearted to do anything like that."

Bess was right. Adair MacKenzie had never in his life made any attempt to hurt a dumb animal in

any way until that morning when he had dug his heels in irritation into the mule's side. At home, he always had animals about him, a dog that was now well along in years, a stable full of horses, and yes, a mule that he once bought on the street when he saw its master trying to beat it into moving along.

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"The crust of that mule," Laura said slangily. "Did it ever do my heart good to see its stubbornness matched against Mr. MacKenzie's! I wonder what kind of a character sketch he would make of it, if he had the chance, that is, I mean, if the mule could understand him."

"Probably, 'stubborn fool' and let it go at that," Nan answered. "Anyway his troubles with that mule will never be forgotten."

"And 'stubborn as a mule', will always mean something to us now," Nan added. "Now, we've got to get ready and get downstairs. Dinner's going to be ready very shortly."

So the girls changed their clothes, washed, combed and presented themselves downstairs all clean and neat.

There was no one around. They walked through the great hall and out into the patio. Still they found no one except the servants.

"I never saw so much help in all my life," Grace remarked. "Why, just millions of people work here. I haven't seen the same person twice at all."

"Didn't you hear Walker Jamieson say that labor's cheap in this country?" Nan explained. "Everyone has one or two or three servants. But I wonder where cousin Adair and everyone is now."

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She hadn't long to wait, for just as she spoke they heard loud voices from the direction of the kitchen at the back, and shortly Adair, Alice and Walker appeared.

"There that's done," Adair slapped his hands together as though he had just disposed of a mighty problem. "Trouble, trouble all the while," he looked at the girls as he spoke. "If it isn't one thing, it's another. One moment it's a mule and the next it's a woman." He looked utterly worn out, and Nan felt sorry for him.

"Oh, daddy, don't take Mrs. O'Malley too seriously," Alice tried to ease his worry.

"Too seriously! Well, I like that," Adair exclaimed. "When the best housekeeper in all Christendom threatens to walk out on you, tell me now, what are you supposed to do? Say, all right, go ahead? Just what would you do, now?" He looked at Alice.

She hesitated.

"There," he didn't give her a chance to answer, "she'd walk out on you before you did anything. You can't hesitate in serious matters like this. You have to act. But never mind," he turned to his guests, "you don't need to worry. I have acted. Mrs. O'Malley has promised to stay. The Chinese cook has promised to stay. Everyone's staying. There'll be no deserting the ship on this trip."

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"That's fine, daddy," Alice complimented him. "And now when do we have dinner?"

"Dinner? Where's dinner?" Adair was off again. He picked up a bell and rang it forcefully. Everyone, except the famous Mrs. O'Malley and the Chinese cook came running. People came out of doors, in through the arches of the patio, and stuck their heads out from windows. Everyone thought that there was something radically wrong. When they saw that it was just the American again, they disappeared as quickly as they came.

The old women shook their heads. Would he never learn, they wondered, that there was no necessity to rush anything, that if you let things just go their own quiet, placid way, they would eventually work themselves out. They couldn't understand this man who had come to them as their master. Already, thanks to the guide of the morning, legends about him and his wrath were spreading around the place. The wireless that civilization knows is fast, but the grapevine among the Mexican Indians was even more effective.

When he saw the commotion he had caused, Adair MacKenzie sat down, and shortly dinner appeared, as it would have appeared even though he had done nothing.

The dinner was good and the cool fruit juices that followed it were good. And everyone sat, as long as the warmth of the day permitted, in the patio under the tropical sky and talked some, sat silent more, for it was all very peaceful.

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"So you're not going to work on that smuggling story after all?" Adair MacKenzie asked Walker just before they all got up to go in.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Walker answered carefully. "Feel the need of a little rest now and I like this place and I like the people and it's hard to tear myself away."

"We thank you, don't we?" Adair took his daughter's hand in his. He felt vaguely that there was something more serious in all of this than appeared on the surface, but just now he was too tired to question. He squeezed Alice's hand.

CHAPTER XXIV

STOLEN!

"Nan, it's a letter from Rhoda," Bess repeated the information twice before she got any response at all, and then it was only a grunt. It was the morning after the famous mule-back excursion, and Nan was in her room alone until Bess's entrance.

"Whatever are you doing?" Bess asked when she saw that Nan, strangely enough, didn't seem to be interested in her bit of information.

"Oh, Bess, I can't find it anyplace," Nan looked as though the world had come to an end. She had all that she could do to keep from crying.

"Find what?"

"Oh, my ring. You know the one I mean, the one old Mr. Blake gave me in Scotland last summer. He said it was a family heirloom and that I should keep it as long as I lived and then see that it was passed on down to my children. Now, it's gone and I'm sure I left it in this room when we went away yesterday."

"Are you sure, Nan?" Bess looked worried too, now. The ring was a lovely thing with the bluest of blue sapphires in an old-fashioned gold setting. Bess had coveted it herself, and often wanted to wear it. But she respected Nan's sentiment about the bit of jewelry enough to have not even asked to try it on.

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Now it was gone!

"When did you wear it last?"

"Bess, I had it on yesterday morning before we went on that trip by muleback and I took it off because I was afraid I would lose it. I left it in this box I'm sure, and it isn't here now. I've looked through it a dozen times." As she finished, she proffered the box to Bess, who took it, opened it up, and carefully looked through the trinkets contained therein. The ring wasn't there.

"Have you told anybody, yet?" Bess questioned.

"No, but if it doesn't come to light pretty soon, I'm going to tell cousin Adair. I'm almost afraid to do that, because he values the ring almost as much as I. He saw it once, he said, when he was in Scotland, and he was proud to think that it came to me. Now I've lost it, and I'm sure he'll think that I've been very careless."

"It doesn't matter what he thinks," Bess said firmly. "You'd better tell him right away. If someone has stolen it, he's the only one that can find the culprit. Come on, let's go downstairs now. Or do you want me to hunt first?"

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"Yes, do that." Nan did dread telling Adair MacKenzie of her loss.

Bess looked thoroughly, but nowhere could she find the ring.

So together, the two girls went down the stairs, Bess this time in the role of comforter.

They found Adair out in the gardens talking as best he could with an old gardener who knew at least a few words of English. Adair looked up at their entrance.

"So you like flowers, too," he greeted them. Nan nodded her head, and then couldn't say anything for a few minutes.

"Why, what's the matter, Nancy child," Adair was all sympathy as he noted the worried look on the girl's face. "Nothing serious, I hope."

"I'm afraid it is," Nan answered. "You know my ring—"

"The sapphire ring that you brought home from Scotland?" Adair said.

"Yes," Nan nodded her head to indicate that he was right. "It's missing."

"What do you mean, missing?" Adair asked. "Have you lost it?"

"No, it was in my room, and it's gone now." Nan said this very positively.

"Gone, gone where?" Adair flared up as usual.

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"That's what I don't know," Nan was having a difficult time being patient. "I wish I did."

"You think it's stolen." Adair now had the girls by the arm and was taking them back to the hacienda.

"I don't like to say that," Nan hedged.

"If that's what happened, speak up." Adair wanted to get to the bottom of this right away and although he was very fond of Nan he wasn't going to spare her or her feelings any now. The ring, he felt, was a personal loss to him too and as he went into the house, he was determined to find it.

First he quizzed all the girls to find out, if by chance, they knew of anything that would indicate that Nan was mistaken. They didn't. No one had seen her wearing it after the time at which she said she had put it away.

Then he quizzed all of the upstairs' servants. This was done with Walker's help, since he was the only one in the crowd that knew any Spanish at all. Again, there was no light cast on the mystery.

He called in all the rest of the house servants, with no results. Then he blustered and fumed and threatened, but this to no avail.

Finally, with one last grand threat that he would find out who the culprit was in spite of everybody, he sent everyone from the room. [193]

The girls went up to their quarters together.

"Now, who do you suppose could have done anything like that?" Bess wondered as they all sat around listlessly and hopelessly, for there was nothing that they could do. "Do you suspect anyone, Nan?"

"No one in this whole wide world." Nan answered wholeheartedly. "The servants since we have been here have all been just as nice as they could be. I don't think there is a one of them that would stoop to anything like that."

"It doesn't seem possible," soft-spoken Grace agreed, "but then someone has taken it. We're sure of that."

"As sure as we are of anything," Nan said.

"Is it very valuable, Nan?" Amelia asked.

"Oh, I don't know that," Nan answered. "I think, however, that the value is mostly sentimental. It was originally given to one of the Blakes as a reward by the king. It was supposed then to have the power to bring the king's soldiers to the help of the person wearing it, in whatever trouble he might be.

"There is a story that once, someone who owned it committed treason and was about to be beheaded when he brought forth the ring. It saved him, even then, and instead of killing him they banished him to another country for ten years. Ordinarily, it would have been death or a life banishment, but the ring's power was mighty." [194]

"Maybe then," Laura suggested, "if you or your cousin will offer a reward, the ring will turn up. The person that stole it probably thought that it was valuable."

"I thought of that," Nan answered, "but cousin Adair says 'no,' that he will get the ring back without any such monkey business. So I guess we'll just have to leave it up to him."

CHAPTER XXV

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BESS HAS SUSPICIONS

They did leave it up to Adair MacKenzie, and for several days nothing happened. The house was like a morgue, for everyone suspected everyone else and the servants were all under suspicion.

Finally, Nan couldn't stand it any longer, and decided to do a little investigating on her own. It was Bess who put her on the track.

"I don't trust Chinamen," Bess had confided and then felt foolish immediately afterward, for if there was one thing that Nan resented above all others, it was race prejudice in any form.

"Oh, Bess, don't be silly," Nan dismissed the statement shortly.

"But I don't," Bess persisted.

"Elizabeth Harley," Nan exclaimed, "if you make that remark again, I'll never speak to you as long as I live." Nan was cross and irritable these days, because nothing seemed to be going right and she felt that if she hadn't said anything about the ring in the first place, everyone would be enjoying themselves.

"But Nan," Bess put her arm around her friend. "I don't mean it all the way you think. I haven't [196]

liked the cook ever since that first day when he had a fight with Mrs. O'Malley and she's such a dear too."

"Oh, but Bess, you know how that happened," Nan protested. "Mrs. O'Malley went into the kitchen that he had run for some twenty years and tried to tell him what to do. He just wouldn't stand for it."

"Even then, I don't like him." Bess persisted. "He's been horrid and mean to all of us ever since we've been here. I think he stole your ring, and if you don't do something about it, I'm going to tell Mr. MacKenzie myself."

"See here, Bess," Nan was very serious now. "If you don't keep quiet about what you have just been saying to me, I'm going to be very angry. I don't want suspicions being cast on people who haven't done anything, and I don't think he has, honestly."

Bess paused and thought before she said anything further.

"And Bess," Nan said more softly now, "don't resent the way I've talked to you these days. I feel very troubled."

Bess felt badly too now. It wasn't very often that Nan let her temper get away with her, and since she had, Bess thought, she must be more troubled than any of us realize. So the subject was dropped between the two friends. [197]

But Bess's remarks had done their work. When Nan was alone, the thought of what Bess had said, came back to her again and again. She dismissed it impatiently at first, but then little things about the cook began to come to her attention constantly.

Finally she determined to do something about it all and so, one day when she was alone, she went back to the kitchen.

She was just about to open the door and go through when she heard loud voices.

"I tell you it's not enough," one, an American voice was saying.

"Alle samee, it's all I can get." The voice of the cook came to her in reply.

Nan stopped, startled. This, why, this verified Bess's suspicions. Nan stood back and listened further, but heard nothing. She had come in on the end of the argument. Shortly, she heard a door slam on the other side of the kitchen, and then there were no more sounds at all.

She waited for some time, and then cautiously opened the door and went in.

Over in one corner, the cook, alone, was busy preparing the evening meal. He looked up as the girl entered, and was on the point of reprimanding her for invading his quarters when he stopped, recognizing her. He waited then, resentfully, for her to speak. [198]

Nan was equally wary however, so there was a moment of embarrassed silence, before either said anything. Then, as they stood waiting, a call outside distracted their attention.

The cook answered it, and when he returned, they both felt more at ease. He brought her a stool to sit on and offered her some of his choice cookies, so before long they were talking to one another. They talked about little things, and Nan went away without mentioning the ring or the conversation she had heard at all.

But she went back the next day. Following this procedure it wasn't long before the cook poured out his whole sorry tale.

Nan later, when she got Walker Jamieson alone, told it and swore him to secrecy.

"Then he took the ring," Walker concluded, when the story had all been told.

"He hasn't said so," Nan was being very careful that the facts were all understood as they were, not as other people might imagine them to be.

"No, not in so many words," Walker agreed, "but then, he did. You and I know that, and it's not necessary to tell anyone at all anything about this yet. It's a bigger story than you realize," he ended, "and it has many, many more angles than this particular one. Let me work on it awhile without any interference." [199]

Nan agreed to this, and so the two conspirators parted.

CHAPTER XXVI

SERENADERS

"What's going on downstairs?" Laura came into Nan's room quietly. "Of course, it's none of my business," she went on, "but everything seems to be in an uproar. Your cousin is ranting around as I've never seen him rant before, and Walker Jamieson is there and he looks as though everything is wrong with the world."

"Why, I don't know," Nan looked up from the diary she was writing, a diary in which she kept a day by day account of her trip. But she looked worried. Had Walker, after all, told the story that they had promised to keep a secret and was her cousin insisting on getting to the bottom of everything right away?

"What were they talking about?" she asked Laura.

"I don't know," Laura answered. "When I came through the room, they stopped, and seemed to be waiting until I got out, before continuing. I got the point and hurried. I was only after a magazine that I had left in the room, anyway. But even for the short time I was in there, the air seemed so heavy with emotion that you could cut it."

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"And you didn't hear anything?" Nan repeated the thought of her former question.

"I said, 'no'." Laura insisted. "Why, what did you expect me to hear?" She looked at her friend intently. As Bess often did in similar circumstances, Laura now felt that Nan knew much more about what was going on downstairs than she wanted to reveal.

"Oh, nothing," Nan managed to say this airily, as though she truly had had nothing in view when she asked the question. So saying, she screwed the top on her fountain pen, put her diary away, and stamped a letter she had just written home. With these little things done, she turned again to Laura, "Do you know that Grace's brother and his friends are expected here at the hacienda tomorrow?" she asked.

"Are they? Tomorrow?" Laura had been out in the courtyard watching some Mexican youngsters at play when Grace had told Nan. Now, the information was a surprise to her. "What's been planned? How many will there be? How long will they stay?" The questions rolled off her tongue one after the other, until Nan stopped her.

"Oh, Laura," she said, "one at a time, please. We've not planned anything definite yet and we don't know how many nor how long, but we're hoping that they can stay at least a week. Isn't it all going to be fun!"

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"Yes," Laura was almost as excited as Nan. "It's going to be grand to have them all here. Now, let's go and get the other girls and plan something."

But before they could get out of the room, the others came bursting in. "Oh, do you know," Bess got the words out first, "Walter and his friends probably will arrive tonight." Amelia and Grace nodded their heads in unison.

"How do you know?" Nan asked.

"Here's a telegram." Grace waved it in the air. "It says," she read, "'Arriving tonight. Six of us. Anxious to see you. Walter.' I wonder when they'll get here." Saying this, she went over to the windows and looked down into the courtyard as though she expected them at once. Then she turned toward the others again, "How good it's going to be!" she exclaimed. "I've been a little lonesome for someone from home ever since Rhoda's mother became so ill."

"Have you, Gracie?" Nan put her arm affectionately around the more timid girl's shoulder. "I guess we all have been. It will be good to see Walter because he has seen all our parents since we left. Now let's go downstairs and tell cousin Adair."

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But the girls lingered a little while longer, talking and planning. "It must have been fate that kept us there," Laura laughed afterwards, for one of the very nicest things of all their trip happened just before they departed.

It was Nan who heard it first, that faint far-away sound of the strumming of a guitar. "Sh! Quiet!" she broke in on the hubbub in the room. "What's that I hear?" They all listened for a second.

"Oh, nothing." Laura waved the question aside, "and do you think we can get Mr. MacKenzie to go with us again on a mule ride over the estate?" she went on with the planning of entertainment for the boys.

"It is too something," Nan insisted, for she heard again the sound of music. "Listen!"

"Oh, Nan, you're hearing things," Laura perhaps was more impatient than any of the others, for she was intrigued with the idea of asking Adair to get on a mule again, and she wanted to talk about it.

"She isn't either." Bess heard the strains now. "I hear something too."

"Come—oh, look!" Nan was at a balcony window beckoning the others eagerly. They all clustered round her, and there in the moonlit courtyard below them Walter and his friends were serenading the girls. When they all appeared, the music grew louder, stronger, and the boys harmonized their voices as they sang for the second time,

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“Soft o’er the fountain,
Ling’ring falls the southern moon;
Far o’er the mountain,
Breaks the day too soon!

In thy dark eyes’ splendor,
Where the warm light loves to dwell,
Weary looks, yet tender,
Speak their fond fare-well.
Nita! Juanita!—”

As they swung into the chorus, the girls, laughing but enjoying it all thoroughly, pulled flowers that they had picked that day from the garden from their dresses and threw them down. The chorus ended, and the girls clapped. The boys laughed up at them, and others in the courtyard who had been attracted by the music called for more.

It was all very gay and happy. The boys did sing an encore, and then as Alice and Adair came out on the veranda they broke off, and Walter went up the steps and introduced himself and his friends. The girls came down and they all had a merry evening together, talking over the million and one things that had been happening.

It was not until the afternoon of the next day, that Nan and Walter had a moment alone together. Then she told him the story of her missing ring.

“Then the cook didn’t actually tell you that he took it?” Walter asked at the end.

“No, but he implied it,” Nan answered, “and I’m as sure he did as I am certain that he is not to be blamed.”

Walter couldn’t restrain the smile that came at this. Nan always trusted people, always felt that there was good in everyone. This was one of the things that first attracted Walter to her. Somehow, she, unlike many others her own age, never found enjoyment in criticising others. She seemed to understand their faults and to be able to explain them sympathetically no matter what they were. Now, in talking of the man whom she felt sure had stolen her ring, she honestly believed that, in doing so, he had been influenced by conditions over which he had no control. She felt sorry for him, and didn’t want to do him any injury. This was one of the big reasons why she had pledged Walker Jamieson to secrecy.

“And what does Mr. MacKenzie think of all of this?” Walter asked just before Nan left him to dress for dinner.

“Oh, he doesn’t know anything about it at all,” Nan hastened to explain, “and I don’t want you to say a thing. This is all a secret until—until—until—”

“Until what?” Walter looked at the young girl curiously, as she stopped midway in her sentence.

“Until it’s solved,” Nan smiled at her friend, and then refused to explain further.

“Nancy Sherwood,” Walter spoke seriously now, “if you’re not careful, you’re going to get yourself all involved in a plot that might hurt you. Come, be sensible for once. Either forget the ring entirely, or tell your cousin all that you know about it. Promise?”

Nan shook her head. She couldn’t tell Walter that she and Walker had already made certain promises about the ring and the Chinaman’s part in its disappearance. She couldn’t tell him that the reporter sensed a big story and asked her to protect the details until he had arrived at a solution. She couldn’t tell him, but she wanted to.

Now it was Grace who saved what otherwise might have been an embarrassing situation. She came out into the corner of the patio where Nan and Walter were standing.

“Nan,” she asked, “did you know that Walker Jamieson left the hacienda early this afternoon and that he took his bags with him?”

“Left the hacienda!” Nan exclaimed, “are you sure, Grace?”

“As sure as I am of anything,” Grace replied, “and if you don’t believe me you can either wait to see if he appears at dinner, or you can go in right now and ask Bess.”

CHAPTER XXVII

WALKER DEPARTS

However, it was Bess who sought Nan out, and that before Grace had barely had time to finish divulging her bit of news.

"What did I tell you?" Bess greeted Nan as soon as she could find her.

"What do you mean?" Nan retorted.

"I mean that talk we had some time ago up in your room."

"What talk?" Nan pretended to have forgotten.

"You know as well as I," Bess responded impatiently. "I mean that talk about Walker and Alice. It was nice, but it's all over now."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Walker talked to your cousin sometime yesterday, that your cousin was simply furious, and that Walker Jamieson has left, never to return!"

"Oh, Bess, don't get romantic about it," Nan said abruptly. "Now get your breath and tell me actually what you know."

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"I have," Bess insisted. "Walker wanted to marry Alice and Adair MacKenzie said 'no!' Walker left without saying goodbye to anyone and nobody knows when he is going to return if at all. Alice has gone to her room, and everybody in the house is all broken up, except the old housekeeper. All she does is shake her head and say 'You just wait. This will all be all right in the end. Young people are too hasty.'

"Imagine that!" Bess ran on indignantly. "She says young people are too hasty, when all the trouble here is caused by Mr. MacKenzie and he certainly isn't young!"

"Elizabeth Harley, you be careful!" Nan warned her friend. "You don't know for sure whether what you are saying is true or not. You'll have everybody in trouble if you don't watch out."

"But Nan, I could just cry," Bess protested. "He is such a nice person and so is she. And now it's all spoiled."

"Hush, Bess," Nan spoke more softly now. Then she looked over at Walter as though begging him to leave them for a few moments which he did.

"Now, see here," she spoke sternly to Bess when he disappeared. "If there is anything at all in what you say, and I doubt it, there is nothing in the world to be gained by crying and talking and interfering."

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"I'm not interfering!" Bess was indignant.

"Well, then talking about it," Nan corrected herself. "We can't do anything about it except sit around and wait. I don't believe that Walker has gone away for the reason you say he has at all, and if he has, he'll be back."

"Well, if he hasn't gone away for that reason, why has he gone at all?" Bess demanded.

"You can't tell," Nan answered lamely. Why was it, she thought, that she was forever running into the secret that she had promised Walker she would keep. She had done the same thing ten minutes ago with Walter. Now she was doing it with her best friend. "You've just got to wait and find out," she added.

"Come on, Bess," she made a decided effort to change the subject, "let's go in and get the camera. I want to take some pictures of the boys. Anyway we are neglecting them by staying out here like this."

"Neglecting them!" Bess exclaimed. "They've done nothing all day but sit around and loaf. They're a lazy bunch, and we all had such high hopes." She let her sentence die away tragically.

"Why," she wrinkled up her nose at Nan, as she spoke, "are boys in general so dumb? Oh, Walter's all right, but all the rest are just like bumps on a log."

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"No, they aren't," Nan denied. "Don't you remember last night when they were all out there below our balconies? You didn't think they were bumps on a log then, did you?"

Bess shook her head and her eyes shone. "No, that was grand," she said. "But today, they just don't do anything."

"Maybe they think that we're neglecting them?" Nan suggested.

"Well, let them," Bess flounced away from Nan and into the house.

Nan looked bewilderedly after her. "What can be wrong with Bess," she asked herself and then did go after her camera. If Bess didn't want any pictures of the visitors, she did.

A few hours later, after an afternoon siesta and a long cool refreshing drink of fruit juices beneath the palms of the courtyard, everyone felt better. Alice's eyes were red and swollen with crying, but she made an appearance. Adair MacKenzie was even more terse than usual, but he was kinder too. And Bess who had but three hours before found the boys so disagreeable now was surrounded by them. She was telling them in low tones of the donkey episode of the day

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before.

It was all very cheerful and pleasant despite the emptiness that was felt because of Walker's absence. However, no one mentioned his name. In fact, he might have remained away from the hacienda, away from Alice, indefinitely, if it hadn't been for Adair himself, Adair and Nan.

"Well, well, girls, how do you like your new home now?" Adair MacKenzie was feeling somewhat talkative after his long refreshing drink of loganberry juice. "A pretty nice place, isn't it?" He looked about himself with a satisfied sort of appreciation. Adair MacKenzie for all of his Scotch blood and his leanings toward economy really liked the good things of life. This southern home pleased him.

"It's grand, Cousin Adair," Nan answered for them all. "Perfectly grand. There's only one thing that's lacking."

"And that?"

"We're missing Rhoda. She was so excited about the plans to come down here that she could hardly contain herself, and now we won't see her all summer. We won't see her until we get back to school in the fall."

"Who said you wouldn't?" Adair asked suddenly. "Don't jump to conclusions like that. Just to show you how wrong you are—you're leaving tomorrow morning by plane to visit with this Hammond girl over the week end, and then if it's at all possible, she is to come back with you to stay here for a week or two. Now, how's that?"

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CHAPTER XXVIII

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NAN'S BIG ADVENTURE

Nan couldn't answer for a moment, then unexpectedly, even to herself, she threw her arms around Adair MacKenzie's neck and kissed him.

"Tut! Tut!" he straightened his necktie and adjusted the soft white collar of his shirt after her hug. "Can't stand for this. What's the matter? Aren't you pleased?"

"Oh, dear!" Nan's face was flushed and her eyes bright as she answered. "There was never in all this wide world a nicer cousin than you are being to me."

"Wait a second," Adair was immensely pleased at this outburst. "What will these young men all think of you? Want to make them jealous of an old codger like me? Better watch out."

Nan looked at the boys sitting around the ground and in the big comfortable chairs and blushed furiously. She had completely forgotten, at the announcement of her proposed journey that anyone else was present beside the girls whom she knew so well.

But her embarrassment couldn't last long in the face of the excitement.

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Nan was going for Rhoda! Nan was going by plane to get Rhoda and bring her back. Nan was going to start the next morning and by Monday she would be back, having flown half the length of Mexico to the border and then from there to Rose Ranch.

It was exciting to think of, but then a thousand, a million times more exciting in reality, for all sorts of unexpected things were to come about as the result of that ride.

Now, Nan could scarcely contain herself as she sat in the group and listened to the little everyday things they were talking about. The only thing that really penetrated her consciousness was the fact that she was leaving and that when she returned Walter and his friends would have left.

Adair brought this fact to life. In his free open, hospitable style, he tried to induce the youngsters to linger. He liked them, liked the excitement they had caused, for in spite of Bess's complaint to Nan that they were a dull lot, they kept things moving from the moment they serenaded their hostesses until they left.

Through the days there had been hikes, parties, a visit into the interior by auto, and an excursion to a small village where the Indians were celebrating a native holiday. They had seen them dressed in native dress, dancing native dances with all the abandon of a people freed from the daily routine, and they had witnessed one of their elaborate religious rites in which the ritual of the church and the ritual of pagan ancestors who had worshipped the Sun God were mingled with one another to result in a queer worship that was unlike anything any place else in the world.

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Then they all went to a moving picture show where Roberta Taylor, the pretty little American

actress whom everybody adored spoke in Spanish. How queer that seemed! They had all seen the film—it was an old one—in a theatre in Chicago, but how different it seemed now with all the conversation translated into Spanish. They giggled when the heroine looked up at her tall American hero and murmured “Señor, Señor,” and when he greeted her with “Buenos Días” and other common Spanish phrases. It was all very charming and amusing and everyone had a grand time.

But now Nan was going to leave and the boys were going to leave. The evening, in spite of the excitement about Nan’s proposed journey, turned a little sad when they all gathered around Walter and his guitar to sing as they had each night since he arrived. The songs they sang were all sad little songs.

By next morning all this was forgotten. The girls were all thrilled over Rhoda’s coming. They had telegraphed to tell her what was happening and she had wired back that her mother was well enough now so that she could carry out the plans that Adair MacKenzie had made with such enjoyment, for he did enjoy doing things for other people. He liked being Santa Claus the year round. [217]

So, by ten o’clock the next day a whole caravan drew up to the airport and Walter, his friends, Bess, Laura, Grace, Amelia, Adair and Alice saw Nan off. How exciting it was, getting the ticket, standing by while the plane’s motors were warmed up, and then, when the passengers started to get in, taking pictures of the plane, of the people around it, and of the crew.

Finally, she was off and Nan was soaring over the heads of all her friends. She looked out the window and waved a big white handkerchief, but already she seemed part of the clouds and those below, waving too, couldn’t see her.

How much fun it was climbing, climbing, climbing. Nan wasn’t worried at all. She looked out. Around her were clouds and beneath her the mountains of Mexico were stretched out. She was higher than the mountains! Her spirits soared with the thought and she looked around at her fellow passengers, two men who were in earnest conversation, a woman with a small child beside her, and another man who seemed to be alone. [218]

None of them looked particularly interesting and Nan returned to her watching of the landscape, so when, after they had traveled for some time, there was a commotion up in the pilot’s cabin and the one traveler who seemed alone stood up and quietly ordered everyone to put his hands up, Nan was taken completely by surprise.

“Hands up, there, you!” The remark was addressed to Nan when she failed to comply with the first request. She put her hands up. The woman with the baby screamed. The baby cried. Nan put her hands down and moved to help the two.

“Put your hands up there!” the order came again in good American diction. Nan did. The voice meant business.

Now the plane began to rock. It slowed down some and glided down a hill of air to taxi across a field in a place far removed from civilization.

Now, for the first time, Nan was really frightened. Somehow, up in the air, she hadn’t been very scared. It had all happened too suddenly. Now, with her feet on the ground, however, she felt as though she was going to faint. She clenched her fists at her side, gritted her teeth, and stood waiting for the next move.

It came, quickly. Everyone was ordered to surrender his pass to cross the border, told to remove his luggage, and then together, they were hurried over the rough ground to a cabin and locked in. [219]

Shortly, they heard the motors of the great plane again and then the drone as it swung around over head and went off in the direction it was headed for before anything happened—the United States.

The passengers, they were only Nan and the woman with the baby—the men had all been involved in the plot—looked at one another in consternation. What had happened? Were they being kidnapped and why? How long would they be left in this deserted spot?

They tried the doors and the windows. Someone outside yelled a warning to them. They paced the floor and the baby cried a pathetic little cry. They tried to help it, but still it cried, a baffled little cry.

CHAPTER XXIX

HAPPILY EVER AFTER!

“Passenger plane X 52 headed toward the border missing. Nan Sherwood—”

Walker Jamieson in a newspaper office in Mexico City got no further as the news came over the wire. He grabbed a phone, asked for long distance, and called the hacienda.

Yes, they had received the news. No, they didn't know anything beyond what Walker did. Nan was traveling alone. Walker breathed a deep sigh of relief at this. He had been afraid that Alice was with her.

It was all a complete mystery. Couldn't Walker do something? This plea came from Alice herself and it wrung his heart.

“I'll try.” These were the words with which he hung up and somehow they comforted the young woman on the phone. She turned to her father and said simply, “It was Walker. He'll help.”

And Walker did. While government planes swooped back and forth again and again across the country looking for a wrecked plane, Walker was busy working out his own theories. [221]

“I tell you,” he was calling his New York editor, “there's a whale of a good story here, one that's bigger than anyone has guessed. This is no mere plane accident.

“How do I know? Oh, just smart that way. Can't tell you more now. Want to go through with it? It will cost plenty of dough. Need a plane and a couple of darn good pilots.

“Sky's the limit, you say? Okey-doke.” With this he slammed the receiver down and was off.

He went to the United States Embassy, called the hacienda again, hired a plane and zoomed off in the direction X52 was headed for when it disappeared.

For hours he and his pilot combed the district and found nothing that satisfied Walker. Then, along about nightfall a lone shack in a deserted district attracted his attention. The plane dropped down.

Nan heard it, from her shack prison she heard it and thought that it was the X52 returning. While she waited, she didn't know what she wanted the more—to have the plane come or have it stay away. If it stayed away, she thought, that somehow, some way they could get out of the cabin, but to what end she couldn't imagine. In the meantime, she was concerned over the child and the fear that it would starve. [222]

She waited tensely as the motor died, as she heard footsteps approaching the cabin.

A voice called.

Where had she heard it before? Could it possibly be—Walker! Was she dreaming? She heard it again. This time she answered and a great flood of relief came over her. It was he! She ran to the door and shook it, although she had done it a dozen times before during the day and nothing had happened. Because Walker was here now, because there was someone out there that she knew, she felt that almost anything might come true. She pushed and shouted and beat upon the door.

Walker called to her again. This time she answered. His relief was as great as hers. She was alive. His hunch was right! He too beat upon the door with all his strength, pulled and pushed, but to no avail. Then he and the pilots got a beam and rammed it into the unresisting blockade. After what seemed hours, the door moved on its hinges, then gave way and Walker found Nan, the pluckiest little girl in the world he said later, unharmed by her experience.

“But Mr. Jamieson,” Nan questioned him as the plane he had brought took to the air with the pilots and the other prisoners, the woman and child, “how did you guess what had happened?” [223]

He didn't hear her at first. He was already busy planning the release on the tale he had pieced together.

The lead—“Plucky Nan Sherwood Found Alive in Deserted Shack in Wilderness. Gang of smugglers exposed in daring attempt to take plane load of Chinese across the border.”

Sounded good, he was thinking, but they really hadn't been exposed as yet. He knew how they worked, but he didn't know who they were. He turned now to Nan to see if he could find a clue.

“What did the men who imprisoned you look like?” he questioned her.

Nan described them briefly.

“Did you hear or see anyone besides the people you saw in the plane?” he questioned.

Nan hadn't, but as he talked she had an inspiration. “Oh, I know, maybe I can help you!” she exclaimed. Then she told him of the pictures she had snapped before boarding the transport.

The rest of the plane ride was a dash toward a place where the pictures could be developed. One by one they were brought forth from the developing fluid, until it seemed as though the inspiration had not been such a fortunate one after all. But Walker didn't give up. It was the last one that brought the desired results.

“Why, I know that man.” Walker Jamieson summoned forth from his long experience as a newspaperman, the recollection of a story about an aviator who had been discharged from the airplane mail service because of irregularities. Here was a picture of the man. [224]

Nan took it up and studied it. "Why, I know him too!" she exclaimed.

"Of course you do," Walker agreed. "He was one of the men who held up the plane, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and not only that," Nan now divulged a surprising bit of information, "he was present at the bull fight in Mexico City a few days ago."

"What do you mean?" Walker looked at her intently.

"He was there with a former schoolmate, a Linda Riggs, and he was introduced to Cousin Adair by her."

"His name?"

Nan searched back in her memory before she answered. "Arthur—"

"Howard?" Walker supplied the name.

"That's right." Nan was smiling now, thinking of Bess's glee when she found out what a position Linda would be in when this story came out.

"So, you perhaps can even locate him," Walker looked at the amazing youngster beside him.

"Linda is staying—oh, I don't know." Nan looked disappointed as she remembered that they hadn't exchanged addresses with the girl. But it didn't matter, before the night was over, Linda Riggs, thoroughly frightened because she had unwittingly entertained and been entertained by an international crook, revealed all she knew about his whereabouts. And before the morning run of the great metropolitan daily that Walker was associated with had gone to press, the story was completed.

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Arthur Howard using visitors' passes stolen at the border and altered to suit his needs passed back and forth freely between the United States and Mexico. He was engaged in smuggling Chinese across and in this particularly daring attempt to finish up a big job had, after he held up the plane on which Nan had been a passenger, loaded it heavily with men who had paid high prices to make the trip.

The Chinese cook at the hacienda had been involved because he had paid a high price to try to get a relative of his across. The ring stolen from Nan was his last desperate effort to finish his payments, payments which had been draining all of his resources for months and had taken all of his life's savings. This was the part of his story that he had told Nan after she had won his confidence.

Needless to say, Arthur Howard and his gang were rounded up by a group of United States G-men and he received a long prison sentence after a startling trial.

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But to Nan and her friends at the hacienda, the most important result of the whole complicated affair was a certain wedding.

"Your cousin just couldn't be mean after Walker found you," Bess hugged Nan in her excitement. "And there is to be that wedding that we talked about, and you are going to be maid of honor and we're all going to be bridesmaids. It will be in the garden and there will be lots of guests from all over the country and maybe Walter will be back here. Oh, Nan, I'm so excited!"

"And that isn't the half of it," Nan finished. "Cousin Adair has given this place to Walker and Alice and he's settled a large sum of money on them and he's inviting Momsey and Papa down for the wedding. Oh, Bess, and Rhoda's going to come too, but not by plane," she added. "Everything is just perfectly grand!"

So, let's leave Nan Sherwood and her friends to a happy, happy time, to finish out a summer in Mexico that was more exciting than they ever imagined a summer could possibly be.

Transcriber's Notes

Obvious printer's errors were silently corrected. Otherwise spelling, hyphenation, interpunction and syntax of the original have been preserved.

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