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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND ***



They could all see the deep scratches on the shell.

BY

GRACE BROOKS HILL

Author of "The Corner House Girls," "The Corner House
Girls Among the Gypsies," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
THELMA GOOCH



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BOOKS FOR GIRLS

The Corner House Girls Series
By Grace Brooks Hill

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AMONG THE GYPSIES
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND

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The Corner House Girls on Palm Island

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND

CHAPTER I—"I HEAR A NOISE"

"I hear a noise," declared Dot, holding her Alice-doll more firmly and staring all about into the aisles of the chestnut grove.

"What kind of noise?" asked Tess, mildly curious.

"Where does the sound come from?" demanded Agnes in her abrupt way, but very carefully picking brown chestnuts out of a prickly burr—and with gloves on one may be sure. Catch Agnes Kenway, the "beauty sister," ever doing anything to spoil her hands!

"Say! Is this a game? Like 'cum-je-cum'?" grumbled Sammy Pinkney, who did not wear gloves and therefore had already got plenty of "prickers" in his stubbed fingers, although the nutting party had not been in the grove half an hour. "I'll bite. How big is the noise?"

"Well," said Dot seriously, and answering Sammy's query first, "it is not a big noise at all. I just manage to hear it. And it's gone now."

"It can't be a wolf, or anything like that," said the eminently practical Tess, whose proper name, Theresa, was seldom heard save from the lips of her Aunt Sarah Maltby.

"O-oo!" squealed Dot, squeezing her Alice-doll harder. "Don't, Tess! A wolf!"

"There'd be some fun in that," declared Sammy, inspired instantly to romantic imagination. "We'd have to hitch up the horses again, and take to the sledge, and flee——"

"There are no horses, and it's our automobile," interrupted Tess, with disdain.

"Aw—you!" gruffly exclaimed Sammy. "Can't you play this is the Russian steppes?"

"What's Russian steps, Sammy? Aren't they like American steps?" asked Dot, who had a bump of inquisitiveness second to none. "I know what Russian sables are, and a Russian samovar, for Ruth has one, an awful ugly thing. And Russian car—caviar. Little black seeds that come in a can and you eat 'em—if you are Russian. But I'm not Russian and I don't like 'em."

"That steppes means plains, I guess. Anyway, they are like the western prairies, and there are wolves on 'em. And when they chase you they are faster than the horses can run."

"But our automobile would beat 'em," announced Tess confidently. "Neale O'Neil would drive it so fast that no wolf could catch us, Dot."

"But we're not in the automobile now," said the littlest Corner House girl who, if the truth were known, loved to be thrilled.

"Sure not. We're in a Russian sledge," declared Sammy, his own excitement feeding on his vivid imagination. "And here come the wolves!"

"O-oo!" shrieked Dot. "Where?"

Sammy pointed dramatically into the deeper woods; but just where he pointed at that moment

Neale O'Neil appeared with a heavy sack on his shoulder.

"That's no wolf," sighed Dot, disappointed. "It's only Neale."

"Well, it might have been a pack of wolves with a leader with slaving tongue."

"Er—what's *that?*" demanded the littlest girl, hearing another new word. "What do they do to 'slaver'?"

"I—I—Oh, well, what does it matter? Wolves' tongues always do that," rejoined the small boy in some disgust. "Anyway, here they come!"

Dot murmured an appreciative and tremulous "o-oo!"

"We got to whip up the horses like mad!" cried Sammy, beating a fallen log with the stick he had used to search the fallen leaves for chestnuts. "See 'em come! They'll get us—"

"Oh, Sammy," cried Dot all in a quiver, "don't let 'em *quite* get us."

"Only one way to save our lives!" gasped the almost breathless Sammy, glaring all about him.

"How? How?" cried Dot, in pretended alarm.

Tess Kenway remained rather unmoved by all this. She was getting older, and the stimulant of Sammy's eager imagination had small effect upon her mind. Besides, she took the attitude of her eldest sister, Ruth, that most boys were a trial.

"You're mussing that fresh dress of your Alice-doll, grabbing her that way," Tess said reprovingly to Dot.

But Dot was still enthralled. She saw the flying sledge and the leaping wolves, and she hugged Alice tighter than ever.

"O-oo!" she moaned.

"Only one way to save our lives!" repeated Sammy, beating off imaginary wolves over the back of the imaginary sledge. "Give me that baby!"

"Wha-a-at?" shrieked Dot, in real alarm now, her voice mounting to a higher pitch. "My Alice-doll?"

"Only way to stop the wolves! They always throw the children to them so the men and women can escape!" declared Sammy, with as much confidence as though he believed that in Russia children were born and bred for that purpose, and no other.

"Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Tess, herself disturbed now by Dot's agony.

"You want to be eat up by the wolves?" demanded the panting Sammy, glaring at Dot and reaching forth one hand to seize the Alice-doll while he beat at the phantom wolves with the other. "Give her here!"

"I shan't either!" declared Dot, recovering herself in some degree. "Sammy Pinkney! You always get up just the meanest plays—so there! I'd be eaten up by the wolves myself first, before I'd give 'em my Alice-doll!"

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy. "That's just like a girl. Spoil everything every time and everywhere! Let the old wolves eat you, then! I don't care," and he shuffled away through the brown and gold leaves to uncover more shiny, brown nuts.

Agnes and Neale, who had looked on in some amazement, burst into laughter.

"Such young ones!" murmured the beauty sister.

"Can you beat 'em?" demanded Neale, who was about her own age and Agnes' closest and dearest friend, bar none. "Where are Ruth and Luke?"

"I saw them wandering off through the woods," replied Agnes, chuckling. "His hand was in her'n and her hand was in his'n—"

"You be good!" exclaimed Neale, grinning. "Dear me! They are getting soft on each other, aren't they?"

"Well," said Agnes, more kindly, "I can't blame Ruth. She was awfully worried about him there in the summer when he was hurt, and was ill so long. She can't forget that she pretty nearly lost him."

"Luke's a good scout," agreed Neale. "But," and his eyes twinkled, "you wouldn't let me hold your hand that way, and moon about with you."

"I believe in one form of holding hands only," declared Agnes sagely.

"What's that?" he asked quickly.

"At the manicure's. And, dear me, after this rough work my hands will need just that treatment," sighed the girl.

"And you with gloves on! Say, Aggie, you are getting too finicky for words."

Promptly she stuck out the tip of her tongue at him. Agnes Kenway was not wholly past the hoydenish stage, in spite of her grown-up airs.

Suddenly Dot broke into the talk again with a repeated statement:

"I hear a noise."

"There you go again!" exclaimed Sammy. "Is it a game?"

"Oh, dear me!" cried Tess suddenly, "I hear it, too. I guess it's no game. It's somebody calling."

"Calling the cows, maybe," said Agnes carelessly.

"Calling the sheep," joined in Neale O'Neil.

"No," said Dot soberly, "It's calling humans. It said 'Help!' and they don't call cows or sheep that way."

"Right for you, Dotums!" agreed Agnes.

"Wait," advised Neale. "All keep still and listen. Of course it isn't Ruth and Luke? They wouldn't get so far away——"

"Listen!" broke in Agnes warningly.

They all heard it that time—a cry of faint voices, and certainly the only word distinguishable was "help."

"What can it be?" demanded Agnes.

"Like to know what they want us to help 'em about," said Sammy. "Maybe it's some fun."

"Fun!" repeated Tess scathingly, looking at him.

Just then Ruth, the eldest sister of the four Corner House girls, and Luke Shepard, the young collegian, appeared walking hastily toward the place where the party had been gathering nuts.

"They are all right, Luke!" was Ruth's first exclamation.

"I told you so, Miss Fussbudget," he laughed. "Did you hear somebody shouting, Neale?"

"Yes, for help. What do you suppose it is?"

"We'd better go to see," Ruth said confidently.

She, too, was a pretty girl; but she did not have Agnes' vivid coloring or volatile manner. Ruth Kenway was graceful, rather mature in figure and manner, and with the kindest smile in the world. Having had to mother her younger sisters when she was so young, the girl had acquired this matronly appearance, although she was still in her teens.

"Say!" broke in Sammy, who, from natural obstinacy, opposed almost everything he did not himself suggest, "let 'em come and ask us to help. Maybe somebody will steal our nuts while we're gone. Or the auto."

"Can't steal the machine," said Neale. "It's locked and the key is in my pocket."

"Come on," Luke remarked. "I feel with Ruth that we ought to look into this. It is easy for something to happen in the woods."

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy. "What could happen in this chestnut wood except getting pricklers into your hands? Huh!"

"You stay here and keep watch, Sammy," Agnes advised.

But that would not have suited Sammy in any case. If there was a chance of something happening, he wanted to be on the spot. So he went along with the Kenway girls and the two young fellows who accompanied them.

The faint calling was repeated and became plainer as the party went forward. It was evident they had started in the right direction. The cries grew nearer and nearer.

"They are children lost in the wood!" exclaimed Ruth, with confidence, hurrying forward.

"The poor children!" said Tess thoughtfully.

Suddenly, through a break in the thicker wood, they saw three little figures. They were two girls and a boy, and the oldest was not more than Tess' age, if as much. They screamed again when they saw the Kenway party, and began to run to meet them.

"Oh, oh!" screamed one. "Daddy's hurt! He's killed! Come help him!"

"Where is he?" Ruth demanded.

"How is he hurt?" asked Luke, quite as practical.

The oldest child answered Luke's question first. "He fell out of a tree. He was shaking down chestnuts to us. And we can't wake him up."

The older members of the Kenway party looked at each other seriously. It might be, as this little girl intimated, that her father had been killed in falling from the tree.

The four orphaned Kenway sisters lived in Bloomsburg when they were first introduced in the initial volume of this series, called "The Corner House Girls." Ruth, the eldest, had been doing her best for months to mother her sisters and to take care in addition of Aunt Sarah Maltby, who really was a trial.

At a time when Ruth scarcely knew which way to turn for money to support the family, Mr. Howbridge, a lawyer of Milton, appeared with really wonderful tidings. A distant relative of the Kenways, Uncle Peter Stower, had died and left the four Kenway girls all his property. This included the Stower homestead in Milton, known far and wide as the old Corner House.

Mr. Howbridge was appointed guardian of the girls, as well as executor of the Stower Estate, and Ruth, Agnes, Tess and Dot went to Milton, taking Aunt Sarah with them, and began what proved to be a most interesting and exciting existence in the old Corner House—and elsewhere.

How they made the most delightful friends and had the most wonderful adventures is told in the succeeding volumes of the series, and include experiences at school, tenting on the seashore, taking part in a school play, finding a very odd treasure, the discovery of which aided very needy people, adventures on a delightful motor tour. It was in the seventh volume, "The Corner House Girls Growing Up," that it seemed as though Ruth, who had then left school, had actually met the young man fated to be her partner in life when they both should grow older. Luke Shepard and his sister, Cecile, became as close friends of the Kenways as Neale O'Neil had previously become.

The eighth book of the series, "The Corner House Girls Snowbound," told of exciting adventures in a winter camp in the Great Woods, and related the recovery of the Birdsall twins who had run away from Mr. Howbridge's guardianship because they had got an entirely wrong impression of what a guardian was. At the time of this present nutting expedition, the Birdsalls were both at boarding-school and had learned to love Mr. Howbridge very much indeed, finding him, as the Kenways had, a delightful mentor and friend.

The ninth volume of the series related the story of the girls' experiences on a houseboat, as well as introducing Neale O'Neil's father who was long supposed to have lost his life in Alaska. The excitement of these incidents was scarcely over when Tess and Dot and Sammy Pinkney managed to get mixed up with a certain gypsy tribe; so the volume immediately preceding this present story, entitled "The Corner House Girls Among the Gypsies," had in it quite as much fun and as many thrills as any of the previous volumes.

Fall had come since then, and school had opened for all but Ruth. This was on a certain Saturday after the frosts had opened the chestnut burrs, and Luke Shepard had come from college to spend the week-end at the Corner House. A nutting expedition was suggested over night, and early on this morning Neale O'Neil, who still acted as the Kenways' chauffeur, had got out the touring car and had driven the party of young folks to the only chestnut wood left standing, because of the blight, in the vicinity of Milton. Sammy Pinkney had, as usual, attached himself to the party, for he had the nature of a barnacle.

The scene just enacted, and the conversation of the seven members of the nutting party, should serve to introduce them to those new readers who have not previously become acquainted with the Corner House girls and their closer comrades. It was Ruth, of course, who took the lead when the three strange children made their announcement of the disaster that had happened in the woods.

"Where is your father lying?" she asked the spokesman of the trio.

"Over there," said the girl, pointing rather vaguely, it must be confessed.

"Who is with him?" again questioned Ruth.

"Oh! He's all alone. He was getting nuts for us. And when he fell and we couldn't wake him up, we all ran away."

"We—we were going home to tell mamma," sobbed the smaller girl.

"We don't know where she is," said the boy, who was staring at Sammy Pinkney.

"Don't you know where your mother is?" cried Agnes. "Fancy!"

"She's at home," said the first speaker.

"But we don't know where home is," declared the boy.

"I declare! You are lost!" said Agnes.

"What is your name?" Ruth asked of the older of the three.

"Pendleton. I'm Margy Ortwell, and my sister is Carrie Purvis, and my brother is Reginald Shotford Pendleton."

"Huh!" grumbled the boy, "and they call me 'Reggy' and I hate it."

"Make 'em call you 'Shot,'" suggested Sammy promptly. "That's a dandy name. Sounds like you belonged out West—or—or was one of those moving-picture fellows. Yep; Shot Pendleton sounds good to me."

Neale O'Neil shouted with laughter, and Luke grinned broadly. But this was no time for laughter in the opinion of the older girls. That man might really be dead.

"Come! Lead us back to where your father has fallen," said Ruth urgently, to Margy Pendleton.

The little girl turned rather waveringly and started off through the thicker wood. But her brother cried:

"Hey! Where you going, Marge? That ain't the way we came."

"Yes, 'tis, Reggy."

"Aw, call me Shot. This fellow is right," said Reginald, nodding at Sammy. "And, anyway, that isn't the way to where daddy is."

"Don't you youngsters know how you came to this place?" asked Luke Shepard.

"Oh! You are really lost, are you?" Agnes repeated.

"How can we be lost when we are with you folks?" asked the boy.

"Can't beat that for logic," muttered the collegian. But like the other older ones he was troubled. "Go ahead and let's see how we come out."

The wood grew thicker as they progressed, and it was hard on the little folk. It was Ruth who called a halt.

"It cannot be that they came this way, Luke," she said. "They could not have got through these briars."

"If they did," muttered Neale O'Neil, "they left no trail behind them."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" sobbed little Carrie Pendleton. "Then we've lost daddy and we'll never find him again!"

"Of course we'll find him, child," cried Agnes soothingly, "only not in this direction."

"But—but where shall we look?" murmured Ruth.

"Mamma will scold us dreadfully if we come home without daddy," sobbed Margy.

Luke and Neale, as well as Ruth and Agnes, had become much troubled. It was evident that the Pendleton children had been so startled by their father's fall and subsequently so frightened by his being unconscious, perhaps dead, that they knew very little of the course they had taken through the woods. They had run, crying and shouting, without any regard as to paths or directions. And now to locate the place where the accident had occurred was going to be difficult.

"What shall we do, Luke?" demanded Ruth of the young collegian.

But it was Agnes, with her complete trust in Neale, who hit upon the more direct scheme to solve the problem. She exclaimed:

"Neale O'Neil! You're so awfully smart, why don't you find out where the poor man is? You have said there isn't a place about this part of the country that you haven't tramped through. Can't you identify the spot where these poor kiddies left their daddy?"

"Good idea, Aggie," said the boy. "Wait. Give me a chance to cross-question them. Here, little folks, don't cry any more. Stop crying and answer a few questions, and I promise to find your father."

His assurance impressed the frightened Pendletons, small as they were. Margy and Reginald ceased their tears, at least.

"I don't know where we were when it happened," said Margy doubtfully.

"Now, just wait," said Neale. "Tell me first of all where you live?"

"On Plane Street," was the prompt reply.

"Oh, I know where that is!" cried Agnes. "It's 'way out on the west side of town."

"Just leave this to me. Don't interrupt, Aggie," said her boy friend. "Now, Margy, how did you get to these woods?"

"We walked. We started right after breakfast, and we brought our lunch——"

"And we eated—eated it all up," gulped Carrie, the smallest Pendleton. "And I'm hungry," she added in a mournful tone.

"Aw, don't be a baby," grumbled her brother. "Of course you're hungry. You always are."

"Now, hold on!" urged Neale again. "You walked out to the woods. And from Plane Street? Then I guess you got into the woods about where that old quarry is, didn't you? That deep hole in the ground where it is all rocks?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Margy. "And there's a railing round it, and daddy told us not to go near, for the railing might break if we leaned on it."

"That's the place," Neale said. "Now we're getting to it. And after you got into the wood a way you saw a place where a little house had been burned down—oh! A long time ago?"

"You bet we did!" interrupted Reginald. "But I got some smut on my hands just the same," and he displayed two very grimy hands.

"Getting warmer," laughed Neale, yet he was serious the next moment. "Where did you go after you passed that burned cabin?"

"Why, we went after nuts," said Margy soberly.

Luke grinned. "That stumps you, my boy?"

"Not so's you'd notice it. I know that part of the wood. I know where the only good trees are in that direction. Now, see, Margy: Did you pass a dead tree with no leaves on it—Oh! A tall tree?"

"Yes, we did!" cried Reginald. "And we found our first nuts under it."

"Aw, shucks!" exploded Sammy Pinkney. "How'd you do that? Nuts under a dead tree? Rats!"

"I think you are the most impolite boy, Sammy," murmured Tess admonishingly.

"But we did," said Margy. "I remember."

"Of course you did," said Neale quickly. "There is a fine big chestnut tree right next to that dead oak. I remember it. When the burrs fall and the nuts scatter, of course some of them fall under the dead tree."

"I got a pocket full, so there!" said Reginald, looking hard at Sammy.

"Aw," muttered Master Pinkney, but was otherwise dumb.

"All right," Neale went on cheerfully. "We are getting on. And where did you go next?"

"Why, we went right on," said Margy. "And we put the nuts we found in a bag that daddy carried. He said maybe we'd get enough to sell some."

"But I want them to eat!" cried Carrie, who was evidently a child with an appetite not easily appeased.

"How long was it before your father climbed the tree?" was Neale's next question.

"Pretty soon after we got into the real woods," said Margy eagerly. "There was a fence there, for Daddy got a pole from it and knocked off some of the lowest burrs. Then he climbed up. And a branch broke and—and—Oh! Oh! I know he must be dreadfully hurt, for he wouldn't speak to us after he fell."

"Come on!" exclaimed Neale, starting off in a hurry. "I know just where that old fence is. All we've got to do is to find this end of it and then follow it up until we come to the place."

"The poor man!" whispered Ruth to Luke, as the party set off in the wake of Neale O'Neil and Agnes.

But Agnes said to Neale, in a very broken voice:

"Oh, Neale! Suppose he is dead? What ever shall we do?"

CHAPTER III—THE PENDLETONS' TROUBLES

They came to the fence, as Neale O'Neil had said they would, and then, after following it a little way, Margy shouted aloud and ran ahead.

"Here he is! Here is daddy!" she cried.

Her brother and sister followed closely on her heels, and the Kenway party came afterward, but almost as quickly. They saw a man lying on the ground, and at first he lay so still that the older girls and Luke and Neale did fear that Mr. Pendleton was dead.

Then——

"Oh!" gasped Agnes, with a sudden intake of breath. "His eyes are open."

"He's alive, all right," said Luke Shepard.

"Oh, Daddy! Daddy!" Margy cried, over and over.

"Margy," the man murmured, "and Carrie, and Reggy——"

"No, Daddy," said the little boy very decidedly, "I'm going to be Shot Pendleton after this. This boy says it's a better name, and I like it. 'Reggy' sounds as if I ought to have curls."

At another time Mr. Pendleton would very likely have laughed, for he was a man who had tiny, humorous lines about his eyes, and the corners of his mouth more often turned up than down. So Ruth said, at least, and she was very observant.

She went forward with Agnes and stooped over the man on the ground. Agnes clung to her sister's hand. The older boys stood back a little.

"Are you hurt?" Ruth Kenway asked softly.

"I believe I am. But I do not know how badly. I cannot move without feeling the most terrible pain in my back. I fell from that limb up there," and he pointed up into the tree under which he lay.

"I bet he's broken all his bones," stated Sammy Pinkney with much confidence.

"Oh, hush!" cried Agnes pityingly.

"Sammy Pinkney!" exclaimed Tess, "you sound as though you hoped he had."

"Well, folks do break their bones falling from trees. My mother says so."

"That's to keep you from climbing them," Tess rejoined decidedly. "Of course this little girl's father isn't badly hurt."

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"Tess would make the best of any catastrophe," chuckled Luke. "Let's see if we can lift him, Neale."

"Wait!" commanded Ruth. "Can you bear to stay as you are for a while?" she asked Mr. Pendleton.

"If I lie still—don't try to move—I seem to be all right," he said.

"Then," said the oldest Corner House girl, "you run and bring the car, Neale. Get it in here just as close as you can. Then when you and Luke lift him you will not have so far to carry the poor man, and," she whispered the rest in Luke's ear, "if he is seriously hurt it will not rack him so badly."

"Thoughtful girl," said Luke proudly. "Go ahead, Neale."

"I'll bring the car around to this other road. It is not far out to the quarry. And maybe I can drive in to the burned cabin. There used to be a road to it."

He started on the run as soon as he had spoken. The others gathered around the fallen man. Dot hugged up her Alice-doll, and remarked:

"I'm glad he isn't dead. I don't think I should like dead folks. And isn't it lucky Sammy's wolves didn't find him here while his children were hunting for us?"

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Carrie, the smallest Pendleton, gasped a horrified "Oh!" Then she asked: "Are there wolves in the chestnut woods—like the wolf in 'Little Red Riding Hood'?"

"The wolves are in Sammy's mind," said Agnes cheerfully. "And wolves in your mind never bite."

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy, "how do you know there aren't really, truly wolves here?"

"You never saw any, Sammy Pinkney!" exclaimed Tess.

"Well, I never looked for any," he declared.

"Anyway," said Dot with determination, "they shan't have my Alice-doll. I won't save our lives by throwing her to 'em, so there."

"There aren't wolves here, are there, Daddy?" asked Margy Pendleton of the injured man.

"I don't expect ever to see any," he said faintly. "I—I don't know what your mother will say to this, Reginald—"

"I'm not Reginald," exclaimed the little boy anxiously. "Do call me Shot. Please, Daddy!"

This time his father managed to call up a smile. "All right, my boy. As you had nothing to do with choosing your name, I don't know but you should be allowed to use it as you see fit. Your great-uncle, Silas Shotford, was a very good man. Oh!"

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"Does it hurt you, Mr. Pendleton?" asked Ruth at this point. "Are you in pain? Can we help you?"

"I am afraid there is nothing you can help me about, Miss," said the man. "If I move that arm it seems to send a shock through my nerves. This is going to be awful," he murmured, "if I am made helpless."

"What is your business, Mr. Pendleton?" asked the collegian bluntly. "If you are laid up will it matter seriously in your domestic affairs?"

"I tell you right now, young man," said Mr. Pendleton more vigorously, "that nothing could be worse than this accident, it seems to me. Oh! nothing could be worse."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," Luke rejoined, but cheerfully. Ruth gave him an illuminating look. "You know, Mr. Pendleton, this is a time when friends come mighty handy to a man—"

The man's face fell. He shook his head despondently.

"I've got very few friends just now, and no work at all. I—I was discharged from my last position two months ago and have been unable to find anything to do at all. I tell you frankly that I am in the worst possible shape to endure a sick spell."

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"Don't feel downhearted, Mr. Pendleton," Ruth said quickly. "Perhaps you will not be laid up long after all. And when you are well I am sure we can find something to do. My name is Kenway. I live with my sisters in the old Corner House."

"I know you do, Miss," said Mr. Pendleton. "I have seen you girls before. But I doubt if you could find me work."

"Oh, yes, we can," she said. "Or, at least, our guardian can. Mr. Howbridge, the lawyer, is our guardian."

The man again shook his head, and his brow was furrowed.

"You can't help me in that way, Miss Kenway," he said. "And I doubt if your guardian would let you."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Ruth.

He looked about quickly. His three children were with Tess and Dot and Sammy, a little distance away. The look in his eyes now was one of mental pain, not physical.

"No, Miss Kenway. I will be frank with you. I was discharged from Kolbeck and Roods because goods were lost from the storeroom—stolen. They accused me. And although they could not prove it, neither can I disprove it. Nobody else in Milton will give me work."

"Oh, Mr. Pendleton!" cried tender-hearted Ruth, "isn't that too bad? But of course Mr. Howbridge will find something for you to do just the same, and as soon as you get well."

"Why didn't you go away from Milton and get work where folks didn't know about this trouble?" asked Luke bluntly.

"You see, we partly own the home we live in on Plane Street," explained the man, with a groan, as he moved restlessly. "Ah! That hurts. I've done something to my back, I fear. And my poor wife

"Well, it's that way. We were paying for our home on the installment plan. If we move away we shall lose all we have put into it, for we could not sell our equity at this time. Real estate sales are at a low ebb, you know. I don't know what to do."

"I think those folks who say you stole are real mean!" cried Agnes warmly.

"Thank you," returned Mr. Pendleton. "I know that no Pendleton was ever a thief. But there are things about the robbery that look bad for me. I admit that. But when they turned me out without waiting to see if the real thief would not be found, I think they did treat me pretty mean."

"I'll say they did!" exclaimed Luke.

They heard then the horn of the Kenway car, and a minute or two later Neale came hurrying through the woods.

"It's only a little way to the burned cabin," he said. "I've turned the car around, and if we can lift him easily I am sure the car won't jounce very much getting back to the main road. Come on, Luke."

"Do be careful, Neale!" begged Agnes.

"You girls take the little folks on ahead," advised Luke. "Then Neale and I will bring Mr. Pendleton."

The boys waited until the others were gone before touching the injured man. The latter muttered:

"I am afraid something is broken. I don't know how much handling I can stand. Ah! This is awful!"

And it was true that when Luke and Neale raised him from the ground the poor man screamed aloud and instantly fainted.

The injured man remained unconscious until the boys got him into the automobile. The Kenway car was a big, seven-passenger machine. But when the whole party was in it, it certainly was crowded.

Luke held the sinking form of Mr. Pendleton upright against the cushions. He was glad the man was unconscious. The older girls tried to hush the weeping Pendleton children. The three other little folks were in front with Neale O'Neil, and even Sammy Pinkney was subdued.

Neale drove the car as carefully as possible, and in half an hour it stopped before the little cottage on Plane Street. There was a telephone next door, and before even the older boys carried the injured man into the house, Ruth had called their family physician, Dr. Forsyth.

"And remember, Doctor," the girl said firmly, "whatever the bill is, it is a Kenway bill. You understand?"

"I understand that Ruth Kenway is up to one of her usual blessed tricks," rejoined the doctor over the wire. "I will be right over."

Neale drove Luke and the little folks home, while Ruth and Agnes remained with the frightened Mrs. Pendleton until Dr. Forsyth arrived and had made his examination. He soon had Mr. Pendleton much more comfortable both in mind and body.

"Nothing broken," the physician said comfortingly. "Your back is strained and you've got to lie quiet. But we'll have you up in a couple of weeks, Mr. Pendleton."

He could see, as well as the girls, that the little family were in straitened circumstances. He gave Mrs. Pendleton a warm handclasp as he left and said:

"I will come in once in a while to see how he does. But do not let my coming worry you, Mrs. Pendleton. I understand your circumstances, and you tell your husband that he can be of easy mind. If there should be anything due for my services, its payment has already been arranged for."

"Those blessed Kenway girls!" exclaimed Mrs. Pendleton. "I don't know how I can ever thank them."

Ruth, and her three sisters as well, loved to play "Lady Bountiful." Having been placed for a time in close financial straits themselves, the older girls at least well understood the plight of those unfortunate people whom they met who were short of funds.

The condition of the Pendletons' exchequer was a source of worry to Ruth especially. She had ways of helping the children and Mrs. Pendleton which were not too obvious; but how to aid the man of the family when he could once more get about was a question not so easily answered.

She saw Mr. Howbridge one day in his office and put the matter up to her guardian with her usual practical sense.

"Mr. Oscar Pendleton does not impress me at all as a man who would commit a crime. I do not see how he came to be accused by his employers. There is either something very much the matter with the judgment of the members of that firm, Kolbeck and Roods, or there is something so queer in the affair that it needs expert looking into."

41

"You think he could not have been tempted to steal, Ruth?" asked Mr. Howbridge, giving her trouble the attention that it deserved, for he knew well her sound sense.

"A man with a nice wife and three such cute kiddies? Impossible!"

"If he needed more money than he was making?"

"I have asked Mrs. Pendleton for the particulars—as she knows them. The goods stolen could not have been sold under cover for more than a thousand dollars. And Mr. Pendleton was earning a fair salary and they were getting on well, and paying for their home. He would be crazy to do such a thing for a mere thousand dollars."

"That sounds reasonable," replied the lawyer. "I tell you what I will do, Ruth. I'll have one of my clerks look up the case and get all the particulars. Perhaps something can be done to explain the matter and relieve Oscar Pendleton of the onus of this charge."

"That is my good guardian!" cried Ruth. "You are a regular fairy godmother. You——"

She suddenly stopped to cough a little. Mr. Howbridge frowned.

42

"What does Dr. Forsyth mean by letting you get such a cold on your chest?" the lawyer demanded. "I thought I paid him to keep you Corner House girls in good health."

"Chinese style?" laughed Ruth. "Well, his system has slipped a cog somehow, Guardy, for both Agnes and I have colds."

The colds did not enter into the consideration of the two older Kenway sisters when it came to the night of Carrie Poole's big party. The Pooles, who lived in a big house out on the Buckshot Road, always gave several very enjoyable entertainments during the winter season. The date of the first one of this season was close at hand, and Ruth and Agnes had insisted on having new frocks for the occasion.

That brought Miss Ann Titus into the old Corner House for several days; for after all, nobody could quite cut and fit a party dress like the gossipy spinster whom Tess had once called "such a fluid talker." It was from the birdlike Miss Titus and her rather tart tongue that the Corner House girls learned of another slant in the Pendleton matter.

"Yes, I got plenty of work, the goodness' knows," Miss Titus observed in response to a query from Aunt Sarah Maltby, in whose room the seamstress always worked when she was at the Corner House. "I was that glad when Mrs. Pendleton said she couldn't have me this fall as usual, that I didn't know what to do. It give me a chance to take on other folks that could afford to pay better," and Miss Titus sniffed.

43

"Oh!" exclaimed Agnes who chanced to be present, "you know Mrs. Pendleton, then? You know her husband was hurt, of course?"

"I know they say he was hurt," responded the sharp-tongued woman promptly. "But as to that ——"

"We know he was hurt, Miss Titus," interposed Ruth, smiling. "For we found him after he fell in the woods and we took him home in our car."

"Do tell!"

"And we think the Pendletons are very nice people, if unfortunate," added Ruth, thinking it better to warn the seamstress against going too far. Ruth abhorred ill-natured gossip, and Miss Titus was inclined to repeat the bitter dregs of neighborhood news.

"Well, handsome is as handsome does," said Miss Titus, with a toss of her head. "I must say I think Mrs. Pendleton is a nice woman, and her children are as well behaved as any. But that man ——"

44

"You mean Mr. Pendleton," said Ruth gravely. "We know all about his trouble."

"And I think it is a shame that Kolbeck and Roods should have made such an accusation against him," cried Agnes.

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed the seamstress. "You have gone off the handle just the same as usual,

Aggie Kenway. The man certainly stole those goods.”

“Never!” murmured Ruth, almost in horror.

“Yes, he did. I know Mrs. Kolbeck. She told me all about it. Her own son—you know she’s Mr. Kolbeck’s second wife and her name was Stumpf before she married Kolbeck. Well, Israel Stumpf, Mrs. Kolbeck’s own son, told her there wasn’t a doubt but that Pendleton—perhaps with somebody to help him—stole those bolts of silk and satin and sold them down to New York.”

“Oh, I can’t believe it!” murmured Ruth.

“It’s a story, I don’t care what they say,” said Agnes hotly. Agnes could never be anything but partisan. She was always much in favor or much against everybody whom she knew.

“Well, Israel Stumpf works right there in the wholesale house, and he ought to know all about it,” declared Miss Titus, nodding emphatically. 45

“Why ought he to know, Miss Titus?” asked Dot, who proved on this occasion to be “a little pitcher with big ears.”

“Because he worked right there with Pendleton.”

“Would that make him know everything about it?” Dot pursued, with her usual insistence.

“Of course,” was the thoughtless reply.

“Then why didn’t he see Carrie Pendleton’s father do it—do whatever he says he did?”

“Good gracious alive!” ejaculated Miss Titus. “Was there ever such a child for asking questions? I should think your jaws ’ud ache trying to find out things.”

“They don’t,” said Dot, rather hurt.

“And I should think,” went on the seamstress, “that you had asked so many questions that there wasn’t another thing in this world for you to learn. Is there anything that you really don’t know, that you’d like to have me tell you, Dorothy Kenway?”

Dot brightened tremendously. She became quite eager.

“Oh, yes, Miss Titus! There’s one thing that’s been bothering me for a long time and nobody—nobody can’t seem to tell me.” 46

“Tell Miss Titus, honey,” said the woman, who really loved the little girl, after all. “Maybe I can give you the answer.”

“Well, then,” said Dot, coming nearer to lean against the woman’s knee, “tell me, will you please, why it is little fishes don’t drown before they grow up and learn to swim?”

It was quite evident that the story of Mr. Pendleton’s misfortune was spreading all through certain strata of Milton society. Although Ruth was sorry for this fact, she could only hope that Mr. Howbridge’s clerk could uproot some information regarding the robbery of the Kolbeck and Roods warehouse that would explain away the suspicion attached to the unfortunate man.

For neither she nor Agnes, nor Neale nor Luke, believed that a man like Oscar Pendleton could be guilty of robbery. And while the injured man was confined to the house the Kenways and Neale showed in every way they could their friendliness for the Pendletons. Of course, Luke Shepard had gone back to college and could have no part in what the others tried to do for the unfortunate family. 47

All their thought was not given to this matter, however. That dance at Carrie Poole’s loomed, before Agnes at least, as one of the most important things that had ever entered into her life. Even Ruth put special importance upon the affair, and that for more than one reason.

The Pooles had engaged a string band from the city, a decorator from the same big town, and a famous caterer. There would be invited guests from Washington, including members of some of the foreign embassies and their wives and daughters. For Carrie Poole’s father during the last eighteen months had served the district in Washington as representative; and the family was, as Agnes said, “cutting a wide swath.”

“But ’tis borne on my mind,” Mrs. McCall, the Corner House housekeeper declared, “that them’s not fittin’ frocks for a pair o’ young leddies to wear on a cold winter night. Hech! They are like gossamer, so they are.”

“Now, dear Mrs. Mac!” cried Agnes, “don’t carp and criticize. Aren’t they pretty?” and she pirouetted before the good matron to display her own new dress.

“Pretty enough for the stage. But nae sensible,” sniffed the housekeeper. “I’m astonished at Ruth, so I am.” 48

“Now, don’t!” gasped Agnes. “Don’t criticize Ruth when for once in her life she is thinking more of her good looks than of her good sense.”

“Ye’ve said muckle when ye say that,” sniffed Mrs. MacCall. “There is nae guid sense in it. And both of ye hoarse as crows with a cold.”

“Am not!” denied Agnes hastily.

She was hoarse, however, as was Ruth. Somehow, the colds the two girls had caught in some

mysterious way, continued to cling to them. Agnes was so afraid that her older, and usually so much more sensible sister, would at the last moment refuse to go to the party that she did not know what to do. She confessed this to Neale O'Neil.

"If you ask me," said the boy with more gravity than he usually displayed, "I think you'd both be sensible if you cut the party. I hate to hear you hacking around like a dull meat-ax, Aggie."

"How horrid!" she cried.

He grinned ruefully. "It threatens a bad night. I'll make you as warm as I can in the car. But it isn't like a limousine."

"Oh, dear," sighed Agnes, the young elegant. "I think we should have a closed car for winter. If Ruth would only speak to Mr. Howbridge about it——"

49

When the evening drew in and the time arrived for them to start for the Poole house, Neale O'Neil brought the car to the side door. Ruth and Agnes appeared, bundled in their furs, but of course, and especially on Agnes' part, with a plentiful display of the thinnest of silk hose above dancing pumps.

"Whew!" whistled Neale, holding open the tonneau door for the sisters. "The foolish virgins certainly are in evidence to-night. It's going to snow and hail and sleet and everything else mean, before we get home."

"See that you put in the tire chains then, Neale," was all that Ruth vouchsafed him.

Perhaps, already, she was secretly admitting the folly of this venture.

CHAPTER V—SOMEBODY PAYS THE FIDDLER

50

If Neale O'Neil was not a good prophet, he certainly was a sure prophet, and Agnes Kenway admitted it. When the time came to leave the Poole party it did everything that the young fellow had said it would. It was as nasty and as cold a night as the two sisters ever remembered being out in.

Worst of all, in spite of the antiskid chains that Neale had spent a good hour from the party in adjusting to the rear wheels, something else went wrong, as he expressed it, and for fifteen long minutes they were stalled on the wind-swept Buckshot Road.

The icy fingers of that wind, if not the snow and sleet itself, sought the girls out, through every cranny of the automobile top. Ruth murmured an admission that her sister was right. They should have a closed car for winter.

By and by, when Neale managed to coax the engine to start again, the girls were clinging together for warmth and their teeth were chattering. Neale insisted on putting his robe about them in addition to their own, and drove barelapped himself for the rest of the journey.

51

Mrs. MacCall never went to bed when any of the flock were out in the evening, especially on a stormy night. On this night, Linda, the Finnish girl, had fallen out of her chair asleep before the kitchen stove and had been driven up to her room in a sleep-walking trance by the good housekeeper two hours before the arrival of Ruth and Agnes.

Tom Jonah, the faithful old watch dog, rose yawning from his place behind the stove as the girls stumbled into the kitchen. He went out with Neale to see if it really was as bad a night as it sounded.

"Ye puir bairns!" gasped Mrs. MacCall when she saw them. "Ye're blue with the cold and perished of the snaw. Hech! Hech! What will Mr. Howbridge say to this, I want to know?"

"You ask him, Mrs. Mac," faintly said the younger girl. "Oh!" and she began to cough.

"Hot drinks, Mrs. Mac, please," said Ruth, trying to speak cheerfully. "I fear we have been very foolish. I fear we have."

For once Mrs. MacCall did not scold when chances had been taken with her charges' health. In fact the housekeeper considered the matter too serious. When she had hurried the sisters up to their rooms, she proceeded to telephone to Dr. Forsyth.

52

Dr. Forsyth had more than a practitioner's interest in the Corner House girls. He had been treating Ruth and Agnes for their colds already. And when he heard over the telephone that they had been out into the country on this terrible night, he declared his intention of coming right over.

Dr. Forsyth had only turned away from his telephone, shivering a little in his bathrobe at the prospect of venturing out into the snow squalls, when he heard a dog barking at his door and an automobile horn tooting at the gate. He hurried to peer through the glass beside the door, and there saw the big head of Tom Jonah poked right against the glass.

"I'll be right out, Neale!" shouted the doctor, glad enough that he had not to go out to the garage and tune up his own cold motor.

Neale had had the same thought Mrs. MacCall had. He knew that Agnes, whom he loved so dearly and with reason, and Ruth were both in need of immediate attention by the medical man. Dr. Forsyth got out as soon as he could, and Neale drove him back to the Corner House and waited there to take him home again.

53

When the doctor arrived the girls were in their beds. Agnes was already in a fitful sleep; but Ruth lay with wide-open eyes, burning up with fever, with her usual domestic anxieties riding her like a nightmare.

"Be sure and see that Tess wears her high shoes if she goes to school to-day, Mrs. Mac," she murmured to the housekeeper. "Those others that she likes so, leak in the snow and slush. And Dot's new gloves are in my sewing basket. I had been tightening the buttons."

"Hold on!" commanded Dr. Forsyth. "Let's pay a little attention to Ruth instead of Tess and Dot. How do you feel, my dear?"

"Like a Baltimore heater, thank you, Doctor," Ruth replied, in a saner tone. "Have I been very crazy?"

"Very. Especially when you went to that party last evening," declared the medical man. "Now be quiet—limbs and tongue! I've got to look you over pretty thoroughly."

"If there's any—anything fun—funda—any fun, doctor, I want to be in it!"

She really meant to say "fundamentally wrong" and that she wanted to know what it was; but in truth Ruth Kenway was light-headed, and it was some hours before she became her usually sane self. Agnes was not so seriously ill, but she was threatened, as Ruth was, with complications which might have resulted in the dreaded pneumonia.

54

"And I don't want them to get the flu, either," growled Dr. Forsyth. "That's going around, too. Now, no school, remember, for the little ones! Nor are they to leave the warm rooms of the house—no playing in that ghost-haunted garret." That referred to an old joke that had haunted the four Corner House girls when first they had come to live in Milton. "And keep them away from the sick ones. We do not know what may develop."

"Oh, goodness gracious!" gasped Agnes, who chanced to hear this. "You don't mean to say I've got anything catching, Dr. Forsyth?"

"It wouldn't surprise me, Miss Flyabout," he declared grimly.

"Oh!" cried Agnes, and then began coughing what Neale declared to be the real 'Hark, from the tomb' cough. "Do I spray everything with microbes when I cough like that?" she panted.

"With germs, perhaps."

55

"Then give me a veil. I must strain 'em," gasped Agnes.

"Never mind straining them," chuckled Dr. Forsyth. "We'll do the straining. You don't want to keep all those squirmy germs to yourself. Cough and get rid of them."

But although he could joke with Agnes (and she would certainly have been in a very bad way if she could not joke) the physician took extra precautions that this serious cold should not spread to the other members of the Corner House household. He left medicine for all.

After Tess and Dot had taken their several doses of medicine, they did not clamor to go to school.

"I feel so mean that I guess I wouldn't be any good in school," confessed Tess, and went to lie down.

Dot struggled with her dose, and although they both felt better the next morning, she could not wholly forgive Dr. Forsyth for ordering such a bad tasting draught.

"Hullo, Dorothy!" said the doctor jovially, when he appeared on that next day to see how his more important patients were getting on. "What do you think of the medicine I gave you yesterday?"

56

"I—I don't want to—to think of it at all, sir," stammered Dot. "I'm—I'm trying to forget it!"

Like Neale and the adult members of the household, Mr. Howbridge became at once anxious about Ruth and Agnes when he heard of their illness. Even Agnes' jokes could not hide the fact that the two girls were in a serious condition.

"We lie here with only a wall separating us, barking like two strange dogs on either side of a picket fence," said the flyaway sister. "How's Ruth now? Bark, dear, and let me hear you!"

But Dr. Forsyth forbade much conversation—especially at the top of Agnes' "barking voice," as she expressed it. Mr. Howbridge said gloomily enough to the physician:

"I am really worried about those girls. I thought they were enough of a charge when I first assumed responsibility to the Court for them. But now I am afraid that I may lose them."

"Nothing like that! Nothing like that!" exclaimed Dr. Forsyth. "But I won't say that conditions are not serious. They may be housebound for a good part of the winter."

"You don't say! And just when I was considering very seriously getting into a more cheerful climate, myself, for January and February. You know, I begin to feel those two months in my bones, Doctor."

57

"Ha!" exclaimed Dr. Forsyth with interest. "Going South, are you?"

"Say 'were you?'" grumbled the lawyer.

"Oh, you can safely go when January comes," said the physician cheerfully. "The girls will be in shape to travel by New Year's, if there is no set-back."

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Howbridge, his eyes opening.

"You did not consider going without the girls, did you?"

"I certainly wasn't considering going with them!" exclaimed the lawyer.

"Why not?"

"Ahem? And why?"

Dr. Forsyth burst into laughter. "It will be a breath of new life to Ruth and Agnes; and of course they could not be contented without Tess and Dot along."

"Wait! Don't say it all so fast," groaned Mr. Howbridge. "I have only just got rid of those twins. Hedden and I have scarcely got our breaths. And to travel with those four girls—"

"You won't mind it," chuckled Dr. Forsyth. "You know you won't."

"But how about Hedden? I believe he will give me notice."

However, the idea went with the lawyer, and stayed with him. The holidays were approaching. Although the two older Corner House girls got out of their beds and were supposed to be convalescent, they were weak. They just lay around the house and were willing to be waited upon. But Ruth did not forget the Pendletons and was glad that Mr. Howbridge found work for the man who had been injured.

Neale played games or read aloud with Agnes by the hour. Sandyface, the old cat, came dragging in her newest litter of kittens—all four of them—and bedded them down in Ruth's sewing basket at that invalid's feet.

"Aye," declared Mrs. MacCall one day, standing to look from one sister to the other, "it's somebody must always pay the fiddler. This time you two lassies be payin' tae the full!"

CHAPTER VI—SAMMY PINKNEY'S DEVOTION

Of course Tess and Dot Kenway had gone back to school after a few days. But while they were housed up Sammy Pinkney learned something. He scoffed at girls as playfellows quite openly when he was in the company of the smaller Corner House girls, but in secret he missed their companionship sorely.

Living as he did, just catercornered across Willow Street from the side door of the old Corner House, Sammy had been the most familiar playfellow of Tess and Dot since they had come to Milton. Sammy's affairs had always entertained the Corner House family—even his attempts to run away to be a pirate.

Whatever Tess and Dot did, Sammy had a share in. During the brief time when they were kept indoors because Ruth and Agnes were so ill, Sammy concluded that he ought to do something big for the little girls on the coming holiday.

"I got to give something nice to Tess and Dot," he told his mother and father. "They have done a lot of things for me, haven't they?"

"They are very good friends of yours," agreed his father.

"You could not have nicer playmates," said Mrs. Pinkney with satisfaction. "What do you want to give Tess and Dot?"

"I don't know yet," answered Sammy thoughtfully. "I want it to be something they'll remember me by after I get so big that I won't want to play with girls any more."

"Why, Sammy!" exclaimed his mother, "I hope that day will never come."

"Huh!" growled her young son. "It's bad for boys to play with girls all the time. Makes 'em sissies."

Mrs. Pinkney was troubled; but her husband laughed loudly.

"Let me pick out something sweet for the little girls, Sammy," said his mother, with a sigh.

"What do you mean, Mom? Candy?" asked Sammy suspiciously. "They always have candy."

"No, no. I mean something pretty—for them to wear or look at."

"Huh!" was the doubtful response. "They don't need any clothes. Do you mean pictures? For they've got a lot of them. Their playroom walls are covered with 'em. Pictures printed on the wall-paper. Don't see much good in that myself."

Again Mr. Pinkney expressed his amusement. His wife, who was wholly without a sense of humor or fun, frowned at her husband's openly expressed amusement. Moreover, she wished that

Sammy was less boisterous. And she blamed Mr. Pinkney for encouraging Sammy's ruder tastes.

"He is getting old enough now to appreciate better things," she said in private to Mr. Pinkney. "See how nice it is of him to think of giving the little girls a nice present. I wonder what he will decide upon."

"You leave it to Sammy," chuckled her husband. "He'll think of something that will surprise them—and probably surprise you, too."

"I hope it will be nice."

"Remember," said the man in warning, "that it was Sammy who gave Tess and Dot that goat, Billy Bumps. It's been a cross to the rest of the Corner House crowd, I have no doubt."

"Oh, dear! Don't suggest such a thing!" gasped Mrs. Pinkney.

Meanwhile the suggestion Dr. Forsyth had made to Mr. Howbridge regarding a winter trip South for the Corner House girls, bore fruit. The lawyer had business at St. Sergius, the capital of one of the island colonies in the Caribbean Sea. St. Sergius was a commercial port of some importance, and the business that called Mr. Howbridge there was of moment.

He had intended to remain at a hotel there for some weeks, and had even written for hotel booklets and the like. Now he proposed to make the trip a real outing, and he broached the matter to Ruth.

"Oh, Guardy!" she sighed, "that sounds fine," and she began, Mrs. MacCall said, "to perk up immediately." Heretofore she had shown little power of recovery from her illness—not as much as Agnes showed. Now she became almost as enthusiastic as her livelier sister over the proposed journey into warmer climes.

Of course she wrote at once to Luke about it and from him received the most amazing reply, worded about like this:

"Tell it not in Gath—nor in Pawtucket! I've been as worried as a ball of knitting-wool in the claws of a six-weeks'-old kitten! I had a chance offered me, and I didn't know what to do about it. Believe me, the wind is tempered to the lawn sham! Professor Keeps, who is a good friend of mine, is going to spend some weeks in the Caribbean, starting soon after New Year's, and he offered me the chance to go along—and get a salary for so doing! Think of it! Luke Shepard is to be assistant to a grave professor who is curious about the botany of those tropic isles.

"I am going to tell him now that I am his for keeps! Pardon the pun. I will be there with bells on, Ruthie. You can't lose me. Maybe we can sail in the same boat for St. Sergius. Tell Mr. Howbridge to try to make the *Horridole* of the Black Pennant Line. She is some boat. I am coming down to see you before the start. Package of remembrances starts with this letter for Christmas. Hang 'em on the tree. I forbid your peeping into yours, Ruthie, until Christmas morning."

Naturally this news could not be hidden. All the household at once knew that Luke Shepard would be able to spend some of the time, at least, with the party which was to go to St. Sergius.

By this time, too, Tess and Dot, knowing that they were to be included in the party, were telling everybody they met of the good times in store for them.

"Huh! You'd better stay home," said Sammy Pinkney disappointedly, for he knew that this was a party which he could have no part in. "There'll be more going on here than down there in the West Indies. You wait and see!"

"But they won't be the same things," declared Tess. "We know all about the things that happen in Milton in winter."

"You don't know everything," said the boy, wagging his head.

"What's going to happen here, Sammy?" cried Dot. "Oh! Do tell us."

"You're going to get a present."

"We always get presents," said Tess.

"What sort of present?" demanded Dot. "Something for my Alice-doll?"

"It's going to be a great one!" said Sammy. "I'm going to give it to you. Mike Donlan—Well, never mind! You're going to be surprised."

"I like to be surprised," confessed Dot.

"You will be," said Sammy, nodding vigorously.

"Well, we are not going until after Christmas," said Tess, with sudden memory. "So it will be all right."

"But if I give you this present you ought to stay home and look out for it," declared their boy friend.

"It must be alive," said Tess thoughtfully.

At that, Sammy, much afraid that he might "give it away," departed in haste. He could not be confident of his own ability to dodge any cross-examination of Tess Kenway's.

Christmas Eve came at last. For the first time she could remember Ruth went to bed without putting the last touches to the Christmas tree in the big dining-room. But she really was not equal to it. So Mrs. MacCall did all that, aided by Linda and old Uncle Rufus.

As usual the toys and games for the little folks were numberless. And nobody was forgotten. Sammy Pinkney, however, had come to Uncle Rufus early in the evening and begged him to leave the side door of the Corner House unlocked when the family had got through dressing the tree.

"What yo' got in your haid, boy?" Uncle Rufus demanded.

"Tain't in my head. It's in our woodshed," confessed Sammy. "But don't you tell nobody, Uncle Rufus."

"I can't tell what I don't know," admitted the old colored man, who always entered into the spirit of the children's plays.

"It's going to be a surprise for everybody," declared Sammy. "You leave the door unlocked, Uncle Rufus, and you'll all know what it is in the morning."

And it certainly was a surprise! Sammy Pinkney was famous for surprising people.

Everybody had at last gone to bed in the big house—Linda and Uncle Rufus on the third floor, and Mrs. McCall and the rest of the family in their several rooms on the second. Midnight had some time passed when everybody was awakened—but that gradually—by a tintinnabulation of silvery bells.

"What is it?" gasped Dot, from her little bed, to Tess, in hers. It was a wonder that the littlest Corner House girl woke up at all, for she was usually a very sound sleeper. But her head was full of Santa Claus on this night. "Is that reindeer bells, Tess?" she demanded.

"Then they are inside the house, and I don't believe they could come down our chimney, big as it is," declared Tess.

"Sammy Pinkney came down it once—you remember?"

"But he doesn't ring like bells," was the very practical reply.

Even Aunt Sarah Maltby heard the bells. She poked her head out of her room door in her nightcap and demanded:

"What's all that? Those are the bells on the Christmas tree. What does it mean, Mrs. MacCall?"

The housekeeper was already up. She came out into the hall and sent the little folks back to bed.

"Whatever it is, human or sperrit, I'll be goin' by myself tae see," she declared. "The night before Christmas is no time for you bairns to be out of your beds."

"Do you s'pose it is Saint Nick?" asked Dot, in an awed tone.

"It may be," said the housekeeper, descending the front stairs. "And if it is, he doesn't want to see you. Go back to bed as I tell ye."

CHAPTER VII—INTO TROPIC CLIMES

The tinkle of the bells on the Christmas tree was silvery in tone, and there was nothing about the sound to frighten even Dot. But it was mysterious, and Mrs. MacCall approached the door of the dining-room with some hesitation.

She had only recently left the room with the arrangements completed for Christmas morning when the youngsters should first run down to look at the present-laden tree, and exclaim in "Ohs!" and "Ahs!" at the sight.

She could imagine nothing that would cause the tree to sway and thus make the silvery bells tinkle. There was no window open which would create a draft and so wag the branches back and forth. What could be the cause of the bells' ringing?

She turned the knob of the door and pushed it open a tiny bit. There was no light in the room, although the tree was strung with electric bulbs of rainbow hues. Instead of an open fireplace now, as there once had been, there was a gas log under the old mantelpiece. But this was turned off. The steam-heating plant in the cellar warmed the house sufficiently and the logs were used only in the fall and spring before and after Uncle Rufus and Neale started the heater.

Mrs. MacCall's finger searched for the button on the wall just inside the door which would light all the lamps in the room. And just then she heard a muffled thumping sound, and the bells all rang again!

"Slosh!" ejaculated the housekeeper. "'Tis ghosties, sure enough!"

She did not mean that, of course. She was just puzzled. But she knew, in spite of the darkness, that there was something moving under the Christmas tree where the rug had been turned back for the framework, which held the tree, to stand.

"Who is it?" demanded Aunt Sarah from above.

"I'm nae so sure 'tis not Sammy Pinkney," grumbled the housekeeper. "He's always up to something. To be sure! I was right," she added, for now she had pressed the electric light button and the whole room was ablaze with light.

The thing under the tree jumped again and the bells once more jingled. The housekeeper stepped forward in wonder. Was it another big cat? Or—or—

"For the land's sake!" gasped Mrs. MacCall. "I knew I was right. Nobody but that dratted Sammy would have brought in a rabbit and tied it to that tree. And there's a Christmas card tied to the creature's neck."

She had to laugh, however. It was not a cat, but a big Belgian hare—the biggest Mike Donlan had in his pen. And the price of it had simply wiped out Sammy's bank account!

He had scrawled on a mistletoe bepictured card the following:

"Fore Tes and Dot, from there fathefull frend S. P."

Mrs. MacCall had not the heart to say anything about it when she went upstairs again, after having confined the Belgian hare in the sink closet in the kitchen, out of which he was not likely to gnaw his way before morning. The "Christmas bells" had ceased ringing, and so the two little girls went back to sleep without learning of their unexpected present until the proper time.

But a lot of fun was had over that gift of Sammy's. Neale and Uncle Rufus made a proper pen for the Belgian hare in one end of the goat shed where Billy Bumps chewed his cud in lonely glory.

"Billy won't eat him up, and maybe the two will become good friends," said Neale.

"What won't that boy think of next?" gasped Agnes, weak from laughter.

What Mrs. Pinkney said about it when she learned the nature of her son's "nice present" to Tess and Dot, was plenty! And how Sammy's father laughed!

"I can't understand," said the worried Mrs. Pinkney, "how that boy comes to do such ridiculous things. I know I never had such ideas when I was a child and I don't believe you did."

"No, I never did," her husband chuckled. "I own up that Sammy has inventive traits—and others—that he does not come by, by heredity."

"Say, Mom!" said Sammy thoughtfully.

"What is it, you strange boy?" sighed his mother.

"Didn't you have a chance to see me before I was born?"

"Goodness! No," gasped Mrs. Pinkney.

"Then I guess you must have 'bought a pig in a poke' and that's something Mrs. MacCall says is awful silly to do. You ought to have been more careful when you was picking out a boy to last."

Of course, Christmas was a great day in and about the old Corner House. Although the older girls could not, as usual, visit their tenants in a poor part of the town and take them presents, Neale drove the little girls over there in the automobile and Mrs. Kranz, the "delicatessen lady," and the girls' very good friend, undertook to distribute the gifts to the needy.

Uncle Rufus's daughter, Petunia Blossom, and her large family, came in for a generous share of the good will that spilled out of the Corner House.

Neale O'Neil's good friend, Mr. Con Murphy, the cobbler, with whom the boy still lived, was not forgotten, and included in his list of presents was a fine green ribbon which Neale soberly produced and proceeded to tie around the fat neck of the perennial pig that occupied a clean sty in Mr. Murphy's back yard. For the old cobbler was always very fond of "the gentleman that pays the rint," which was his name for the pig.

Agnes tried to be as merry as her condition would allow. And on Christmas afternoon her school friends came in, and they had a little party.

"Aggie is managing to inject considerable pep into these proceedings, in spite of her lack of strength," Neale remarked to Ruth.

The news that the Corner House girls were going South for two months or so, was now general knowledge; so the young folks when they departed bade the Kenways good-by. It was positive that Agnes' face grew longer and longer during this proceeding, and when they had all gone she suddenly looked at Neale, gulped, grabbed him by both shoulders and shook him a bit, sobbing:

"You horrid boy! How can you be so cheerful, Neale O'Neil, when I'm go-going so—so far away?"

"Crackey, Aggie!" he exclaimed, "I thought you wanted to go!"

"I—I do! But Ruth is going to have Luke along, while you—you—"

"Hold on, Aggie! Don't turn on the sprinkler," he begged. "I'd thought of that. You bet I have been thinking about it every minute. And—and—Oh, you wait!"

He dashed away, and she did not see him again during Christmas day. But Mr. Howbridge was surprised to receive a visit from Neale O'Neil, whose affairs were in his care while Mr. O'Neil was in Alaska.

"What's the matter now, Neale?" asked the old bachelor guardian. "What's gone wrong?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing yet, I mean. But something is bound to go wrong if you and those girls go off to the West Indies without making a provision that you have not thought of."

"Yes? Is that so? I thought I had arranged for almost everything. Will you please tell me what you have discovered missing in the arrangements Hedden and I have made?" and the lawyer smiled grimly.

"First of all, I want you to look at that report, Mr. Howbridge," said Neale respectfully, handing Mr. Howbridge a report from the principal of his school.

"Humph! Yes! I had already observed it. And I must say, Neale, that your standing does you credit."

"Thank you, sir," the young fellow said, glowing at this praise. "And I am away ahead in my classes. I can keep up all right if I chance to be out of school for a few weeks. I can show you——"

"What's this? What's this?" demanded the lawyer.

"Yes, sir, that's just what I mean!" cried Neale O'Neil, rushing on. "I have just got to go with you all, Mr. Howbridge. I couldn't bear to be left behind. And—and Agnes couldn't bear it either."

"Ah-ha!" cried the lawyer. "Sits the wind in that quarter? Then that is the explanation of the note I got this very day from our surprising Sister Agnes."

"What's that?" demanded Neale, amazed.

"She says here," Mr. Howbridge said, reading the note which was written in Agnes' unmistakable hand, but rather shakily, "that she thinks she doesn't want to go with the party, but would rather go back to school and catch up with her class. And she needs the voyage just as much as Ruth does."

"The blessed kid!" exploded Neale O'Neil, his face very red.

"Quite so, Neale," said the lawyer soberly, and laying a hand upon the boy's sleeve. "That is exactly what our Agnes is—'a blessed kid.' Don't forget it. She is an impulsive, loving, *blessed* girl."

"Yes, sir," gulped Neale.

"Never forget it," repeated Mr. Howbridge. "But I want to tell you that I had already favorably considered taking you along. I think I can make use of you down there. Goodness! I can't be expected to look out for four girls without any help at all, can I?"

This matter being satisfactorily settled, there was nothing left to do but to pack their trunks and otherwise prepare for the voyage into tropic climes, as Agnes, having suddenly recovered all her gayety, expressed it.

The new year came in with an old-fashioned snowstorm and Agnes and Ruth began to cough again. Mr. Howbridge looked grave, but Dr. Forsyth prophesied that the coughs would wear off as soon as the afflicted girls got into the belt of steady, warm weather.

On the third of January they started. Mrs. MacCall was red-eyed and Linda was really not fit to be seen! Old Uncle Rufus was as mournful as could be, but tried to show some cheerfulness.

Sammy, having observed certain weddings in the neighborhood, tied a number of old shoes on the back of the automobile for luck and was restrained with difficulty from throwing rice all over the Corner House girls as they left home.

Mr. Howbridge had taken Luke Shepard's advice, and had booked passage on the steamship *Horridole* from the port of Boston. Luke met them with Professor Keeps and his outfit at the dock. It was a gay party indeed that went aboard and sought their reservations among the best staterooms on the boat.

"Dear me!" sighed Agnes ecstatically, and now quite her pleasure-loving self, "it is so nice to be wealthy. If we should ever be poor again, Ruth, I know I should be the hatefulest thing in skirts."

"Why, Aggie! Don't talk that way."

"It is the truth," said the flyaway sister. "Nothing poor or mean can ever satisfy me again. I sometimes think I shall have to marry a millionaire, or else I shall make my husband very miserable."

"You won't have to worry about that yet," laughed Ruth, but she flushed very prettily and looked at Luke, who was out of earshot.

CHAPTER VIII—LOTS OF FUN

There was one matter which had troubled Ruth, and her friends, as well, before they left Milton and the old Corner House. Even her illness could not entirely turn Ruth's mind from the sad case of the Pendletons.

While she had been so ill she could not visit the little family on Plane Street which seemed to

have been so sorely stricken. But she knew that Mr. Pendleton had got up and was about, after a fortnight or so, and that Mr. Howbridge had found him a job. Dr. Forsyth told Ruth that with proper care the man would suffer no serious results from his fall in the chestnut woods.

At Christmas the family, especially the three children, was lavishly remembered by the Kenways. Margaret Ortwell Pendleton did not go to the same school as Tess and Dot, so the little Corner House girls did not see much of her, but they heard about the Pendleton children—especially of “Shot” Pendleton—quite frequently through Sammy. Sammy was a rover, and he kept in touch with the acquaintances which he made to a remarkable degree.

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But it was through her guardian that Ruth Kenway learned more about Oscar Pendleton and his troubles and learned what was going on in the investigation into the robbery at the warehouse of Kolbeck & Roods. Mr. Howbridge had become interested in the case.

“My clerk has not really raked up anything satisfactory about that affair,” the lawyer reflected, as he sat with Ruth on the deck of the *Horridole* the second day out from port. “He has got Pendleton’s story from him and—my clerk, I mean—believes the man is innocent. It is not a mere opinion; he gains his judgments through logical reflection.

“But there is no evidence to the contrary that would be accepted by any court. You see, Kolbeck and Roods are not sure enough themselves to have Pendleton arrested. That makes it very bad —”

“Why, Guardy! I think that makes it very good. Consider how poor Mrs. Pendleton would feel if her husband was taken off to jail.”

“You don’t see very far, Ruth,” said the lawyer. “If he was arrested we’d bail him out, hurry the trial, and make Kolbeck and Roods try to prove their allegation. They couldn’t do so and the man would be discharged and his name practically cleared. We have no ‘Scotch verdicts’ in America.”

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“What is a Scotch verdict, Guardian?”

“It is a custom in some courts of that country, when guilt is not assured, to render a verdict of ‘not proven’; but it does not clear the victim’s reputation. It is neither guilt nor acquittal. But if Kolbeck and Roods could not bring forward convincing proof of Oscar Pendleton’s guilt, he would be acquitted.”

“Oh! And can’t your clerk dig up any facts on the other side—that Mr. Pendleton could not have committed the robbery?”

“That is the job I have left him to do,” said Mr. Howbridge. “He tells me the man who saved Pendleton from arrest in the first place is Israel Stumpf.”

“‘Israel Stumpf’? Let me see—haven’t I heard that name before?”

“Perhaps. I understand he is Mr. Kolbeck’s stepson.”

“That is it!” cried Ruth. “Miss Titus spoke of him. And—and somehow I drew from what she said that Israel Stumpf was not a friend to Mr. Pendleton.”

81

“My clerk says he is the boy who saved Pendleton from immediate arrest.”

“*Saved* him?” quoted Ruth. “Don’t you mean that he balked the intention of the firm to arrest the suspect and have the matter cleared up at once?”

“You split hairs like any lawyer,” laughed Mr. Howbridge. Yet he stared at the girl thoughtfully for a long minute. Then: “I see your point. I am going to wireless my office a message. Perhaps a closer examination into the life and works of Israel Stumpf might prove important.”

The little folks were, of course, immensely interested in the sending of that message, although they did not know its purport. Tess and Dot wandered about the decks of the steamship in their furs, Dot with the Alice-doll hugged close to her breast, and stared at everything they saw new; and, in Dot’s case at least, asked innumerable questions.

When the *Horridole* got out into the Gulf Stream where the air and sea were both warmer—much warmer than at Boston—the two little girls began to enjoy themselves enormously. They did not have to bundle up so much and the sea-air was delightful.

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Its effect upon Ruth and Agnes was equally efficacious. They soon stopped the “Hark, from the tomb a mournful sound!” as Neale had called their separate coughs. Ruth was soon able to walk about. Already Agnes, leaning on Neale’s arm at first, paced the upper deck, around and around, “to get an appetite,” she said.

“Don’t do it, Aggie,” begged Neale O’Neil, after watching her at dinner the second day. “Remember what devastation you are causing. This is a rich steamship line; but profits won’t stand many such passengers as you are proving to be.”

“I know it!” cried his friend delightedly. “One would never think I had been eating at home, but would believe I had been saving up for this occasion. Do ask the steward for some more tongue, Neale. I’m ashamed to.”

“‘Every part strengthens a part,’” said Neale, quoting Mrs. MacCall. “I don’t know about that tongue, Aggie. You weren’t behind the door when they were giving tongues out.”

“Is that so!” and she tossed her head.

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“But, still,” he added, his eyes twinkling, “this is the tongue that never gossiped, so perhaps it

won't hurt you to have a little more," and he summoned the waiter.

"I like your impudence!" Agnes exclaimed. "Do you think I am in training to occupy Miss Titus' exalted position when I get to be her age?"

"Don't know. Can't tell. You are getting kind of dried up and ancient, Aggie. I'm worried about you," teased the boy.

"I'm not worried about you," said she, tossing her head again. "I know just how you are going to turn out, Neale O'Neil."

"How?" he inquired curiously.

"Bad."

"I'm bound to be a bad man, am I?"

"You are. You are a tease, and you're careless, and you don't care what happens when you are out for fun, and you are reckless with your money, and—and——"

"So far," interposed Ruth who had heard this, and she said it rather soberly, "you have related your own shortcomings to a nicety, Agnes. There is little use in the pot calling the kettle black."

"Well! I declare! Isn't it the result of my association with this boy that my own character is so bad?" Agnes demanded.

"You are both incorrigible," declared Ruth, and thereafter paid no attention to them.

Agnes was feeling so much better by this time that she was ready for any gayety and almost any stroke of mischief. She was about with Neale O'Neil all the time; and usually the little ones were in their company. So that Mr. Howbridge had not to fret himself in the least regarding Tess and Dot.

Ruth and Luke were together most of the time, for aboard ship Professor Keeps did not need his young assistant. Ruth thought the bald-headed professor with the very pronounced near-sighted squint, rather an interesting man. He was still in the thirties; but he was so dry of speech and look that it was difficult not to think of him as much older.

He was interesting to talk with—or, rather, to listen to. Luke said what Professor Keeps did not know about botany, the flowers of the field themselves had forgotten!

"You speak almost as uproariously as Neale does," said Ruth, smiling. "I never knew you to be so hilarious before, Luke—not since I have known you."

"Why shouldn't I be light-hearted?" he returned, smiling. "This is my first regular job. Of course, I worked at that hotel for part of last summer, and so showed Neighbor that I really mean to be self-supporting just as soon as I can be. But being a hotel clerk did not rise out of my college work."

"This is something different. Neighbor is just as pleased as Cecile and Aunt Lorena. I don't suppose I shall be a professor of botany; but this experience will help, and while I am helping Professor Keeps I'll be getting full credit in my regular course. Shan't have much tutoring to do to catch up."

"It is certainly nice that you can be with us," sighed Ruth happily. "I wish Cecile might have come."

"Aunt Lorena needs her. And whisper! I believe Cecile has a new interest near home."

"No!" ejaculated Ruth, her eyes shining.

"Yes, ma'am! Cecile has a 'gemplum friend.' And he's an all right fellow—'Gene Barrows. He has a garage, and a business, and red hair. And he is going to make a good thing of all three,'" chuckled Luke.

Agnes, as she regained her strength, regained her volubility and charm as well. She was a very pretty girl, and in spite of her youth she always attracted attention from both young and old. She was especially popular with the men and boys of the passenger list.

She showed preference for none of them, however, save Neale O'Neil, yet some of the girls of her own age aboard began, before long, to consider that the blond Kenway girl gathered altogether too many of the boys about her. The boys gathered about Neale, too, but the envious ones would not see that. In fact, having set their futile traps for Neale and failed to snare him, they were all the angrier with helpless Agnes.

"Who is that girl who stares at me so hard whenever she passes, Neale?" Agnes asked languidly, as she lolled in her steamer chair on the third morning out of Boston. "Have I seen her somewhere before, or do I owe her money?"

"Hush, my child!" urged Neale, grinning. "You know not of whom you speak in so careless a manner."

"Is she somebody?" asked Agnes, with increased interest.

"She is. Her father is one of the high muck-a-mucks of the Black Pennant Line—owns oodles of stock. And she is from the coldest stratum of Back Bay society—pos-i-tive-ly."



"Who is that girl who stares at me so hard whenever she passes?", Agnes asked.

"Really, Neale?" demanded Agnes. "The real people? What's her name?"

"Nalbro Hastings."

"My goodness me! Not those Hastings?" exclaimed Agnes, but lowering her voice and sitting up to look after the girl in question.

"She is the real goods," said the slangy Neale, his eyes twinkling in amusement over Agnes' excitement. "John Y. Hastings is her male par-y-ent."

"Hush!" whispered Agnes. "She is going to turn around."

"Then I bet the earth stops whirling on its axis, and the moon follows Miss Hastings' course. She is going to play hob with the next tide."

"Do be still!" commanded Agnes, worriedly. "I had no idea she was Miss Hastings. And how I looked at her!"

Neale coughed behind his hand. "You looked at her just now as though you felt yourself to be quite as good as she is. Have you had a change of heart, Aggie?"

"Do behave!" commanded Agnes again, and now she was really angry. "I had no idea! If she gives me another chance——"

"Help! Help!" crowed Neale. "Ath-thith-tance, pleathe!"

"Now, don't be common, Neale O'Neil!" hissed Agnes angrily, prettier than usual when her cheeks flamed so.

She smiled very winningly and looked straight into Nalbro Hastings' eyes as the latter came down the deck again. The daughter of the Back Bay millionaire was not unattractive herself. And she was dressed in the very best of taste. But she was not a person to gain unbounded admiration.

She looked coolly at Agnes in return. She must have noticed the change in the Kenway girl's expression since she had passed her and Neale before. As Agnes smiled and bowed Nalbro Hastings returned the greeting with the very faintest of nods and walked on immediately as though having no desire to improve shipboard acquaintance.

Neale began to shiver and his teeth chattered. Agnes stared at him sternly.

"I believe if you would behave, Neale O'Neil, I'd get on better in the world," she sighed. "I believe you were laughing when Miss Hastings went by. Well, now, listen! I am going to get acquainted with her. Maybe she will go to the St. Sergius Arms where Mr. Howbridge has got reservations for us. It is the most fashionable hotel on the island."

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"Do I have to put on full dress for dinner at night?" demanded Neale, not at all pleased.

"You do," said Agnes wickedly. "And I shall insist upon your going to the manicure every other day."

"Ow! Ow!" groaned Neale. "Lucky I don't have to frequent the barber shop as Luke does. I suppose you would then insist upon facial massage, my lady?"

"Be still!" commanded the girl half in laughter and half serious. "I mean to become very snug with Nalbro Hastings, now you see."

"I can see you've got a crush on her," grumbled Neale, "just because you think she's of the smart set. I wish you wouldn't get these fits, Agnes. You are such a jolly good sport otherwise."

At that Agnes Kenway took real offense and would not speak to him again for half an hour.

CHAPTER IX—THE GIRL FROM THE BACK BAY

90

Neale O'Neil tried to keep his eye on Tess and Dot, as he had promised Mr. Howbridge and Ruth, and he succeeded pretty well in doing so. But the children made their own friends very soon, and when Neale saw them conversing with some of the passengers, or making inquiries of the men working about the deck, he felt sure that they really could be in no mischief.

Just what they talked about, and all the wonderful things they learned of ships and shipgoing, they found little time to tell the other girls or Neale and Luke. But from a certain deeply tanned and quizzically smiling deckhand, whom they first met polishing brasses, Tess and Dot gained a deal of what Dot insisted upon calling "inflammation" about various things.

Some of this knowledge "spilled over," as Neale said, at the cabin concert, without which no pleasant steamship voyage would be complete. Agnes saw that "Nalbro Hastings" was written at the head of the list of patronesses of this concert, and she sighed bitterly because her name or Ruth's was not there at all. The charity for which the concert was held was worthy, and Ruth said that was enough. But it was not enough for her social-striving sister.

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However, to plan for a concert and for its object was one thing; to find talent to offer a fairly interesting program, was another.

"And that stuck-up Nalbro Hastings will never get anybody to work for her in this show," declared one girl to the equally outspoken Agnes.

"Is she really stuck-up?" queried Agnes.

"When I asked her a question just now she only mumbled and turned away," declared the critical girl. "She'll spoil the whole thing."

"We won't let her," Ruth said quietly. "If they have used her name as patroness because her father is a big man, as they say he is, in the steamship company, it is not her fault. You know, she may be bashful."

"Bashful!" exclaimed Agnes.

"And you see her name in all the Boston papers," gasped the other girl. "She is just stuck-up."

Ruth had no opportunity of speaking to Miss Hastings herself. The daughter of the shipowner did not eat in the cabin with the other first-class passengers. The very fact that she had her meals served to her in her stateroom seemed to support the idea that had got about pretty generally, that Nalbro Hastings was a very snobbish girl.

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"I hope that idea will not serve to ruin the concert," Ruth said more than once.

"I don't know where she expects to find her talent," sniffed Agnes. Then, twinkling: "She hasn't asked me to sing or dance."

"I know a couple of stokers who do a regular double-shuffle," said Neale. "Caught 'em at it on one of the ventilators, below. Say! No stage dancer ever turned 'em off better."

"Stokers! Grimy coal-passers?" sniffed Agnes.

"Why wouldn't it be a good thing—and a novel thing, too—to get the talent for this concert from the steerage, stokehole, and forecastle? Usually the concert is given by the cabin passengers and the workmen aboard listen out on the edges of the crowd. Why not let the poor fellows give the concert and then everybody in the first and second cabins can be asked to pay a round sum for tickets."

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Agnes said not a word, but Neale threw up his hat.

"I'm going to ask those fellows——"

"No, no!" cried Ruth. "You have no right to do anything of the kind. The suggestion should be made to Miss Hastings."

"Well, I guess nobody will dare do that," said Agnes, and settled back into her chair with more satisfaction.

Neale went off at once, however, without saying another word to the sisters. He had noticed Nalbro Hastings leaning against the rail, forward. He marched up to her and pulled off his cap. Miss Hastings looked rather startled and Neale wondered if she was bashful, as Ruth had suggested.

"Beg pardon, Miss Hastings," said the boy, quite untroubled himself, "have you got all the talent you need for the concert?"

The young girl (she was not far from Agnes' age, after all) stared at him. Her lips moved, but at first no sound came forth. She really looked scared.

"For if you haven't," Neale O'Neil went on to say, "I've found a couple of fellows who might help out. If you are going to have sort of a vaudeville entertainment, I mean."

"Would—would that be thuitable, do you thuppoth?" lisped Nalbro Hastings. "I couldn't imagine what thort of conthert would be exthpected, don't you know."

"Oh, my aunt!" thought Neale. "She lisps. Wow!"

Aloud he said, keeping a perfectly straight face: "Who have you got already and what do they do?"

"I—I haven't done a thing," admitted Miss Hastings, in evident desperation.

"Whew!" whistled Neale.

"I—I don't know what to do," she added. "I—I can't talk to people, Mithter—er—"

"My name's Neale O'Neil. I'm with the Kenways and Mr. Howbridge."

"Oh, with that pretty, pretty Agneth Kenway?"

"Don't tell her that!" commanded Neale. "She is proud enough already. And she has a deadly crush on you, Miss Hastings."

"On me?" Miss Hastings smiled; then, as her upper lip began to lift she grew suddenly sober again. "And—and I can't talk to her—or to any one!" she groaned.

"But you are talking all right," said Neale, amazed.

"But you made me. And I have to pick my wordth. Oh! Don't you thee!" wailed the girl from the Back Bay. "My—my—oh, dear me, my teeth—"

"Lost 'em?" asked Neale, with quick sympathy. "But you can get more." Then he grinned suddenly. "Mr. Howbridge has an extra set; maybe he would lend them."

"Oh!" gasped Miss Hastings. Then she actually laughed, and in laughing she showed a little red gap in her upper front teeth.

"Don't—don't!" she begged. "I know you are funny. You have thuch good timeth with that Mith Kenway. But pleathe don't make me laugh. I had a dreadful acthident latht fall. Wath thrown from my horth in the Fenway. The dental thurgeon promithed to have the plate ready before the *Horridole* thailed. But it didn't come to the dock. Now I have thent a wireleth meththage—Oh! Ithn't it terrible?"

"It's a shame," agreed Neale, but with dancing eyes. "And can't you have a concert because of that?"

"Well, I thertainly can't take part in one," she said rather tartly.

"You'd bring down the house if you did," giggled Neale O'Neil. "But never mind. I'll help you. Have you talked with the other members of the committee?"

"Not very much," admitted Miss Hastings. "I—I've had to talk with my handkerthief in front of my mouth and I am not thure that they know what I have thaid. Maybe they think I've got the flu," and she began to laugh, herself, now.

"That's right! Cheer up," said Neale, who would be friendly with the most self-conscious or bashful person in existence, and found that Miss Hastings was pretty human after all.

He told her about his "Caruso" and the dancing team from the stokehole. Nalbro Hastings seized upon the originality of the idea which Ruth Kenway had expressed.

"And there are two little girllth—Here they come now," said Miss Hastings. "I heard them thinging—the cuteth little thingth."

"Why, that's Tess and Dot Kenway," declared Neale, in surprise.

"Call them over, pleath," commanded the Back Bay girl. "Athk them to thing that thong about 'Dooley.'"

"That's a new one on me," Neale declared, beckoning to Tess and Dot. "What's all this about the new song you've learned?" he asked the sisters, when they came near. "This is Miss Hastings, Tess and Dot. You want to know her. She's a nice girl, only she's made a vow that she won't

speak till she gets to St. Sergius and the parcel post catches up to us.”

“Oh, Mithter O’Neil!” murmured the Back Bay girl.

“She speaks some,” said Tess curiously.

“Let’s hear the song—and where did you learn it?” Neale said.

“Our friend, Mr. Billie Bowling, learned it us,” said Dot, referring to the deckhand before mentioned. “Do you really want to hear it?”

“Sure,” said Neale. “Is it good enough to sing at a concert?”

“Of course,” said Tess scornfully. “I’d sing it at a Sunday school concert.”

But after Neale heard it, and had recovered from his paroxysm of laughter, he said breathlessly:

“Don’t let Ruth hear of your singing that in Sunday school. But it will be a knockout at this cabin concert, Miss Hastings.”

“It will! It will,” agreed the Back Bay girl. “You muthn’t tell anybody about it, children. You can rehearthe in my thtateroom. Oh! You tell them, Mr. O’Neil.”

And Neale did that.

What made Agnes mad—and she admitted it to any of the party who would listen—was the bold way in which Neale did it! To think of his walking right up to Nalbro Hastings and talking to her as though she was—was—well! Just common folks!

“She is,” growled Neale, at last getting rather tired of Agnes’ complainings. “She doesn’t claim to be any different from other people.”

“I’d like to know!” was his friend’s scornful remark. “And with her nose stuck up the way it is?”

“Nature did that; she’s not to blame,” declared Neale soberly.

“Indeed!”

“Come along, Aggie, and I’ll introduce you,” chuckled Neale. “Although she did tell me she didn’t want to meet anybody aboard ship.”

“The stuck-up thing!” For Agnes was as angry now as the other girls who considered Nalbro Hastings snobbish. “She never would have spoken to you if you weren’t a very good-looking boy, Neale O’Neil. And you fell right down before her and adored.”

“Oh! I never!” gasped the boy, hotly.

“Don’t you deny it. Her money, and everything——”

That settled it with Neale. He tramped away in the heat of anger. And because of what Agnes said, he took delight in keeping the secret of Nalbro Hastings’ retirement to himself.

However, because it was her duty, Miss Hastings met with the members of the concert committee—the “patronesses,” and arranged the program. Ruth’s suggestion, relayed through Neale O’Neil, governed Miss Hastings in choosing the talent. Sailors, stokers, engine-room men, and stewards were examined for talent.

Nor did Miss Hastings forget Tess and Dot Kenway. As Neale O’Neil said in his most vigorous language, their song was bound to be “a knockout.”

CHAPTER X—THE CONCERT

Of course, Neale O’Neil and Agnes Kenway could not be “mad at” each other for long. But they did frequently have spats, for both were hot-tempered and willful.

The boy, however, was usually so good-natured that he overlooked a lot that Agnes said to him when she was ruffled. On this occasion, however, he enjoyed keeping certain facts secret and letting Agnes fuss and fume. And as Neale continued to be Miss Hastings’ right-hand man in the preparations for the concert, Agnes existed in a state of suppressed fury.

The glorious weather the party enjoyed while sailing southward made it difficult for Agnes to hold to her grouch.

It was surprising, too, what a number of things there were to see while the steamship ploughed southward. One day a half-grown whale kept pace with the *Horridole* for hours, just as though he enjoyed racing with steam. One of the ship’s officers had been on several whaling voyages as a young man, and he related to the Kenways and Neale some exciting experiences he had had when chasing the great mammals.

A school of porpoises likewise gamboled about the ship, sometimes ahead, sometimes following, their changing colors bringing wondering cries to the lips of Tess and Dot. Circling seabirds flew high above them, for, after all, the route the steamship followed to the West Indies was never far from shore.

The evening before they expected to reach St. Sergius was appointed for the concert. Great secrecy had been maintained regarding the identity of the entertainers secured for it. There was part of an opera company going to St. Sergius for the winter season, and that had been drawn on for an augmented orchestra, the ship boasting a pretty good string band in any event.

But besides this help from the second and first cabin, nobody else had been asked to entertain among the cabin passengers. Save, of course, Tess and Dot Kenway. Ruth was a little anxious as to what the little girls were going to do; but knowing that they had committed to memory many songs and recitations, she did not doubt but that they would acquit themselves well.

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Nalbro Hastings had taken a good deal of interest in the charity entertainment; but when the hour arrived for it she did not appear on the platform to announce the numbers. To Agnes Kenway's expressed amazement Neale represented Miss Hastings—and he was not even a member of the committee!

Her boy friend, however, acquitted himself nobly. Agnes was forced to admit it and she was, secretly, pleased that this was so. But she did her best not to show it.

Of course, there could not be much dignity attached to any occasion in which Neale O'Neil was active. He began "jollyng" when he introduced the first entertainer.

"We begin with Caruso Junior," was his declaration when he introduced the Italian coal-passer to the company.

Somewhere Neale had found a dress suit for the young Italian, and as it was several sizes too big for the man's slim figure it aided in the hilarity of the number. For the high note of the whole concert was comedy, and "Caruso Junior" sang only topical songs in both Italian and a brand of broken English that delighted the audience.

The two dancers who did "a brother act" were an oddity that pleased as well. If this concert was different from the usual kind on shipboard, it was all the more appreciated.

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Even Tess' and Dot's friend, Bill Bowling, had been literally "roped in" for a number. It seemed that he had been something besides a deckhand in his life; and his past experience in roping cattle in the West enabled him to use a lariat equal to any vaudeville entertainer.

About the middle of the program Neale came forward with a solemn face and announced:

"The nicest little team of entertainers in captivity. I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, you are going to have a treat when the Misses Theresa and Dorothy Kenway sing their song. It is one of their own choosing, they learned it without professional assistance, and the sentiment and depth of feeling expressed in the words cannot be questioned. I bespeak for Theresa and Dorothy your gravest attention."

"What is that boy up to now?" murmured Ruth, troubled.

Agnes glared at Neale as he came down from the platform.

"He has got something up his sleeve," she said, almost angrily.

"Do you children know your piece?" demanded Ruth in a whisper, as Tess and Dot started for the stage.

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"Of course we do," declared Tess haughtily.

"Miss Hastings says we sing it fine," said Dot eagerly, and trotted after her sister.

Facing an audience did not trouble Tess and Dot in the least. They had once played in a real play; and they had often sung and recited at school concerts. They mounted to the platform as the orchestra struck up a queer melody, and together, and hand-in-hand, began the song Bill Bowling had first taught them.

To the amazement of Ruth and the others it was a real Irish "come-all-ye," and although the words might not have been altogether well-chosen, they were funny. When the little girls came to the chorus and, with appropriate gestures, emphatically half recited and half sang it, the audience burst into a roar of laughter that almost drowned the children's voices:

Tess (stamping):—"And what did Dooley do to him?"

Dot (stamping):—"He vowed he was not tr-u-ue to him!"

Tess (stamping):—"Did Dooley owe him money?"

Together:—"No! (Pause.) He shtole McCarthy's pants!"

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The serious air with which Tess and Dot rendered these lines almost convulsed their own family. Even Ruth was helpless, although for a few moments she felt shocked. It was, after all, just a funny song, made more funny by the way it was rendered and the character of the singers. Tess and Dot realized that they had made a hit and sang the three verses with gusto.

"That Neale O'Neil!" murmured Ruth, turning to Mr. Howbridge for comfort.

But the lawyer was laughing so uproariously that she saw she would get no sympathy from him.

Agnes declared that it was "that Nalbro Hastings' fault." But, if it was a fault, it was something that everybody enjoyed to the utmost. Neale's statement that the song would be "a knockout" was prophetic. Before the entertainment concluded there was a general request that the children sing "Dooley" again.

"I guess we are pretty popular," said Tess, confidently.

"Didn't we sing it right the first time, Tess?" her little sister wanted to know. "Have we got to do it all over again?"

"Oh, go and do it over!" gasped Ruth. "It can't be helped now. But I'll never let you prepare for another entertainment without first finding out what sort of song you mean to sing. To think of it!"

"Don't worry, Ruth," chuckled Luke. "It's great. Worth the five dollars I paid for my ticket. Those two chicks are certainly the hit of the evening."

The incident served not only to make Tess and Dot popular, but the other Kenway girls were likewise much flattered by the first cabin passengers after the entertainment. Agnes began to preen herself a little. There were some very nice people aboard the *Horridole*, and even if Agnes considered herself shut out from knowing Miss Hastings of the Back Bay, there were others of social prominence whom it pleased the girl to become acquainted with.

So they arrived at St. Sergius and went ashore next day amid great gayety. The St. Sergius Arms—a white and green building of Spanish architecture—overlooked the city, which nestled at the foot of the island cliffs. Yet the hotel was not too far from the bathing beaches and the curio shops along the plaza. 107

The Kenway girls continued to be made much of by their new friends, and in a couple of days they were as much at home in this strange environment as any of the tourists. For St. Sergius was certainly a very different place from any town the Corner House girls had ever before visited.

"I can't help thinking all the men I see going past are millers," declared Agnes. "All in white, you know. Only their broad-brimmed hats do not look like the caps millers wear."

"The girls don't look like milleresses," chuckled Neale. "All of them with some kind of veil twisted about their hair—"

"The reboza," said Ruth.

"Maybe. Anyway, there are some of them awfully pretty," added Neale.

"It seems to me," Agnes said with dignity, "that you are becoming a regular connoisseur in feminine loveliness. How is your friend, Nalbro Hastings?"

"She's a whole lot better than she has been since she left Boston," declared Neale cheerfully. 108

"What do you mean by that?" asked Ruth, while Agnes stared at him. "She has not been ill."

"I'll say she has!" declared Neale, broadly smiling. "Almost dumb. Very sad case."

"I'd like to know what you mean, you horrid fellow," Agnes complained. "I know there must be some joke about it, but I don't understand."

"Allow me," Neale said, rising and bowing very low to Agnes. "I have here an invitation from Miss Hastings." But the note he drew from his pocket he presented to Ruth. "Verbally, I am particularly to urge 'that *pretty* Miss Agnes' to attend afternoon tea as a special favor to Miss Hastings."

"Oh!" ejaculated Agnes.

Ruth nodded, but seemed puzzled.

"Yes. That is what she asks—and very prettily. That all of us, not forgetting Tess and Dot, will come to her suite at five, with Luke and Neale."

"Well, of all things!" gasped Agnes.

"Won't you go?" Neale asked, just a little worried now. He had carried the joke pretty far, he thought. 109

"I have half a mind to refuse," declared Agnes. "What shall I wear, Ruth?"

Neale was relieved by this question. He smiled engagingly.

"You don't need to worry about what you wear, Aggie. She's an awfully good kind. And she's been wanting to know you all along. But—she couldn't talk."

"I don't believe you," said Agnes flatly.

"Neale says she had a vow," remarked Tess soberly. "And she did speak sort of funny to me and Dot. But she's nice."

"She has nice candy," observed the littlest Corner House girl. "She gave us some when we were rehearsing for the concert."

"Of course you will go—and be a good girl," said Ruth, when she and Agnes were alone.

"Well, I suppose I must," sighed Agnes. "But I tell you what it is, Ruthie, I don't like Neale O'Neil having secrets from me. And I don't want him to be too friendly with other girls—not even when they are from the Back Bay and their names are in the society columns."

That afternoon tea-party in Miss Hastings' suite was one of the nicest things that had ever happened to Agnes Kenway. She had dreamed of being entertained by a person like the Back Bay girl, served tea and cakes from a tea-wagon and by a French maid in beruffled cap and an apron not much bigger than a special delivery postage stamp!

Neale said that Agnes began to purr like a satisfied kitten almost as soon as she had shaken hands with the Back Bay girl. Once convinced that she had not been intentionally slighted on the boat (for Miss Hastings could tell of her dental predicament now with honest laughter), the beauty sister proved herself to be one of the most attractive girls in the world.

"I've wanted to know you, Miss Agnes, and Miss Kenway, ever since you came aboard the *Horridole*," Nalbro Hastings said, in a winning way. "And I must thank you girls first of all for lending me Mr. O'Neil, who is a very efficient aid in almost anything social, I fancy."

111

"Easy on the Mister O'Neil stuff," growled Neale. "I've got a first name, you know."

"We have trained him very well," said Ruth demurely, "save in language. He uses the most atrocious slang."

"But he's a good worker," admitted Agnes, staring coolly at Neale. "We have brought him up to be useful."

"Good in the pinches," muttered the much maligned Neale, but grinning.

It was a jolly occasion in every particular. Agnes perhaps had her eyes opened regarding the manners of Back Bay society girls. Nalbro Hastings was just as friendly and demure a girl as the flyaway Kenway had ever met. The latter continued somewhat subdued, herself.

During the next few days the Kenways saw a good deal of Miss Hastings. They searched out all the interesting parts of the old town together. The settlement dated back to a time soon after the coming of Columbus to the West Indies. It was not so old as Nassau; but there was an old fort at the harbor's mouth; a monastery, grim enough of appearance, that might be turned very easily into a fortress overlooking the town; and a nunnery of dazzling white outer walls, but glowing with color inside, where the girls almost wrecked their pocketbooks buying fancy work.

112

Luke had to attend Professor Keeps on his first jaunt into the interior of the island, and was gone a week. Meanwhile Mr. Howbridge had several conferences with a business friend whose grapefruit plantations dotted the island. It was to see this man and arrange for the investment of some of his loose capital in the States that the lawyer from Milton had made this trip to St. Sergius.

So Neale was left alone to "beau the girls around." He did his duty nobly, nor were all the ventures he engineered too tame. There were only twenty miles of auto road on the island; and, although a few people had small cars, it was no paradise for motorists. But the trails over the hills and along the verge of the chalk cliffs were wonderful.

The natives had bred small donkeys, or burros, in the comfortable saddles of which the tourist could observe nature, at sea and ashore, in an agreeable way. The Corner House girls, often with others, including Nalbro Hastings, and under Neale's protection, traveled miles by donkey-back over the trails of St. Sergius.

113

The trails were bordered by jungle, it was true; but that was because a cleared spot in the jungle would return to its primeval state in two years. But little plantations dotted the ways—a cabin, palms, a grapefruit orchard, and a tiny vegetable garden, all over-run with naked babies of all shades from deepest ebony to a saddle-color tan.

"I don't see how anybody can be so black as the black ones are," sighed Agnes. "And so shiny. Their skin shines, and their teeth shine, and their eyes shine. Even Uncle Rufus' Petunia, as black as she is, doesn't glisten like these darkies."

All the adventures the Corner House girls had were not on shore. There were both sail and power boats in the bay for hire. Neale felt himself able to handle a sailing craft, and they ventured out in one. But he obeyed Mr. Howbridge's injunction and did not go beyond the fort.

During this first week at the resort letters arrived from Milton and one of them was of particular interest to the girls and Neale O'Neil. It was from Mrs. Oscar Pendleton and was addressed to Ruth.

The troubled woman said in part:

"We have many things to be thankful for, and are especially indebted to you, Miss Ruth, and your sisters. Don't think us ungrateful. But it does seem too bad that Mr. Howbridge asked my husband to work for Peter Conroy, and without learning first how Peter felt about Mr. Pendleton's affairs. It seems he gave Mr. Pendleton a job just because he felt himself obliged to do so. He was under obligation, he said, to Mr. Howbridge. He told Mr. Pendleton so.

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"All the time he was watching him, and counting the money in the cash-drawer over and over, and not letting Mr. Pendleton wait on cash customers. It was very embarrassing for Mr. Pendleton and sometimes forced him to explain to people who were quite strangers, his misfortune in having to work for Peter.

"And finally Peter miscounted the sacks of potatoes that were delivered to the store and came right out and accused Mr. Pendleton of carrying off a 180 pound bag of potatoes! He accepted his dismissal before Peter found the miscounted bag, and I told Mr. Pendleton he should not go back to work for the old curmudgeon. I hope you will say I was right, Miss Ruth, although it does seem

that as long as these accusations hang over him we shall continue in straits."

The letter was somewhat rambling; but it gave the older girls the impression that Mrs. Pendleton was dreadfully worried. And if her husband was again out of work it was no wonder that she was anxious.

"I know that old fellow who keeps the store on Plane Street. He's just as ill-tempered as Billy Bumps," declared Neale O'Neil. "I guess Mr. Howbridge did not know Peter Conroy, or he would not have sent Mr. Pendleton to work there."

This proved to be the case, as the lawyer admitted when he returned to the hotel at the end of the week.

"I am sorry for Pendleton. I had a personal interview with him before we left home and he seemed patient and willing. I am waiting now to hear from my clerk whom I instructed by wireless to look up the personal character of Mr. Israel Stumpf."

"Oh!" murmured Ruth, in some trouble, "I only felt a suspicion of him. I do not really know anything about Mr. Kolbeck's stepson."

"No. Neither do I," said Mr. Howbridge dryly. "But I mean to."

"I know Mr. Pendleton has been ill used," declared Agnes, with her usual energy. "And Mrs. Pendleton is a dear." 116

"Carrie and Margy are real nice," said Tess, who overheard the discussion. "I guess their father must be, too."

"Anyway, he is the only man we ever saw that fell out of a tree," Dot observed. "He's real int'resting, I think."

Ruth and Agnes were very much worried, and talked the matter over together before retiring.

"I am sure I don't know what poor Mrs. Pendleton is going to do if the money stops coming in," said Ruth.

"It will certainly be a hardship for them," answered Agnes. "He hasn't been at his job long enough to have saved any money."

"Saved money! Why, Agnes, they're not out of debt yet for what they owed to the butcher and the grocer and a whole lot of other people!"

"Yes, and think of its being in the dead of winter, too!" went on the sister, with a troubled face. "I do hope they've coal and wood enough in the house to keep warm."

"Yes, and clothing too. Think of those children going out in the bitter cold winter weather only about half clad!"

Nothing at present could be done, however, by any of them to help the Pendletons. Matters would have to take their course. Mr. Howbridge knew that his clerk would be informed of Oscar Pendleton's loss of employment and would take steps to aid the family accordingly. But nothing vital could be done for the Pendletons until the truth about the robbery of the Kolbeck & Roods warehouse was discovered. 117

Luke came back with Professor Keeps from their first expedition for the study of the flora of the island. The botanist was delighted with his discoveries, and he was intent upon classifying and mounting his specimens during the next few days, so his young assistant was excused from attendance upon him.

The Kenway party planned a voyage around the island, for Mr. Howbridge's business friend owned a large motor-boat and had put the craft at the disposal of the party from the North.

Both Neale and Luke had some knowledge of the management of a launch, and the Kenway party got under way early one morning, provisioned for a voyage of at least forty-eight hours. That they took no native seaman along was a misfortune rather than an oversight. The caretaker of Señor Benno's motor-launch had been taken ill during the night and lay groaning in his hammock unable to go with the "Americanos." 118

"Shucks!" grumbled Neale, "we don't need him. He wouldn't be much good anyway, like enough."

"I suppose he would know the shoals and tides better than we do," said Luke.

"I've got the newest chart," declared Neale. "And we will have a care in getting near the islands. Now, don't say anything to scare the girls."

"How will you scare them?" Luke wanted to know. "Agnes will always take a chance, and Ruth really isn't much afraid of anything. As for the kids——"

"Well, then," Neale added, grinning, "say nothing to Mr. Howbridge or he will want to send up to the hotel for Hedden. And Hedden, you know, would want to serve afternoon tea at five, even if we were wrecked on a desert island."

They laughed over the possibilities of catastrophe, without considering that anything may happen upon a voyage like this, and in these tropical but treacherous seas.

The day was gloriously fair, and the motor at first acted as though charmed. The craft, named *Isobel*, made the circuit of the island long before evening. They had kept well off shore and were 119

then in sight of the string of pearl-like islets that extended farther than they could see into the southeast. Palm-fringed, edged with white ruffles of water, and in the distance hazed in blue, they made an entrancing picture.

"We must see them all," Ruth declared. "Doesn't your chart tell you where there is a cove, or bay, where we can spend the night in safety, Neale?"

"Of course. And we can get there before nightfall," declared Neale.

"What do you say, Mr. Howbridge?" Ruth asked their guardian.

"It seems quite safe to venture," the lawyer returned. "Is the engine acting all right, boys?"

"Don't see anything the matter with it," replied Luke.

But one can never prophesy regarding a motor-boat engine.

St. Sergius was twenty-five miles behind them, and the nearer of the chain of small islands was not less than ten miles away, when the power went wrong on the *Isobel*.

"That comes of blowing about how fine she worked without knocking wood," grumbled Neale O'Neil.

"Is it going to keep us long?" asked Agnes.

"What a ridiculous question that is!" rejoined her friend. "Am I a prophet, or the son of a prophet? What do you say, Luke?"

Luke had been scanning the horizon to westward. He stepped down into the cockpit of the *Isobel* with some haste.

"I tell you what I think about one thing, Neale," he whispered in the latter's ear. "There is going to be a change in the weather—and a big change—within a very short time."

"For the worse?" asked Neale, startled.

"It couldn't be for the better," replied Luke. "We've had a perfect day; but the end of it is going to be squally. And I've heard that even at this time of year, which is not the hurricane season, the weather in this part of the Caribbean can be distinctly nasty."

CHAPTER XII—THE ISLAND REFUGE

Those streaks on the horizon foreboded evil weather, as Luke had feared. None of the party on the *Isobel* had ever seen a storm gather so quickly. In an hour the waves were white-capped and those blue streaks of wind had reached the zenith.

Behind it, from the west, rolled up a pallid hedge of mist, back of which the stronger wind growled like a leashed dog. Lightning fluttered across the face of the coming cloud-bank. Then the crackle of thunder rose louder and louder.

Luke and Neale, even Mr. Howbridge, worked at the stalled motor. They took turns whirling the fly-wheel. There was no more response than as though they had stood up and commanded the tempest to recede.

Fortunately the children did not understand the threat of the elements. Tess and Dot were not often affrighted by a thunderstorm. And Ruth and Agnes could not wholly understand what was coming.

There was not the usual hush which is so often noted before the striking of such a tempest. In this case the wind and lightning drew on with equal velocity; but the rain stayed behind. On and on the forefront of the storm came, as savagely persistent as a pack of wolves, and then leaped upon its prey with a force that seemed to crush every object on the surface of the sea.

The only craft in sight was their own *Isobel*. The waves flattened about her for a considerable space, and for some moments, as though the wind came from directly overhead.

"Get inside, every one of you girls!" commanded Mr. Howbridge, shouting at the top of his voice. "Close that cabin door and keep it closed."

The little ones were already below. Ruth went down the steps, shouting back over her shoulder:

"You'd all better come too. You can do nothing here."

Agnes scuttled behind her, terrified indeed. They jammed shut the slide. Almost the next instant the thunder of the rain on the deck deafened those in the cabin. The two boys and the lawyer lay under a tarpaulin which shed a portion of the deluge. But they could not distinguish each other's speech.

It seemed as though the very weight of the rain must sink the motor-boat. It thundered on the deck and foamed in the cockpit. Such a cloudburst none of them had ever seen, or even dreamed of.

In ten minutes the rain passed. It roared on toward the east like the rattle of a giant drum corps.

But the darkness and wind remained. It was impossible to see more than a few yards about the *Isobel*. Islands, and all, had disappeared. But the launch was moving now—racing into the east, like the rain, and with all the force of the wind and sea astern.

Neale crawled out from under the tarpaulin and climbed up on a cushion seat out of the knee-deep water. That water was roaring out through the vents, or seeping into the lower bilge. When Luke got up he made straight for the pump and began to work it. It sucked immediately, and the water spurted through the hosepipe.

"My goodness, boys!" shouted Mr. Howbridge, "what are we going to do?"

"Keep our eyes open for an island," shouted back Neale.

"Hope we'll find one," was the muttered reply.

"Keep the old boat from sinking," declared Luke, vigorously pumping.

"The girls will be scared to death," grumbled the lawyer.

"Let them stay below and they won't know much about it," Luke told him.

"Good idea," tossed down Neale, as he staggered upon the break of the cabin roof.

There came a knocking on the cabin door. It was stuck.

"There! They want to get out already," cried Mr. Howbridge.

"'Want to' and 'Can' are two different things," replied Luke. "Let 'em knock!"

It was not that the boys were callous, but they knew that if the girls came out of the cabin they would immediately appreciate the full danger of the situation. Agnes and Ruth would not be able to see much through the narrow deadlights.

Mr. Howbridge went to the cabin slide. He put his lips close to the door and shouted:

"Don't bother! Stay where you are! We are all right, but must wait for the wind to stop."

"Let—us—out!" shrieked Agnes' voice.

"Stay where you are and keep still!" commanded their guardian more sternly. Then he asked the boys, with no little anxiety: "Is it safe to let them stay down there? Suppose she should turn turtle?"

"We're riding pretty fair now," said Luke.

"And if she turned over they would have a better chance than we would," declared Neale O'Neil. "There would be air enough confined in the cabin to keep them going for a time. But if we were thrown into this sea there isn't one of us could live five minutes."

This was so evidently the fact that Mr. Howbridge said nothing more. The lawyer was not much of an out-of-doors man at the best. He had not spent much time on the sea or in the wilds, and he was now past middle age. But he possessed something that not all men used to roughing it possess. He had a broad knowledge from reading of boat-sailing as well as of other sports.

He was less ready to show apprehension than the young fellows. The responsibility for this condition of affairs must rest more on Mr. Howbridge's shoulders. The lawyer accepted this fact, and proceeded to cudgel his brains to find a way out of the difficulty.

"We've got to overhaul that engine, in spite of the heavy sea, and try to make her go," Mr. Howbridge said. "You've cleared out the water pretty well, Luke. She rises to each wave, and as long as it does not rain again we certainly will not be swamped."

"We need a lantern," complained Neale. "Guess we'll have to pry open that door, Mr. Howbridge."

"Think so? I don't want the girls up here."

"Well, we can make the little ones stay down, and Ruth will look out for them. If Aggie insists on coming up here we'll set her to work."

"That will please her only too well," said Agnes' guardian.

Which was true enough. Agnes rushed out on deck, sputtering. Neither she nor Ruth had any idea of the extent of the disaster. When she saw the racing, foam-capped waves and the blackness of sea and sky, even the flyaway was subdued.

"Are we headed in the right direction?" Ruth asked at the open slide.

"We sure are," grumbled Neale. "Heading right with the wind. If we tried to shift our course the wind would like enough roll us over and over like a barrel."

"Isn't it fortunate the wind is heading us toward St. Sergius, then," observed Agnes.

"Oh, shoot!" ejaculated Neale. "Do you think even the elements play in our favor, Aggie Kenway? According to the needle of this compass we are heading due east, and St. Sergius is some distance behind us."

"Oh!" gasped Agnes and Ruth in unison.

"Now, Ruth," said Mr. Howbridge sternly, "I expect you girls to do your share. You look out for the children in there. If Agnes insists on being out here she can come and hold this pry-bar. I

believe we've got to block up the engine at this corner before she will make an even stroke. I could see that she jarred when we started, and I should have insisted upon having her jacked up then."

Agnes came very meekly and did his bidding. Neale stuck to the wheel, or the craft would have wobbled much worse than she did. Luke aided the lawyer at the cranky engine.

Ruth tried to be cheerful with Tess and Dot. But both little girls had already gained the impression that they were in danger. Tess asked seriously:

"Don't you suppose, Ruthie, that it would be a good thing if we said our prayers, even if it isn't bedtime?"

But Dot's mind ran upon more mundane things. She remarked after a little silence:

"I wonder if Sammy Pinkney was here, if he would feel much like being a pirate on this wiggly boat?"

As the storm continued to sweep the *Isobel* on and on, with no sign of abatement, the older ones at least felt no desire to converse uselessly, and the little girls went to sleep in a berth. Fortunately they were not so seriously troubled by the peril that menaced as their elders. Even Agnes was subdued; but she, like Ruth, was courageous.

Mr. Howbridge finally gave up the attempt to start the engine. While the launch pitched so it was impossible to make any headway with the crippled mechanism of the *Isobel*. They managed to make some coffee, and with this and crackers, they tried to satisfy their appetites. Then they went to rest for the night. But nobody slept much.

In addition to the force of the wind, a certain current must have seized the boat, for she drove on for hours in a direction quite opposite to that in which the party wished to go. St. Sergius and any inhabited island they knew anything about were behind them.

With dawn the wind fell, the sea became calmer, and the clouds began to break. The first rays of the sun, when flung into their faces, did not dazzle their eyes so much that they could not observe an isle almost dead ahead. A cheerful green island it was with a hill in its center on which grew a very tall palm.

"We're going to land there if it can be done," declared Mr. Howbridge. "There are two long oars and you boys do what you can with them when we get close in."

"Aye, aye, Captain," cried Neale cheerfully. "Looks as if we were going to play Robinson Crusoe for a while, doesn't it?"

"More like the Swiss Family Robinson," Luke remarked. "Looks like a deserted place, doesn't it?"

"I don't see any hotel," rejoined the lawyer dryly. "But there is quiet water in that cove yonder. See if you can paddle us into it."

At any rate, the strange island offered a refuge. And a bit of solid earth under their feet was what they all most craved.

CHAPTER XIII—A LONG WAY FROM THE CORNER HOUSE

An hour after sunrise the keel of the *Isobel* scraped upon the sands of the shallow cove which indented the western shore of this unknown island that was to be the refuge of the Corner House girls and their friends.

There was still a wide stretch of calm water between the prow of the motor-boat and the low-water mark. The boys could force the craft no nearer land with their oars.

"How do we land?" Agnes demanded. "We can't fly. And this water looks as though it were waist deep."

"Oh, for a bathing suit!" murmured Ruth.

Neale had quickly retired to the cabin while the other members of the party were discussing the difficulty that confronted them. Luke had sat down to pull off his shoes and stockings and prepare to wade ashore, when the younger youth reappeared.

"I declare!" exclaimed Agnes. "He has got his bathing suit. How did you ever think to bring it, Neale O'Neil?"

"Never know when it may rain," chuckled her friend. "Now I'm going to drop over the bow, and I'll take you ashore first, Aggie, if you want me to."

"I don't know about that," objected Agnes. "We don't know what may be lurking in that jungle. The hill around the foot of that big palm is clear, I know. But that thicket between us and the hill —"

"What do you think will hurt you?" Luke demanded. "There are no wild animals in these islands. Not even snakes, I am told."

"Just the same, I'll wait till you are ready to carry Ruth, Luke," said Agnes decidedly. "We can wait together on the shore while you bring over the children and Mr. Howbridge."

"This is another case like the man who had to cross the river with the goose, the fox, and the bag of corn," chuckled Neale. "But I guess we'll make it somehow. Come on, girls."

"Here comes the goose!" cried Agnes, stepping off the bow of the launch into Neale's arms. "Hurry up, Ruth. If there are savages in that jungle I want you to be present at the first introduction. Your manners are so much better than mine."

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The transportation of the four girls did not take long. Meanwhile Mr. Howbridge removed his shoes and socks and came ashore carrying some wraps and a few cooking utensils.

"We want breakfast first of all. I do not believe we shall find here any natives, savage or otherwise, who will offer us a meal," the lawyer said.

Neale had carried ashore the end of the painter and they moored the motor-boat safely to a stub driven into the sand above high-water mark. The young fellows went about making a camp at the edge of the jungle in a matter-of-fact way.

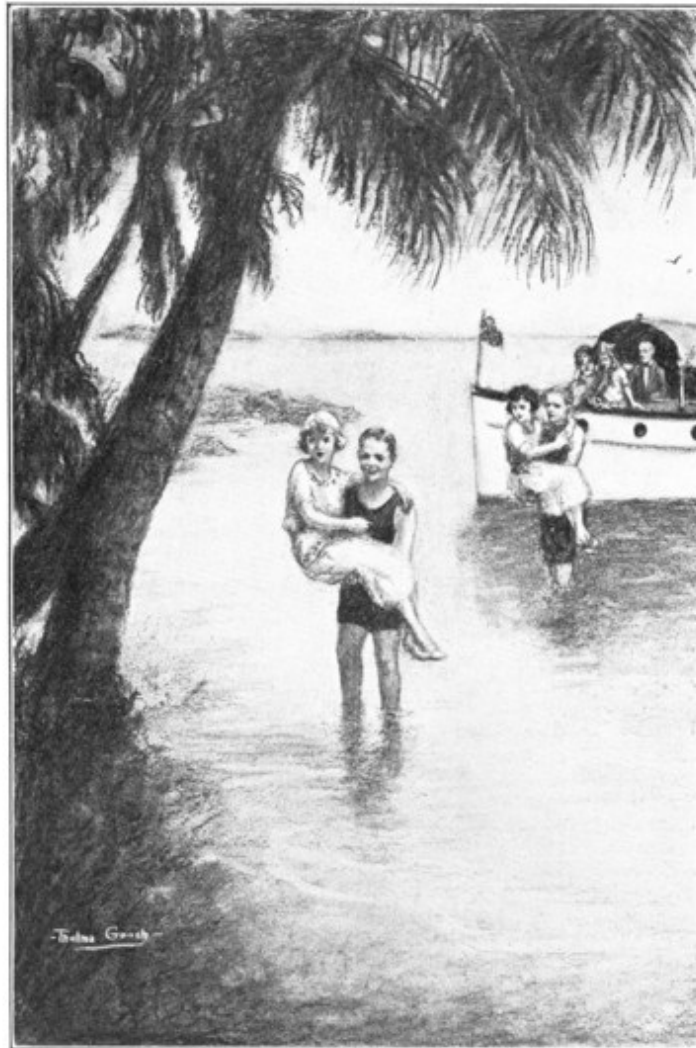
"Doesn't your chart tell what island this is?" Ruth asked Neale O'Neil. "Surely it can't be an unknown island."

"Probably not," Mr. Howbridge said, smiling, and before Neale could reply. "But it is safe enough to say that it is unoccupied save by ourselves."

"And—and have we got to stay here?" gasped Agnes.

"Until we can repair the motor-boat engine, or some one appears to take us off," said the lawyer soberly. "But we have some provisions and I can see that there is fruit growing in plenty yonder, and this cove probably offers many shellfish, and finny denizens of the sea as well."

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The transportation of the four girls did not take long.

"That's all right," said Agnes, briskly recovering from her momentary alarm. "But I never care for fish for breakfast. What are you going to cook over that fire, Neale O'Neil?"

"Give your order, lady. The chef will try to fill it," declared Neale, quite unshaken by the prospect.

"Two eggs. I always have two eggs for breakfast," declared Agnes. "You can have all the fruit you want to; but I demand the pair of hen-fruit, too."

"Very well, my lady," Neale said, bowing. "Keep your eye on this fire, Luke, while I go egging."

"Egging!" exclaimed Luke, quite as mystified as the others.

"Sure. I've got to go to market for the eggs, haven't I?" said Neale.

"Can't we go to the store with you, Neale?" Tess asked eagerly. "Dot and I. We can help you bring home the things."

"You certainly can. Come on," said Neale cheerfully, and started off as confidently as though he expected to find a butter and egg store around the first corner. Ruth made no objection to the little girls going, for she was assured by their guardian that there was nothing on these little islands that could possibly hurt them. The three were soon out of sight, for the fringe of low palms and shrubs edged the sands in both directions, and probably continued right around the circumference of the island.

"This is certainly a lonely island," Ruth said reflectively. "Don't you suppose it has even a name?"

"Let's give it one," announced Agnes, when Luke had shaken a negative head to Ruth's question. "Why not? We'll take possession of it in the name of the U. S. A. Spain, or Holland, or France, or England must have overlooked it, or they would have named it."

"And tacked up a shingle here with the name on it—and a traffic arrow?" chuckled Luke. "'This is a one-way street!'"

"Smarty!" exclaimed Agnes, making him a little face. "Can't we name it, Guardy Howbridge?"

"With my full permission," rejoined the lawyer.

"I wouldn't know what to call it," said Ruth reflectively. "That big mound in the middle—with the tree on it. A palm, isn't it?"

"We saw that palm just as soon as we saw anything when the light broke this morning," said Luke.

"It is a landmark," Mr. Howbridge added.

"That is just the thing!" exclaimed Agnes briskly. "The big palm is the most prominent thing about here. Call it Palm Island."

"Why not?" cried Ruth.

"I subscribe to that name," said Luke.

So the refuge of the Corner House girls and their friends came to be called Palm Island. That Dot insisted upon calling it "plam" instead of "palm" made little difference. She was always mispronouncing new words.

Just at present, however, Dot and Tess and Neale O'Neil did not know that the island had been christened. They came back briskly from around the point at about the time Luke got a good fire to burning on the beach. The coffee was on and Mr. Howbridge was boiling cereal which had been aboard the motor-boat.

"Where are my eggs?" demanded Agnes, shouting to the exploring trio just as soon as she caught sight of them.

Neale O'Neil raised a bundle he held in his hand. It was a big bandana handkerchief, knotted together at the corners, and evidently containing something heavy. The little girls were both smiling.

"Eggs for every one," said Neale cheerfully. "Our hens laid very well this time. Here are eighteen, and that should be enough for seven people, don't you think?"

"You never found eggs, Neale O'Neil!" cried Agnes.

"Yes, he did! Yes, he did!" cried Dot, jumping up and down with delight.

"And out of the funniest nest," said Tess, quite as excited.

Agnes and Ruth looked into the handkerchief with some disbelief. They saw a dozen and a half rather dirty looking eggs; at least, they were of a brownish-gray color. The shells looked leathery and not like the shells of hens' eggs.

"Goodness!" murmured Ruth.

"You call those eggs?" demanded Agnes doubtfully.

"And all out of one nest," cried Tess delightedly.

"Fancy!" said Ruth, much puzzled.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Neale O'Neil," said Agnes. "Don't poison us with some strange fruit."

"So they look like fruit to you, do they?" snorted Neale.

"I'll take a chance," said Luke, grinning, "if there is a yolk and a white to them."

"Put on the fry-pan with some oil in it. Get me the pepper and salt. The chef proposes to turn out some fried eggs to beat the band! How do you like 'em—sunny-side up, or turned over? State your preference, ladies and gentlemen."

He used his knife to cut the “shells” of the eggs; but the yolk of each was of a deep color and it was quite evident that, no matter what kind of eggs they were, they were fresh.

“Ought to be,” said Neale with confidence. “If they were not laid last night during the storm, they certainly were the night before.”

“I do not understand it,” said Agnes, as the first relay of eggs began to sputter in the pan. “Are there really poultry on this desert island? What kind of hen lays such eggs?”

“A four-legged one,” declared Neil promptly.

“Oh!”

Luke was chuckling again, for he had already guessed the nature of the eggs. “And a hen with no feathers, Neale?” he suggested.

“You’ve said it,” rejoined the younger fellow.

“Oh! Oh!” cried Ruth, suddenly laughing. “And it has a shell.”

“Mercy! Four-legged—and featherless—and a shell,” murmured the puzzled Agnes. “There is one thing sure, we have no poultry to answer to that description at the old Corner House.”

“Ah, but we are a long way from the old Corner House,” said Mr. Howbridge, likewise smiling. “You must expect different fauna—as well as different flora—in this part of the world.”

“And of course, we are bound to find many wonderful things on Palm Island,” Ruth declared soberly.

CHAPTER XIV—MANY NEW THINGS

After all, that was the gayest of gay breakfasts. Tess and Dot did not appreciate the gravity of the situation in any case; they were only glad to be off “that pitchy boat,” as Tess proclaimed it, and there was so much on the island that was novel that the little girls could not fail to be excited and interested every moment of the time.

Besides, Tess and Dot were in Neale’s secret of the eggs laid by the wonderful four-legged hen without feathers. This description of the wonder pleased the little folks very much.

“I don’t see what you mean by all this mystery,” declared Agnes, tasting her first fried egg gingerly enough.

Then she ate it all down very quickly, for it was now late in the morning, and she had been hungry for her breakfast.

“Isn’t it all right?” demanded Neale.

“It tastes kind of—of fishy, I think,” said Agnes. “But I don’t mind it.”

“I suppose,” said Luke gravely, “that if there are hens here on the island they probably frequently dine off the shellfish along the shore. So that would explain the flavor of these eggs.”

“There’s a trick somewhere,” sighed Agnes. “But never mind. If these eggs are the work of legerdemain, Neale, you can wave your wand again. I’ll take another.”

Ruth and the others knew by this time, of course, the nature of the eggs. But it was much fun to keep up the joke as long as Agnes, who was usually so bright, did not see through it. She said to Neale:

“Can’t you take me to the hen-run and let me see your flock of biddies? I know they must be trick hens, and I’d like to see them.”

“Ahem!” murmured Neale thoughtfully. “You want to look a gift egg in the mouth, do you?”

“No. I want to look these hens in the beak,” declared Agnes.

“And you can do that, by ginger!” crowed Luke, suddenly falling over on the sand in a paroxysm of laughter.

“‘Look ’em in the beak’ is good!” ejaculated Neale. “Yes, you may do that, Aggie. But—let me think—”

“Don’t think if it is going to strain anything,” said Agnes scornfully.

“There is only one time in the whole twenty-four hours when you can be sure of doing that,” continued Neale O’Neil, with perfect soberness.

“For goodness’ sake!” exclaimed his girl friend. “Now you are carrying the thing too far. Only one hour in the twenty-four when the hen that laid these eggs is to be seen?”

“You have put it pretty near right,” declared Neale. “Isn’t that so, Mr. Howbridge?”

“I believe so, Neale. At about sunrise, isn’t it?”

“Pretty near that,” agreed Neale. “I’ll wake you up when the time comes and show them to you, Agnes.”

"Of course, they are some seabird—Oh, no! That can't be!" she cried. "For seabirds have feathers."

"You had better not undertake to strain your mind, Aggie," advised Neale. "Wait until the proper time."

Agnes tossed her head again at that and refused to show any further interest in the mystery. Besides, there was so much to do just as soon as breakfast was over that they could not chatter any more about the eggs.

The sky was fleckless by this time and it did not seem possible that another storm could come up. But remembering how quickly and unexpectedly the tempest of the afternoon previous had broken, Mr. Howbridge first of all considered it wise to make provision for getting the motor-boat into a more sheltered roadstead. The cove was too open to the sea, and Neale, on his short exploring trip, had noted a more sheltered place at the eastern end of the island.

The boys and Mr. Howbridge waded out to the boat again, pushed her keel out of the sand, and proceeded to paddle the craft along the shore, while the girls strolled along the strand, easily keeping pace with the boat. They saw not a living thing on the island save lizards and birds. There was no sound from the jungle to affright them. The strand itself was a field of wonderful sea treasures, to be reaped as they pleased.

"It is a wonderful place," Ruth declared. "I am really glad we came."

"If we don't have to stay too long," ventured Agnes.

"I expect Mrs. MacCall and Aunt Sarah will be pretty lonely without us," remarked Tess.

"And Uncle Rufus and Linda," said Dot, accepting the idea that they might never return to civilization.

They really had so much to do and so much fun doing it that it was little wonder if Tess and Dot considered very lightly the semi-privations the party suffered. What were proper beds, and shelter, and restaurant-cooked food, compared with the jolly makeshifts that were made necessary by their present condition?

The camp was established back from the small but sheltered inlet in which the *Isobel* was finally anchored. The anchorage was so deep that a fallen palm log made a gangplank from the rocky shore to the deck of the motor-boat. By means of this, everything was brought ashore that they thought would be needful.

The boys brought tarpaulins and pieces of sailcloth, and between four palm-stems in the middle of the cocoanut grove some rods back from the water, they proceeded to set up a shelter for the girls to use as a bedroom. Of course, the living and cooking in general would be done in the open, and there were plenty of blankets for the boys and Mr. Howbridge when they lay down to sleep on the sand.

The grove showed some marks of the storm that had swept this part of the Caribbean so savagely the day before. Although the cocoanuts were in a green state, some had been wrenched from the tops of the trees and flung about. The soft meat of these nuts was already good to eat; and there were bananas and mangoes—the latter refreshing, but not much to the children's taste at first.

Neale poked out great lobsters in the crannies of the rocks. There were crabs to be caught too. Mussels, razor-shell clams and maninoses added to the edible supplies. Besides these, the waters about the island were crowded with fish of various kinds. There was little need of the party going hungry, although Dot did ask rather earnestly for a piece of bread and butter.

Besides laying up such stores of provisions as they might need for the next few meals, the party, even Dot and Tess, walked clear around the island, following the edge of the sea. It was a long walk, but they took it in the cool of the day and the little folks were not too greatly wearied by the walk.

They were all, too, delighted with what they saw. There were in some places great coral rocks heaped up by the surf, and the girls had never imagined that there could be so many varieties of coral. Great, smooth, mother-of-pearl-lipped shells were likewise gathered by the children.

There were ill-smelling masses of half-animal, half-vegetable matter to which the Corner House girls were inclined to give a wide berth. These, too, had evidently been cast up on shore by the recent storm. Luke poked at them, and then became importantly scornful.

"You use these probably every time you take a bath in your tub at home," he announced. "And because you see them in their natural state you scoff at them."

"Not me!" cried Agnes vigorously. "You've got the wrong idea if you think I'd let a thing like that into my bathtub. Whew!"

"I don't really understand, Luke," said Ruth. "Is it an animal?"

"Partly. It swims about at first and then adheres to a rock. So then it grows into a vegetable."

"Humph!" scoffed Agnes. "Then an oyster is both animal and vegetable, for that is what it does."

"They are sponges, are they?" asked Mr. Howbridge. "I never chanced to see one in its natural state before."

"Ho!" exclaimed Neale. "Me for the rubber sponges you buy in the drug stores hereafter. They are nasty, Luke."

"Don't blame me," chuckled the collegian. "They don't belong to me. And perhaps you wouldn't care for rubber if you could see it gathered and know how it is prepared. But that, like the sponge, goes through so many processes before becoming commercially useful that we can easily forget its natural state."

They got back in time for supper. Somewhere on the way Neale had slyly discovered some more of the leathery-shelled eggs, and he produced them triumphantly in an omelet; for Neale, after his circus experience and other adventures out-of-doors, was by no means a bad cook. They all acclaimed his skill.

"But I do want to see your flock of funny hens!" exclaimed Agnes. "You never used to have secrets from me, Neale O'Neil. It began with that Nalbro Hastings, the girl from the Back Bay. I wonder what she would do if she were here!"

"Be eaten up with sand-fleas—as we are," murmured Ruth, scratching.

But the boys had laid a piece of sailcloth for the floor of the girls' tent; and when they went to bed they were no longer annoyed by the sandhoppers. Around the fire, after the Corner House girls had retired, Mr. Howbridge and the two young fellows talked very seriously indeed regarding their situation here on Palm Island.

"I have an idea from studying your chart, Neale, that we have been driven far off any steamship course," said the lawyer.

"That's my idea, too, sir," agreed Neale.

"As long as it remains pleasant and we have enough to eat and drink, all is right enough. But do you notice, boys, that the water barrel aboard the launch is getting low?" said Mr. Howbridge.

"Crackey! I didn't think of that," muttered Neale.

"I did. And I've been smelling about for a spring. But I didn't find any," said Luke.

"And many of these coral islands don't have any fresh water save in the rainy season."

"That's so. But—but, Mr. Howbridge, we're not sure that this is entirely a coral island," Neale said anxiously.

"There are coral reefs surrounding it, anyway," the lawyer observed.

"Those rocks where we have moored the launch are not coral," said Luke suddenly.

"You are right, my boy!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge more confidently. "There is a chance that the island may be of volcanic formation, and be immensely old. As old as the big islands of the West Indies. That being the case, we may easily find water bubbling up from the subterranean depths."

"Hope so," muttered Neale. "Thirst is an awful thing, as the codfish said when he found himself on dry land."

Still, it was not a matter to joke upon. The three followed the example of the girls and went to sleep, fearing no enemy on this deserted island. Neale O'Neil was astir very early, however. Indeed, it was not yet light and a fog lay upon both sea and shore. This gray pall made the place seem so strange and uncanny that Neale could not go to sleep again. Besides, he heard something!

He sat up and threw aside his blanket. There was a shuffling step on the sands below the palm grove. No, there were countless shuffling steps!

Amazed—not a little frightened for the moment—Neale got lightly to his feet. He was about to touch Luke and try to awaken him, when to his mind came the simple explanation of the sound, and he almost broke into loud laughter.

At second thought he stifled this desire to vent his amusement and crept away from the camp to the edge of the grove. The sliding, shuffling sound in the sand above highwater mark continued. He could see absolutely nothing, for the light fog plastered the shore like a mat.

Remembering something that he had promised Agnes Kenway the day before, Neale went back to the tent and scratched with his finger nail on the canvas. He heard a movement in answer almost at once, and spoke Agnes' name.

"This is Ruth," said the older sister. "What do you want, Neale?"

"Agnes," replied Neale, chuckling.

"What you punching me for, Ruthie?" asked the sleepy voice of the flyaway sister.

"Neale wants you," giggled Ruth. "He's waking up the whole camp to get you."

"Oh! Neale O'Neil!" gasped Agnes. "Do you want me?"

"Come on," whispered Neale. "I want to show you my hens."

At that statement Ruth began to laugh again, but Agnes scrambled into her outer clothing, greatly excited by what Neale had promised her.

"Now shush! And listen!" whispered Neale, when he grabbed Agnes' wrist just outside the girls' tent.

"What is the matter with you?" she demanded.

"If you don't keep still," Neale warned her, "you'll miss seeing my flock of chickabiddies."

"You are fooling, Neale O'Neil. You know you are," she murmured.

"You come on, and keep still," he said, still dragging her by the wrist. "Don't even whisper. The fog is rising slowly and the dawn will soon appear. My flock is scary in the daylight——"

"Oh, pshaw!" muttered Agnes. "You just sound silly."

"I'm not as silly as a girl of your age must be not even to imagine what kind of eggs those were," chuckled Neale.

"I knew there was a trick in it!"

"Shush!" he warned her again. "If you don't mind frightening my flock, don't wake up everybody else in the camp."

She was silent when they came to the edge of the palm grove. It was already growing light over the sea, and the mass of fog that had covered everything during the night was lifting and rolling back upon itself. Something moved on the sand not twenty feet from where the girl and boy stood.

"Oh! What is that?" queried Agnes.

"Hear 'em?" said Neale. "That shuffling sound? I bet there are a hundred of 'em on this shore."

"Neale O'Neil! What does it mean?" gasped the girl, in wonder.

"It means that we are on one of the Tortugas. We must be. And this desert strand is populous at night, sure enough."

"Turtles!" shrieked Agnes.

At once the sliding and shuffling noise increased. The first beams of the sun coming up out of the eastern ocean began to separate the strands of mist. The boy and girl peered earnestly out upon the open shore.

"There's one!" gasped Agnes. "A big fellow! Wish we could catch it to show to the children, Neale."

"I mean to catch it," declared Neale, running down from the cocoanut grove, a stick in his hand. "And more than one."

"Going to make it lay more eggs?" giggled Agnes, keeping step with him.

"My dear girl! That is fresh meat for us. Fish and clams are all right. But here is the nicest kind of meat—better than chicken. And nourishing fat. My flock not only will supply us with eggs at this season of the year, but the turtle will give us ragout and soup beyond compare."

"Why, you talk like a French chef, Neale O'Neil," she cried.

"Say rather like a hungry American boy who wants variety. Ah! This is a monster, Aggie!"

They almost fell over a turtle which was bigger around than the bottom of an ordinary tub. Neale stuck his stick under it, heaved persistently, and the struggling, hissing creature went over on its back.

"Now look him in the beak," laughed Neale. "But keep away from his flippers. Those claws are sharp."

"Goodness!" ejaculated the girl. "What do you think! Here is another!"

"We'll turn over a couple more. They can't very well get back on their stomachs and crawl away. You see, they all beat it for the sea about sunrise and go to feeding on kelp and the like down on the rocky bottom. They come ashore to lay their eggs—and—and visit together, I suppose," he added, rather confused in his mind regarding the natural history of the sea-turtle.

Twice he pitched upon a scrambling turtle and turned it over. The three were well above highwater mark, so the sea could not roll in and aid them to escape.

"And now," pursued the boy, "let us hunt the haymow for eggs for breakfast."

"How ridiculous! What do you mean—'haymow'? Where do those funny things lay their eggs?"

"Wait," urged Neale O'Neil. "It is getting lighter now, so we can see better. Look along the sands up here near the jungle. If there is a sort of round place patted down—not just smooth, but hard—that may be a nest. The turtle scoops out the nest with its fore-flippers, lays the eggs smoothly in the saucer, and then covers back the sand and beats it down with its flippers. Look! There is a likely place!"

Agnes fell on her knees immediately and began to scratch away the sand. She came, not more than two inches below the surface, to the huddle of leathery-skinned eggs.

"Dear me, Neale! How exciting this is. I thought I should cry myself to sleep last night because I was a Miss Crusoe. But I went to sleep so fast that I forgot to cry. And now *this!* Why, being cast away on a desert island is lots of fun, I think."

Later, the two smaller girls quite agreed with Agnes on this point. But Ruth looked at the situation more soberly.

When they were all up and had bathed their faces at the edge of the water——

“But I feel sticky!” Tess observed, after her ablutions were performed. “I might just as well have not washed my face. And if there isn’t anything but salt water here on this island, shall we have to drink only coffee and tea?”

“I’d rather have milk,” said Dot thoughtfully. “I guess if Neale found hens here he can find cows, too,” and she laughed.

“Of course I can find milk,” declared Neale O’Neil promptly. “And don’t worry about the salt water for washing your face, Tess. It is very good for your eyes, sea-water is.”

Luke looked sideways at Ruth and muttered:

“Some boy, that Neale. He’d be cheerful at the bottom of a well.”

“We must admit Neale O’Neil is a very good person to have along if one is to be cast away on an uninhabited island,” said the critical sister, smiling. “But where, do you suppose, will he find the milk?”

They had forgotten the cocoanuts. Neale got a gimlet and bored the “eyes” of a big one and the milk foamed out into the children’s cups. They rather liked its sweetish flavor too.

“Although,” said Dot, “I think my milk’s been skimmed. It looks sort of blue.”

In the stores which they had brought ashore from the launch there was some canned milk; but they were sparing of this. The older members of the party refused to use it at all in their drink. There was considerable coffee and tea and some canned fruits and meat. They had not expected to be gone from the St. Sergius Arms much longer than two days, and had provisioned accordingly.

But Neale’s bright mind evolved makeshifts for food as well as for other things. He entered into the spirit of this Crusoe experience with all the gusto of live adventure. It would have seemed very tame indeed to him, on this uninhabited island, if his ingenuity had not to be taxed.

Mr. Howbridge warmly acclaimed Neale’s statement that the capture of the sea-turtles was important. After breakfast, which was graced by the turtle eggs which Agnes had helped discover, the whole party gathered about the three sprawling turtles, which the lawyer called “testudinate reptiles.”

“Don’t call them by such horrid names, Guardy, or I shall not want to eat them,” begged Agnes.

“And who is going to do the preparing?” Luke wanted to know. “How do you get them out of their shells, Neale? That looks like a formidable task.”

“You can read poetry to them, if you like,” grinned Neale, “till they get disgusted and shuck their shells to get away. Or you can tickle their toes with a straw until they laugh so heartily that they split their shells.”

“Now, Neale!” exclaimed Ruth, while the others laughed with and at him.

“Never mind. Give me the boat-ax,” said the joking boy. “I don’t need any help. We will have stewed turtle for dinner if you leave it to me.”

Mr. Howbridge and Luke immediately went aboard the *Isobel* and began a thorough overhauling of the engine. They had tools in plenty; and now that the motor-boat was in quiet water they thought they would be able to correct the mechanical difficulties. Luke knew considerable about an engine, and the lawyer was not unhandy himself.

Ashore, the bigger girls proceeded to make the tent more comfortable, so that if they *should* be obliged to stay another night it would be better for the children. There were certain pans and dishes to wash, and washing them in salt water was not an easy matter.

Nobody had said much about the small amount of drinking water; but Ruth had thought of it and she forbade Agnes to use any of the supply that had been brought ashore unless she was actually obliged to. If Tess and Dot said anything about being thirsty, Ruth gave them fruit, the juice of which made up for the lack of water which they would have drunk under other circumstances.

As for Tess and Dot, when they had sated their curiosity in looking at the three turtles on their backs with their flippers waving in the air, they wandered away on a tour of exploration, the smaller sister bearing her Alice-doll, which was almost as much her companion as her own head.

The two little girls wandered afar that morning. The others were so sure that Tess and Dot could not get into trouble that they did not limit the bounds of their wanderings, so long as they kept to the easterly side of the mound on which grew the great palm tree.

The island was not more than an eighth of a mile wide at this end, and the shrubbery in the middle, between the two strips of shore, was not properly a “jungle,” for it was easily penetrated even by Tess and Dot Kenway.

Dot, however, was not as sturdy as her sister. Nor was she so much interested in the strange things they saw. In fact, Dot was a very practical little thing, and nothing, no matter what, suited her unless it was just what she was used to in and about the old Corner House.

“Aren’t these shells pretty?” cried Tess, gathering pearl-lipped shells on the strand and loading

her apron with them.

"We have shells at home," said Dot, in her blasé way. "Mrs. MacCall's got one as big as that for a sugar scoop."

"Oh! Well! So she has," admitted Tess. "But maybe she'd like a new one."

"What for?" asked the exasperating Dot. "They never wear out, I guess."

The sun began to get hot and there was no longer a breeze. Even Tess considered the shade of the dwarf palms preferable to the open beach. Dot, nursing her Alice-doll, sat down on a stone as soon as Tess called a halt, and emitted a sigh of relief.

"Well, anyway!" she remarked. "I'm glad you want to wait a while, Tess Kenway. You know, we don't have to see everything on this island in one day."

"Maybe we have," rejoined her sister quickly. "If Mr. Howbridge and the boys get the engine fixed, we'll go right back to the hotel. Ruth says so. I need a clean pair of stockings."

"Well, my Alice-doll ought to have her clothes changed," admitted Dot. "I guess we'll not have to stay here much longer. Or maybe a steamship will come for us. I——"

And then, with sudden animation, she began waving her arms and feet and from her lips issued the most excruciating cries. She lost hold of the doll, which sprawled in the sands. To Tess Kenway's amazement, Dot began to travel right away from the edge of the grove toward the sea!

CHAPTER XVI—MR. METHUSELAH

Dot's cries of surprise and Tess' shrieks for help brought Neale bounding through the grove with the older girls after him in wild alarm. What they saw first was calculated to amaze them.

Cavorting down the beach was Dot Kenway, flat upon her back, her legs and arms waving wildly. She was not moving so very fast, but she evidently was headed for the sea.

Luckily Neale had picked up the first weapon to his hand when he started. This was the stick he had used early that morning to turn over the three captured turtles. He ploughed his way through the brush, leaped across the sands, and arrived beside the traveling Dot just as she rolled off the shell of the huge turtle which, half-buried in the sand, she had thought was a stone!

Neale immediately inserted the stick under the edge of the creature's lower shell and heaved it over on its back. Dot gathered herself up, crying and sputtering.

"You—you can have your old turkles, Neale O'Neil!" she cried. "I won't even eat their eggs, if that's the way they act. I—I thought I was sitting down on a stone. I—I——"

Ruth arrived to comfort her. Meanwhile Tess brought the Alice-doll and Neale and Agnes examined this huge reptile, which really was a monster.

"He must be awfully old," said Agnes, wonderingly.

"The edge of his upper shell is all cracked and dented. He's seen some few seasons, all right," Neale agreed.

"Do they grow very old, Neale?"

"Old as Methuselah," laughed Neale.

"No!"

"It's a fact. Tortoises—sea turtles, too—grow to be hundreds of years old. They beat elephants and whales. This fellow——"

"He'll get away if you turn him over," Agnes cried.

"I'll head him up the beach. I want to see——"

Over went the big turtle at that moment. Neale jumped on the corrugated shell and tried to hold the creature down. The sand slid from the shell and as the dull beast started to crawl up the strand, instead of into the sea, Agnes came nearer and pointed at something she saw.

"See there, Neale."

"Look out! Don't get in front of him!" Neale warned her. "His beak is as hard as iron."

"Are those letters, Neale—words?" demanded Agnes, still staring at the turtle.

Neale rolled off, scrambled to his feet, and began to examine the marks on the turtle's back.

"You're right they are!" he exclaimed. "We aren't the first folks that have made a pet of this fellow."

"Pet!" repeated Ruth, scornfully.

"What does it say?" cried Agnes.

"Perhaps he carries his calling card with him," announced Neale O'Neil.

Dot stopped crying and Tess and she came nearer to the turtle. The creature, as though realizing that it was foiled in its first attempt to reach the sea, had stopped. They could all see the deep scratches on the shell. They looked like this:

CRISTOFO COLUMBO
1492

"Well, of all things!" gasped Ruth, when she had gained a complete understanding of what the inscription on the turtle's shell meant. 163

"Is that his name?" asked Dot. "Cristuff—tuff—Why! And there is his number!"

"I wonder if that is his street number or his telephone?" chuckled Neale.

"Don't be ridiculous!" exclaimed Agnes, quite in earnest. "What do you suppose it means, Ruth?"

"It seems awfully funny," observed the oldest Kenway girl. "'Christopher Columbus, 1492.' It's not possible."

"One thing sure," said Neale dryly: "They spelled just as poorly in those days as they do now."

"It can't be possible!" exclaimed Agnes.

"I remember Christopher Columbus," said Tess practically. "We learned about him at school."

"So we did!" shouted Dot, with sudden energy. "You know—'First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his coun-tri-men!'"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Tess. "That was George Washington, Dot."

"Well, it is a most remarkable thing," Ruth said. "Can't we keep him to show Mr. Howbridge and Luke?"

"Sure will," declared Neale. "Wait till I drive him up above highwater mark. And into the shade, too; for this sun would dry him to powder, seems to me, in an hour. I'll turn him over in the shade and then let's all take a swim. It should be safe enough in the pool where the *Isobel* is anchored." 164

"I'd like to know how you think we girls are going to go bathing, Neale O'Neil, when we haven't any bathing suits with us?" complained Agnes.

"I'll lend you mine," grinned her boy friend. "But isn't there anything you girls can wear?"

"I'd like a dip," sighed Ruth. "We can let the children go in with you boys. And then Agnes and I will take our turn by ourselves."

"You think of so many nice things, Neale," said Agnes. "Why can't you invent us some bathing suits?"

"I might paint the lily and adorn the rose," grumbled Neale O'Neil. "But I am no modiste. I—guess—not!"

However, after the heat of the day was over they all found means of getting a cool dip. Meanwhile they compared notes. Neale had supplied a most excellent stew of turtle meat, for they had plenty of seasoning, and he had likewise discovered specimens of the plantain, the fruit of which added to the variety of the repast. He was acclaimed a wonderful chef by all. 165

On the part of Mr. Howbridge and Luke, although they bore upon their hands and faces plentiful marks of toil in grease and smut, they could not report that much progress had been made in repairing the engine. That matter really seemed almost hopeless.

"But there is something of even greater importance," Mr. Howbridge said the next morning to Neale and Luke. "I am worried about the water question."

"What fell day before yesterday, I suppose, was soon burned up," Luke reflected.

"You said it," agreed Neale.

So, following the usual siesta, for nobody could work even at this time of year in the full heat of the sun, the boys and Mr. Howbridge set off through the brush to sound every likely spot for water, leaving the girls at the dish-washing. They did not have a shovel but they had a broken oar and sticks with which to prod the ground for any dampness that might promise a living spring.

The smaller girls were by this time anxious to run about again. They were much interested in "Mr. Methuselah," as Neale had dubbed the big turtle on which had been engraved by somebody the name of the discoverer of America and the correct date of that discovery. 166

"But it makes him awfully old," Tess said gravely. "How old does it make the turtle, Ruth?"

"Well," said the older sister, "if we are to believe that Christopher Columbus carved his name and the date on that turtle when he first came to these islands, it must have been more than four and a quarter centuries ago."

"O-oo!" gasped Dot. "That's awful old, isn't it?"

"And the turtle must have been pretty big when the carving was done," laughed Ruth. "It takes a couple of hundred years for them to gain full size, I believe."

"What a joke!" ejaculated Agnes. "Then this turtle would be at least six hundred years old right now."

"It would seem so," agreed Ruth.

"I guess he must be," said Tess gravely. "He looks that old. He is the oldest looking thing I ever saw."

Just then Neale gave a shout, and called to them. The four Corner House girls responded by hurrying to the spot where Neale had come out of the shrubs.

"Here's another!" he cried.

"Another what?" demanded Agnes.

But she saw what he referred to the next moment. Neale was dancing in front of a big turtle and poking it with his stick to keep it from descending the beach to the sea.

"Come on!" Neale cried. "Here's another one with his calling card on his back."

"You don't mean it!" cried Ruth. "Is he dated, too? Is it Amerigo Vespucci?"

"Wait! This fellow will keep going. There must have been some practical jokers in this neighborhood. Look, Agnes! What are those letters?"

"For goodness' sake!" gasped Ruth.

But Agnes, almost choked with laughter, spelled out the following inscription on the turtle's shell:

JULES CESAR
B. C. 48

"Four years before Cæsar died," exclaimed Ruth, casting back in her mind to ancient history lessons.

"And what do you know about the 'B. C.?' Cæsar must have known they were going to change the calendar," chuckled Neale. "And the same informality of spelling. It seems Cæsar and Columbus must have gone to the same school."

"And," said Agnes, gravely, but with dancing eyes, "if we accept the one as *bona fide*, then we must believe this one, too. This turtle is nearly two thousand years old."

"O-oo!" gasped Tess.

"'Julius Cæsar' is the name of Bill Monnegan, the coal man's horse," declared Dot. "And that horse never could have cut those letters into that turtle. So I guess it is maybe a joke, isn't it?"

"It must be a joke," laughed Ruth. Then, quite seriously, she added: "But think! Maybe this island isn't always deserted. Perhaps other people have been here and will come again."

"These turtles travel many hundreds of miles, Ruth," Neale said quietly. "This discovery, I guess, offers no particular hope that we shall have visitors. But, of course, we'll get that old engine to working before long."

CHAPTER XVII—LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE

Imagine becoming bored on a desert island in the tropics! But that is exactly what happened in the case of Dot Kenway. Nor was Tess in much finer fettle on the fourth morning of their sojourn on Palm Island.

"I wish we had Tom Jonah here. Or even Billy Bumps," said Tess to her smaller sister. "There isn't really much to play with on this place but turtles. And they only lie on their backs and wave their paws at you."

"It is too bad we didn't bring that rabbit along that Sammy Pinkney gave us for Christmas," said Dot, quite as ruefully.

"That old Belgian hare!"

"We-ell, the Belgians are all right, I guess. They live over there in Europe."

"I guess that rabbit never came from Bel-Belgia, or whatever that place is called," said Tess.

"And we don't even know *his* name," went on Dot. "We came away so soon after Christmas, and it snowed in between, that I didn't see that rabbit at all. But Uncle Rufus said it had a good appetite."

"I'm hungry myself," announced Tess, rather despondently. "If I tell Ruth she'll only give me some funny fruit and tell me to eat it and be thankful."

"M-mm. I know," rejoined Dot, appreciating this. "But how can you be thankful for something you don't want? Now, if I had a piece of bread and butter—"

"Oh! And with honey on it!"

"No. Apricot jam. I like that better."

"Of all the stingy children!" exclaimed Tess, in a strangely quarrelsome mood for her. "When I want honey!"

"Can't you have honey if you want to? And me have apricot jam? It's only in our minds, anyway,"

mourned Dot, hugging up the Alice-doll. "Say, Tess, let's do something."

"What is there to do in this place?" repeated her sister despondently.

"Mr. Howbridge and Luke and Neale have gone hunting for springs again. Ruth told them she had just got to have fresh water. I don't know what for," Dot remarked. "They have almost got the engine fixed. I heard Neale say so. Let us go see it."

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This suggestion for action was better than no action at all. Tess agreed, and, unseen by the older girls, the two little ones made their way down to the rocky cove where the *Isobel* lay. She was not even at anchor now, for the anchor had been raised and the motor-boat drawn very close in to the rocks, as it was high tide. The log still lay like a gangplank from the rock to the forward part of the *Isobel*.

The boys and Mr. Howbridge had gone away and left the motor-boat in rather a precarious situation, but quite without realizing it. The tide was rising and that served to lift the log and make it rather unsafe for Tess and Dot to pass over; and when the little girls had done so, splash! The log fell into the water between the boat and the shore.

"O-oo! Now see what we've done," gasped Dot.

"Never mind. Neale will find another. And we can stay here till he comes back," Tess declared.

She did not notice, however, that the accident had brought a sudden strain upon the single line that bound the boat to the shore. This mooring was not very skillfully made, for neither Neale nor Luke were practical sailors, and so were not professional rope-knotters.

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At any rate, with the falling of the log the hull of the *Isobel* strained at the small hawser, and that rope loosened, almost imperceptibly at first, from the rock around which it had been looped.

Tess and Dot did not see this. They got down into the cockpit, and from that place they could not see the rocks without standing up, nor could they be seen themselves from the shore.

The motor-boat rose and fell rather pleasantly upon the surface of the inlet. The tide had now risen to its highest point, and as it turned and began to recede, naturally everything afloat in the little cove began to drift out to sea. The log that had served as a gangplank between the *Isobel* and the shore went first, but soon the motor-boat likewise got into the tide and blundered out through the mouth of the narrow estuary.

Strange as it may seem, the two smallest Corner House girls did not discover what had happened until the bobbing motor-boat was quite a long way from the island. It was then the freshening wind, that made the boat "joggle," which first annoyed Dot Kenway.

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"I wish this boat would stay still, Tess," she complained. "Let's go back to the land. I feel all joggled up inside me."

Tess jumped up. "Why-ee!" she gasped. "Where—where is Palm Island?"

"Where is what?" her sister demanded, likewise scrambling to her feet.

They were both facing seaward. There were islands in that direction, but smaller ones, and, it seemed to Tess and Dot, a vast distance away! Tess whirled around. Palm Island was behind them. The motor-boat was blundering away from their refuge and their sisters and their friends!

If Dot and Tess had been looking for adventure, they certainly had found it this time.

"Is that Plam Island?" Dot demanded.

"Of course it is."

"But—but what's it doing 'way over there?" quavered Dot. "I thought we were tied to it."

"We came untied I guess," said Tess, despondently, seeing the rope dragging over the boat's rail. "Oh, dear me!"

"I told you I didn't like this place, Tess Kenway!" stormed Dot. "And now see what's happened to us. Ruthie will be awful mad."

But Tess knew that Ruth would experience a different emotion from anger. As long as the boat remained on even keel Tess did not see how much harm could come to them. But suppose they bumped into something?

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"Let's shout!" she urged, climbing upon one of the seats. "Maybe they will hear us."

But the wind was blowing from the direction of Palm Island, and that and the tide carried the *Isobel* away from their friends, and carried the sound of their shrill voices away, too.

It was an hour later before anybody on Palm Island imagined that anything out of the way had befallen Tess and Dot Kenway.

There was good reason for the fact that Tess and Dot were not soon missed. The older sisters had left the little ones playing near the tent when they strolled away themselves to see if any success was attending the efforts of the boys and Mr. Howbridge in their search for water.

The heat of the day was over. The breeze had sprung up and laved their faces delightfully as the girls strolled toward the hill on which the big palm tree grew.

The two older sisters found that the boys and their guardian had gone around the foot of the hill which occupied the middle of Palm Island, but they started to mount the slope of the smooth

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eminence.

"I wish we could see some boat and attract its attention," sighed Ruth, as they went on. "Then it wouldn't matter about the water supply or about repairing the engine of the *Isobel*."

"I guess we have been castaways long enough," agreed Agnes. "It would be awful if we had to stay here much longer. Think of our nice dresses there at the hotel all going to waste."

Ruth smiled indulgently. "We can wear them when we go back North."

"Oh, they'll be almost old by that time," declared the younger girl sadly. "And I did so want to wear 'em where Nalbro Hastings and those other girls could see that we weren't frumps, even if we did come from Milton."

"I never!" exclaimed Ruth, laughing. "You are the strangest girl, Aggie."

"Ought not to be strange to you, Ruthie. You've known me all my life," remarked the flyaway sister, smiling. "And I did want to sport my new frocks!"

"So you shall," said Ruth, comfortingly. "I don't think we shall have to remain on Palm Island much longer. Luke tells me he is sure that the engine will be all right soon. He knows a good deal about such things."

"Oh, Ruth!" exclaimed Agnes suddenly, "there's a boat coming to rescue us now!"

They were about half way up the slope of the hill. Agnes had turned to look back, and right over the lower trees and the rocky end of the island a craft of some kind was visible. Ruth, quite as excited as her sister, turned sharply to look in the direction Agnes pointed.

"From that way?" she murmured. "St. Sergius isn't over there, Aggie."

"I don't care. You can see the boat, can't you?" cried Agnes eagerly. "Hurrah! I want to tell Neale. I saw the boat first."

"Wait!" commanded Ruth, seizing the excited girl's arm. "That boat is not coming this way, I am afraid."

"It's never got past the island without our seeing it!" wailed Agnes. "Never!"

"I—don't—know——"

"I wish we had put up a flag—a signal of some kind," Agnes continued to complain. "Oh, Ruthie! If they have gone right by without seeing us! I would have sacrificed my sports skirt for a flag and worn—worn a gunny sack, if necessary! This is too mean."

"Wait, Aggie!" exclaimed Ruth, still staring at the boat Agnes had first spied. "There—there is something the matter with that boat. What propels it?"

"It is a motor-boat like ours, of course," rejoined Agnes quickly.

"It is not moving fast enough for that. And there is no sail. And I cannot see anything moving on that boat."

"For goodness' sake, Ruthie! Is it a boat sailing all by itself?" Agnes demanded.

"Exactly. That is what it is. The boat has broken away——"

"Well, now!" gasped Agnes. "Isn't that strange? And it's a motor-boat like the *Isobel*."

"Oh, Aggie!" cried Ruth, turning to her with a frightened face now. "Aggie! It is our boat! It's broken away, somehow. We are now really cast away on this island. What will become of us?"

Agnes Kenway felt immense dismay at the possibility of the truth of her sister's statement. But Ruth was so utterly despairing that the younger girl felt she must comfort her.

"If it's the *Isobel*, we're lucky not to be in her," she said. "I guess we would have to wait for some other boat to come after us, anyway; so we are no worse off than we were before."

"How can you say that?" Ruth demanded. "Luke was sure he had almost got at the cause of the trouble with the mechanism."

"Well, let's not cry about it," begged Agnes. "Oh, don't, Ruth! If Tess and Dot see you in tears ——"

Ruth dried her eyes suddenly. "I wonder where the children are?" she murmured. "I wonder if they have seen the boat drifting away?"

"And I don't believe Neale O'Neil knows about it. I am going to run and tell him," said Agnes, who always made Neale a partner in everything that happened to her.

She darted off excitedly. Ruth started back toward their camp. As she pushed through the shrubs, hastening her steps, she wondered where Tess and Dot were. By and by she began to call them by name; but she received no reply save the raucous cries of the water-fowl and the chattering of parakeets.

Ruth Kenway began to be alarmed in earnest.

Agnes Kenway was as light-footed as a deer. She ran as hard as she could around the slope of the hill on which the big palm grew, and thence down into the green wood. She shouted as she ran and soon heard Neale O'Neil reply.

"What's broken loose, Aggie?" demanded the boy, as soon as she came into view of the waterhunting party.

"That's exactly what has happened, Neale," she returned, in accents which assured both Neale and the others that she was quite in earnest. "Something has broken away! The *Isobel*!"

Mr. Howbridge came running with Luke. The lawyer's face was white, for he had heard the girl's statement.

"You don't mean that the boat is gone?" he cried.

"So Ruthie says. She is sure," choked Agnes. "We saw it from up there on the hill."

Luke and Neale at once dashed away, climbing the hillside with great leaps. But Agnes remained with her guardian.

"We had just found a spring. A good one, too," murmured the troubled gentleman. "Well, perhaps that is a good thing. If the boat has really drifted away."

"Oh! It has! It has!" cried the girl. "Everything bad is happening to us. I wish we were at home at the Corner House again."

"Tut, tut! That is no way to talk," said Mr. Howbridge, and took her arm as they started in an easterly direction again.

They had not gone far when the two young fellows returned. Both of them looked grave, and Luke said quickly:

"You can't fool Ruthie. She is always right. That is the *Isobel* out there and she's all of two miles away already."

"She'll run right into one of those small islands and be wrecked," said Neale. "Say, Mr. Howbridge! isn't this a pretty pickle?"

The party hurried on toward their camp, but they could not overtake Ruth. It was not until they passed the tent that Neale said:

"Wonder where Tess and Dot are? Seen 'em lately, Aggie?"

"Why, they must be with Ruth."

"But there is Ruth now," cried Luke, increasing his stride. "I don't see the children with her."

"Truly, the *Isobel* has drifted away," muttered Mr. Howbridge, as they now came in sight of the inlet and the place where the crippled motor-boat had been moored.

The younger people, however, made him no reply. They had suddenly lost interest in the matter of the boat. They were all gazing at Ruth Kenway. Her attitude, as she stood on a high boulder at the edge of the water, looking off upon the sea, was almost tragic.

Luke bounded ahead at last, reaching the girl much in advance of the others.

"Ruth! Ruth!" he exclaimed. "What is it? Tess—Dot—"

Her hands were clasped tightly against her breast. She did not turn or even look down at him. But her lips moved stiffly and he heard what she said:

"Luke! They are out there! My darling children—my little sisters that I promised mother when she died I would always take care of! Oh, Luke! They are gone—gone!"

He sprang up then beside the girl. It was well he did so, for she wavered and would have fallen had his arm not been around her.

"Ruth! Ruth!" shrieked Agnes, now flying over the sands to the rocky shore. "They are not on the boat? Oh, they *can't* be!"

Mr. Howbridge was aroused to the seriousness of the happening. The disappearance of Tess and Dot was a tragedy that dwarfed altogether the loss of the motor-boat.

"I saw them! I saw them!" panted Ruth, lying in Luke's arms for the moment. "They waved something on a stick. I think it was Tess' skirt. But the boat is too far away now for you to see it."

"And not a thing to follow them in," muttered Neale.

Agnes put a quick palm over his mouth. Thoughtless as the flyaway sister usually was, she realized at this moment the feelings that racked her sister. For Ruth had been responsible for the safety of the little ones, and Agnes knew that nothing could be said to make the older girl forget that fact.

The sun was fast declining. They all knew that the twilight would be short. Indeed, nightfall in the tropics is almost sudden enough to scare one. The last ray of the sun disappears and in an instant it would seem it is velvety dark and the stars pop out!

It did not seem possible that they could do anything to help or to follow Tess and Dot; in any case, not at night. The boat was so far away that they could merely distinguish it as a black-red blotch upon the ocean, where the departing rays of the sun touched the moving object.

The children were too small to be seen, even had they stood upon the decked-over forward part of the *Isobel*. They were, of course, in the cockpit or in the cabin. All alone upon the ocean! The thought smote the others as well as Ruth Kenway with horror and alarm.

They stood there on the rocks, staring seaward. Not a craft was in sight save the drifting *Isobel*. It was a lonely stretch of water, with perhaps half a dozen small islands in sight. The lost craft might be drifting toward another strand, or it might pass right out between the islands and go to sea. For Neale's chart portrayed the fact that beyond this group of the Tortugas, the islands where the pirates used to careen their schooners and scrape their hulls of barnacles, was the tropical Atlantic Ocean.

It was a hopeless group indeed on Palm Island. Perhaps more hopeless and unhappy than the two little girls themselves who were the object of so much solicitude. It was true that Dot had cried a little, but she had the Alice-doll with her, and was soon comforted. Tess, from her very nature, was likely to consider the situation more interesting than threatening.

Here was a chance for Tess to take the lead; and she certainly loved to "boss." Dot was quite ready to sit down and allow her older sister to arrange matters. That was by far the easier way. Then, if things went wrong, there was always Tess to be blamed.

The older sister assumed responsibility with the joy of an oyster imbibing sea-water. She immediately became possessed of the idea that she really might do something to aid in their difficulty. They were afloat on rather a big ocean, as far as she could see, and without means of propelling the *Isobel* in any way the current did not go; nevertheless, Tess took the wheel, as she had seen Mr. Howbridge and the boys do, and proceeded to "steer" the motor-boat on her course.

"Why don't you turn it around and make it run back to Plam Island again?" Dot wanted to know with what might have been considered sarcasm from an older person.

"Now, you know very well that the engine isn't running," said Tess, "And so the propellers aren't making any splatter in the water. So we could not make her go back to the island. The tide will carry us—carry us—"

"Well, where's it going to carry us?" Dot demanded, a good deal more efficient as a question-asker than a question-answerer.

"Now, Dorothy Kenway!" exclaimed Tess, very self-important, "I wish you would not sit there and ask such things. I am no better acquainted around here than you are."

"There's an island," said Dot, standing up to look ahead.

"Yes, I see there is. Perhaps this boat wants to go there. I am sure I would just as lief be on land as out here in this boat."

"Suppose—suppose there is somebody on that island?" quavered Dot.

"Wouldn't be any harm in that."

"Or something to hurt us? A big, big—"

"Turtle," finished Tess practically. "That Mr. Methuselah didn't really hurt you, Dot, if he did start to run off with you. You can look where you are sitting, next time, can't you?"

"Well, I hope Neale O'Neil or somebody will come after us," sighed Dot.

Suddenly Tess became very thoughtful. She exclaimed:

"Why, they won't know we are in this boat at all! They can't see us over the sides. Here, Dot! You take this steer-a-ma-jig."

"I don't believe, Tess Kenway, that does any good," said Dot. "The boat goes just where it wants to, anyway."

This very sensible statement rather annoyed Tess. But she was in earnest. She found a boathook and hurried to remove her skirt, which was plaid with much red in it. This she fastened to the rusty hook and set it up in the stern of the *Isobel*. As a flag of distress it was a good deal better than nothing.

Then Tess went back to the steering wheel. She did not, herself, see that what she did to it made any difference; but one must do something. She looked ahead at the island which the bow of the motor-boat was aimed for. The current that had seized the drifting boat undoubtedly laved the shore of this island, which was not, as Tess could see, half the size of Palm Island. There was a goodly group of palm trees on it, but the white beach, as far as the little girls could see it, was very narrow.

In fact, it was a true coral island, built entirely by the coral insects. Sand had been washed upon the coral reefs by the sea until the soil was raised slightly above the surface of the water. Birds had brought and dropped seeds of tropical plants here. The waves had washed ashore logs and other refuse to decay and aid in forming a crust of friable soil.

Thus, in thousands and thousands of years, had grown up the island. Ruth had told Tess and Dot all about the formation of such bits of land, and the little girls had been much interested in the

story. Now, in the fast-dimming evening light, they watched the green and white edge of the little island the boat was approaching with some uncertainty in the mind of Tess as well as of Dot.

If they did bump into that island what was in store for them?

"I—I guess," said Tess, finally, "we'd better go downstairs into the cabin and go to bed; and—and—let her bump."

CHAPTER XIX—THE RAFT

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With the night shut down upon Palm Island and the sea there was absolutely no use in the anxious party standing longer at the inlet, out of which the *Isobel* had drifted, carrying the two little girls. Even Ruth recognized the futility of remaining longer on the shore.

Neale hurried ahead to the camp and started a fire. They had plenty of thoroughly seasoned driftwood, and when the flames began licking about the broken chunks their hues of green, amber, and pink were very pretty. To-night, however, even Agnes did not exclaim over the delicate beauty of the flames.

The party ate what Neale and the girls prepared, and there was very little said among the quintette. Agnes frequently went to Ruth and put her arms about her. The younger sister felt so sorry for the older that she almost forgot her own anxiety for the safety of the little girls.

Mr. Howbridge could say nothing to aid Ruth or the others or to make them feel more cheerful. The absence of Tess and Dot was a thing that could not be lessened by any further talk. Even now, in the pitch darkness of the tropical night, the *Isobel* might have come to grief and the children be cast into the sea.

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These thoughts were so bitter that occasionally the lawyer groaned aloud. Luke, clinging to one of Ruth's hands, felt the girl tremble every time her guardian gave voice to his bitter feelings. Agnes sobbed now and then convulsively. And for once Neale could find no silver lining to this cloud of trouble.

The little girls had often caused the older ones anxiety; they had been lost; they had got into mischief that might have proved dangerous; but this situation seemed far and away more terrible than anything that had previously happened to the Corner House girls.

Tess and Dot had drifted away once in a boat at Pleasant Cove, but Tom Jonah, the faithful, had then been in their company. Now they were adrift on an unknown sea, in the dark, and with a hundred perils threatening them. Ruth felt that never before had her little sisters been in such danger while she was unable to lift a finger to help them.

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She scarcely touched the food placed before her. Even Luke could not comfort Ruth Kenway now. In her mind continually danced possibilities of disaster for the two children who, since their mother's death, she had attended so closely.

Her early duties as "little mother" had made Ruth seem really older than her years. Her thoughtfulness for her three sisters had made her different from other girls. Agnes often declared that Ruth "couldn't have any fun" because of the duties that took first place in her mind and in her life.

The release from care that had been joined with the coming of the four Kenways and their Aunt Sarah Maltby to the Corner House in Milton had not entirely erased from Ruth's mind certain remembrances connected with their previous poverty in Bloomsburg. This fact, perhaps, made her all the more charitable and thoughtful for other people's troubles.

And now the occasion called up in the older girl's mind the most doleful thoughts and surmises. What might not happen to Tess and Dot out on the sea in that unmanageable boat?

Ruth Kenway retired to the tent and nobody but Agnes followed to comfort her. And Agnes was not much of a comforter. She gave way too easily to her own despair to be of help to her sister.

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The latter heard Mr. Howbridge and the boys talking together over the embers of the fire long after Agnes had fallen into a restless sleep. For her own part, Ruth could not sleep. She could not even close her eyes.

The question which she knew was discussed by her three companions outside her tent before they rolled up in their blankets was the question that fretted persistently the girl's mind: How to reach Tess and Dot on the drifting boat?

If it was still adrift! Suppose it had crashed upon some rock—some island shore? Suppose the *Isobel* had really been wrecked at last? A hole stove in her hull, perhaps, and the craft even now sinking with the helpless children upon it?

Then Ruth heard the gentle souging of the waves on the strand below the camp, and she took heart again. The sea was so quiet, the wind was so gentle, it scarcely seemed possible that the *Isobel* could be wrecked. But the wind and the current were both driving the motor-boat away from Palm Island if, by chance, she was not cast away.

The fact of disaster Ruth tried to deny. The sea was so gentle even the lightest bark must be safe

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upon it. There was practically no surf. The waves merely lapped against the strand with a very soothing and reassuring noise.

"Why, a mere raft would not be in danger!" the girl thought.

And with this conclusion there suddenly stabbed her mind the thought that the means of following and rescuing Tess and Dot might lie in the very thing she pictured. *A raft.*

There were plenty of trees upon Palm Island, as well as much flotsam timber on the shores of it. There was a heavy boat ax and a few other tools that had been removed, fortunately enough, from the *Isobel*. In the jungle were green vines and lianas as tough in fiber as commercial rope. She knew just how the raft could be built and where. They could strike the tent and make a big sail of it. If the trade wind continued to blow, and she was sure it would do so, for its direction had been the same since they had left St. Sergius, the raft would be propelled in the same general direction as the *Isobel*.

She sat up and threw off her coverings. She could not wait until morning to discuss this thing with Luke. When she peered out through the tent opening only the blinking embers of the fire gave any light in the wood at all. But she heard her friends breathing near her.

Luke was nearest. She crept over to him and shook the young fellow by the shoulder.

"All right!" muttered the collegian. "What's up?"

"I am," said Ruth, in a shaky whisper.

"Is anything the matter?"

"Of course there is," cried the girl, but under her breath. "Aren't those blessed children in danger?"

"But, Ruth! We can't help that just now. Not while it's dark."

"And what are you going to do when light comes?" demanded Ruth, with some exasperation.

Luke Shepard groaned. What could he say to soothe the girl of whom he was so very fond?

"Hadn't you better try to get some sleep, Ruth?" he finally said.

But he did not wholly know Ruth Kenway, much as he admired her. He had not known her in the days when she had borne the entire burden of the Kenways' domestic troubles. He had no idea that her very active mind was bound to exert itself until some reasonable method of helping Tess and Dot was evolved.

"Listen!" she commanded, sternly. "Listen, Luke. The children must be brought back."

"Oh, Ruthie!"

"It may sound impossible to you, but it isn't impossible. It means hard work, and you boys and Mr. Howbridge must practically do it all. But I have thought of a way."

"Goodness me!" gasped Luke, sitting up quickly. "Come away from here. Don't wake Mr. Howbridge. You can tell me first, can't you?"

"I mean to tell you first," declared Ruth, quite undisturbed by his expressed doubt.

Luke hurried her away from the camp. They reached the open beach where the starlight gave to the scene a bland radiance. At another time both the young people would have considered it a lovely view and would have spoken of it. But now—

"What is it you have thought of, Ruth?" demanded the youth, holding her hand and looking closely at her.

"I know how we can—how we must—go after Tess and Dot."

"Oh, Ruth!"

She explained. The idea of a good-sized raft, with sail and two oars (these had belonged to the *Isobel*), was rapidly sketched by the girl in no faltering accents. Luke soon began to take fire at her plan. His eyes sparkled and he could scarcely wait for her to complete her details.

"Ruth! It's a wonder of an idea! Of course we can!"

"Oh!" she said with a sudden sob, "if it were only daylight. All the time the dear little things are floating farther and farther away."

"Don't say another word!" exclaimed Luke, eagerly. "I don't care if it is dark! Wait! What time is it?" He struck a match and looked at his wrist watch. "Twelve-twenty-five. The darkest time of all the night, but you can see pretty well out here on the shore. There are plenty of fallen logs at the edge of the grove, over toward the inlet where the *Isobel* lay."

"So there are, Luke."

"We'll want to build the raft there. Then we can push her out right into the wake of the motorboat. I'll wake Neale. Don't disturb your guardian yet. Neale and I can do a lot before morning."

"Oh, Luke," she sighed, "you are such a comfort."

Luke sped back to the camp and shook Neale awake in a jiffy, and without hearing the anxious girl's approbation.

"Wha-what's the matter?" asked the younger youth, sitting up and rubbing his eyes vigorously. "Nobody's come to rescue us, has there, Luke?"

"Hush!" commanded the collegian. "No. But we've found a way to go after Tess and Dot."

"Crackey!" gasped Neale, struggling out from under the blanket. "It will be a long, hard swim, Luke. I had thought of that."

"Ruth has got an idea—and a good one," declared Luke.

"Oh, that puts another face upon the matter, as the fellow said when he put on his masque at the costume ball. Ruth is a regular 'go-getter' when it comes to ideas. What is it?"

He hurried after Luke through the grove and they came out upon the easterly point of Palm Island, where the rocky reefs guarded the inlet whence the motor-boat had floated away.

Luke had already begun in a low voice to explain to Neale the details of Ruth's idea. The younger fellow was immediately excited. The idea of making a raft that would bear them all up and float them over the quiet sea in pursuit of the motor-boat seemed the most feasible thing in the world.

Perhaps, if Mr. Howbridge had been awakened at this time, his riper judgment might have pointed out facts that would have seemed to show flaws in Ruth's idea. But Luke and Neale accepted the plan at its face value and went to work immediately. As well as they could in the starlight they began to drag certain fallen tree trunks together on the shore by the deep inlet, ready for the real task of building the raft. They had a rope and with its aid dragged the logs through the sands.

Agnes awoke and came out and insisted upon helping the young fellows. Ruth, too, was too restless and excited to remain idle. Before dawn—oh, long before!—all four of them had aching shoulders and backs and blistered palms. But they worked on without complaint, believing that they were at last doing something practical toward the recovery of the lost children.

CHAPTER XX—THE FLAG ON THE TREE-TOP

"But it is practical, Guardy!" cried Agnes, at breakfast. "You know our Ruth is always practical."

"Far be it from me to say that it is not practical—theoretically," rejoined Mr. Howbridge, referring, as Agnes did, to the idea of building a raft.

"I guess whatever will float us off this island after the *Isobel* is good enough to try," said Neale O'Neil, just a little sullenly.

"We will do all that can be done with the idea, of course," agreed Mr. Howbridge.

"But," ventured Ruth slowly, herself a little timid now, "you see something dangerous about it?"

"I hope not, my dear girl."

"Can't we build a raft big enough to carry us all?" demanded Luke.

"I suppose even that might be done," admitted Mr. Howbridge. "But, you know, there are five of us, and we are of some weight. The raft must cover sufficient area to bear us up, and the children as well when we get them, if, perchance, the motor-boat should be unusable."

"Those logs do float pretty deep in the water," observed Neale.

"Green logs," said Luke, joining in. "They are almost awash."

"Can't we use the seasoned timber along shore?" asked Ruth, faintly.

"Not so well," Luke said thoughtfully. "You see, that is of all sizes and shapes. The easiest way to build the raft is with these trimmed logs. But most of the trees were felled during that small hurricane which brought us to the island."

"Oh!" wailed Agnes, "don't say that it can't be done."

"Not at all," said Mr. Howbridge, briskly. "We are going to bind those timbers together right after we have eaten, step a mast, bend a sail, and set sail. But we must not make the raft too cumbersome; therefore we cannot all embark in this venture."

"Oh!" murmured Ruth.

But Agnes shouted: "I'm going! I don't care, Guardy Howbridge! If Neale goes, I'm going."

"Agnes!" murmured Ruth, putting a restraining hand upon her sister's arm.

"You're going, I suppose, Agnes, even if you have to walk?" chuckled Mr. Howbridge, for he knew the obstreperous Agnes pretty well by this time.

"I don't care——"

"Yes, you do, child," said the lawyer more earnestly. "You care very much about getting Tess and Dot back safely. We may have much difficulty in managing the raft. Especially on our return. The boat may be broken, or perhaps we cannot finish repairing the mechanism when we overtake it."

"We must build a raft of limited capacity. It must hold the boys and me, and the children, of course. But the added weight of you and Ruth might sink it so deeply that it could not be managed. You girls will remain here——"

"Alone?" gasped Agnes.

"No. Together," put in Neale.

"Oh, Guardy!" exclaimed Ruth, "will that be necessary? Are you sure?"

"It is a physical impossibility for us to make these green logs float higher than they do," said Mr. Howbridge dryly. "Some tropical timber is corky and very light. Not these palm logs. To build the raft of drift timber is, as you can see yourself, my dear, impossible. We must use what we have to hand, and use it at once."

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"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" murmured Ruth. "There must be no more delay."

"It will take our best efforts to manage the raft. If the wind holds fair that canvas will make a splendid sail; but it will have to be tended all the time or half of the wind will be spilled, as the sailors say. Two of us at the sail and one at the steering oar. You two girls will have to remain behind."

"It is not so much the staying here," said Ruth shakenly. "But I wanted to find the children myself and make sure they are all right."

"You will have to trust that to us," said Mr. Howbridge. "I do not believe for a moment that anything will happen to you girls here on Palm Island."

"Oh, I am not afraid," Ruth rejoined faintly.

"I think the camp should be moved over to the spring. There is a sheltered place in the side of the hill within ten yards of the spring—almost a cave. As we must take your tent——"

"Don't bother about us!" cried Ruth. "Hurry and finish your raft."

But Mr. Howbridge and the two young fellows were determined to leave Ruth and Agnes in as comfortable a situation as possible. In the first place, although no one dwelt on the thought, nobody could tell how long they would be gone from Palm Island.

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It was all very well to consider that there was a fair wind blowing away from the island, one that would presumably drive the raft on the course followed by the drifting motor-boat. But how would they ever be able to beat up against this same wind on their return?

Even Neale and Agnes kept still about this. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Once they find the two little girls and the motor-boat, everything else must come right. That was the way the young people looked at it, anyway.

The repairs upon the engine of the *Isobel* had been all but complete. If the boat had not been wrecked upon one of the small islands, the trio hoped to finish the repairs easily and bring the craft back to Palm Island in triumph.

Now the party made haste to transfer all their belongings from the point where the old camp had been established to that spot west of the hill, at the spring. The spring was a fair-flowing stream that bubbled out from under a rock and had worn a course for itself in the sands to high water mark. When the party had first walked around the island they had overlooked this tiny rivulet, as the tide had been coming in and the brackish water had flowed up the course of it.

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Agnes climbed the hill to the very foot of the huge palm, carrying an old pair of binoculars with her. She came down with flying hair and excited eyes.

"There is something flapping in the top of a palm tree on that first island! I can see it as plain as plain!" she cried.

"What is it—an old carrion crow?" demanded Neale.

"I don't mean that it is alive," returned Agnes. "It is a flag or something!"

"Do you suppose it is something the children have put up to attract our attention?" cried Ruth.

"If it is in the top of a tree, how did they get it up there?" questioned Luke.

"We-ell. They put up something in the boat; Tess's skirt, I think," Ruth said.

They could not stop to investigate Agnes Kenway's discovery at this time. But when they went back to the inlet where the raft lay, Mr. Howbridge climbed upon a rock with the glasses and examined the fluttering thing which Agnes had marked in the tree-top on the first island of the chain to the east.

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There was no other sign of life or occupancy; but certain it was that some sort of pennant fluttered in the breeze. Tess and Dot could not, of course, have climbed so high to fasten a signal of distress, even had they thought of doing such a thing; but this mysterious pennant seemed a promise that the island was occupied.

If the little voyagers had come in the drifting motor-boat to this island and been stranded, they might have found somebody already there—somebody who would take care of them.

Ruth's mind was a little relieved by this thought. Perhaps Tess and Dot were not entirely alone. The thought of their having remained alone over night on the sea or on the lonely strand had made the older sister acutely miserable.

She and Agnes saw the two boys and Mr. Howbridge set sail upon the rude raft with less anxiety than they would have felt had they realized how treacherous both the sea and the weather was in this locality. They had forgotten, in this new trouble, the savageness and abruptness of the storm that had cast them all upon Palm Island.

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The raft blundered out of the inlet, the boys guiding it with the oars. But the great, square sail was already bent upon the mast and one yard. As Mr. Howbridge had said, as soon as they were really adrift Luke and Neale had to "tend sheet." They had to keep the canvas trimmed all the time to hold the wind.

The raft began to move at a pace that momentarily increased. A little ruffle of white water showed before the blunt nose of the heavy craft. The girls, standing with clasped hands on the rocky shore, watched the ponderously moving raft with great anxiety.

Now and then one of the boys turned to wave a confident hand to Ruth and Agnes. But both Luke and Neale, as well as Mr. Howbridge, felt more worryment for the safety of Ruth and Agnes than they cared to have the girls imagine.

They had been several days on Palm Island and had seen no vessel in the offing but their own and had marked no trace on the island of any former occupant. It might seem that there was really nothing on or about Palm Island to bring to it any person, either kindly or evilly disposed.

There was one thing, however, that Neale O'Neil had pointed out to Mr. Howbridge. They had considered the possibility in secret of certain fellows of the baser sort coming to the place, but nothing of this had been said before the girls. If they had not thought of that themselves, it was not desirable to bring it to their attention and burden them with one more anxiety.

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The three masculine members of the party of castaways had absolutely to go in search of Tess and Dot. The raft could not be made big enough to transport in safety Ruth and Agnes too. Would the raft return? This was a desperate situation.

The girls watched the raft move heavily away in the white glare of the sun, now almost overhead. The blot of shadow cast by the huge sail was very narrow. The glare of the view at last so blinded them that Ruth and Agnes retired to the covert of the cocoanut grove.

From this vantage point they could see the raft as it rose and fell upon the long, sweeping surges. Slowly, but steadily, it moved away from Palm Island toward that islet on which the flag had appeared and upon which Ruth hoped the children had taken refuge.

After the raft was so far away that the boys and girls could not shout back and forth to each other, it seemed that it moved very slowly indeed. Yet as the hours wore on the distance between the shore of Palm Island and the raft could be plainly marked.

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The figures of the trio upon the raft were dwarfed at last to the size of manikins. The sail looked like a palm-leaf fan. The raft itself, rising and falling on the surge, became very small, and to the girls' anxious eyes it seemed nearer to that distant island than to this one on which they were marooned.

"Come," said Ruth at last, sadly. "Let us go over to the spring and get some supper and go to bed. Watching them any longer will do no good. We cannot help. We can only trust that God will be good to us all. We'll hope for the best."

Even the usually voluble Agnes could say nothing cheerful in reply, and the two girls moved away from the point of their vigil.

CHAPTER XXI—A NIGHT ALARM

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It was a very lonely evening for Ruth and Agnes Kenway. The boys had made the new camp near the spring as snug as possible. An outthrust rock partially sheltered them, and they had the smaller piece of sail-cloth to help keep them dry when they lay down. They had a good fire too.

But the wailing of the seabirds and the lap, lap, lapping of the little waves along the strand sounded very mournful in their ears. This tropic world was very empty and lonely!

Their minds not only reverted constantly to the question of the whereabouts of Tess and Dot, but the question of the safety of their boy friends and their guardian was now added to that first anxiety. Ruth and Agnes did not consider that they were in any immediate personal danger. The thought that they might be left indefinitely on this lonely island they resolutely kept out of the forefront of their minds. But wreck and disaster might have overtaken both the other parties.

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Agnes had climbed the hill just before the night fell and tried to spy the raft again. But she could not distinguish it. In fact, that nearest island on which they had seen the flag flying was almost blotted out.

"We cannot see anything until morning," Ruth told her. "I believe Mr. Howbridge and the boys got to the island. If the children are there, then it is all right."

"All right?" repeated Agnes, with a sniff. "How can you say that? Nothing will be all right again, I guess, until we get back to the Corner House. I wish we had never come South."

"We could not foresee all this trouble," rejoined her sister soothingly. "We must not give up hope, Aggie."

"Humph!"

"If I only knew that Tess and Dot were safe I would feel better. Lots of people have worse troubles than this. Think of what the poor Pendletons are going through, for instance."

"Well, at least," declared Agnes, "the Pendletons have a roof over their heads."

"Ye-es," agreed Ruth thoughtfully. "And they are all together."

"They have somebody to help them too," Agnes went on more energetically. "I am sure Guardy's clerk will dig up some evidence to clear Mr. Pendleton. It only takes time. But we haven't a soul to help us, Ruthie."

"I wonder what the folks at St. Sergius think about our absence," murmured the older girl. "Guardy's friend, Señor Benno, ought to suspect that we are in some difficulty."

"I wish he'd send a boat for us—right now!" cried Agnes. "Then we could go after the boys and the raft."

"And find Tess and Dot," added Ruth. "This is a dreadful thing, Agnes!"

"Who would have thought they'd do such a thing?" was Agnes' vigorous speech. "I'm always expecting them to get into mischief when Sammy Pinkney is along. But one would think that with him thousands of miles away, Tess and Dot could be trusted for half an hour alone."

"I can't blame them," sighed Ruth. "Of course they had no intention of sailing away with the motor-boat. It was an accident."

"And we can't do a thing to help," said her sister gloomily, and cuddled down in her blanket.

Worried as she really was, Agnes was not long awake. Ruth tossed and turned and, as on the night before, could not compose herself to sleep. Each faint sound from the sea aroused her sharply. Were their friends coming back? Had they found the motor-boat and the children and repaired the former and brought back the latter?

Thus between sleeping and waking Ruth Kenway lay until long after midnight. A faint mist, as usual, rose from the sea and rolled inshore, masking every object with a soft and glowing mantle. She watched these wisps of fog until her nerves were "jumpy" and her troubled mind was filled with strange imaginings.

Figures seemed stalking along the open shore; but she knew they made no sound and left no footprints on the sand. They were merely phantoms of her overwrought thought.

Then suddenly, but so sharply that she could not deny its existence, something clattered out there on the sea. She sat up with a gasp and reached a nervous hand toward her sister.

Then she waited. Why arouse Agnes and frighten her? It might not be anything of consequence.

The sound was repeated. Ruth could not identify its cause, but she knew it could be no marine creature. It was no noise made by the turtles which sought the island each night at this season of the year.

It was a man-made sound.

The shadows in the fog did not trouble Ruth now. There was something of greater moment out there on the water, she was sure. Ruth crept down to the open shore and listened.

A voice! She almost cried aloud, she was so startled. And for a moment a thrill of delight shocked the girl.

It was a rescue! Somebody had come looking for them! She knew it could not be Mr. Howbridge and the others returning, although she had imagined such a thing as she lay there between waking and sleeping.

Nevertheless, something told Ruth Kenway not to shout. She determined to make no sound until she knew more about these strangers. Or at least, until it seemed that they might be going away from Palm Island without investigating.

She now knew what the sounds were which had first startled her. The anchor of a boat had splashed overboard; then the sail had come rattling down. Although the mist hid the craft, she knew just about where it was lying.

Ruth strained her eyes to see. She strained her ears to hear. Out of the mist she felt that something was coming shoreward. Was it a small boat? Was a landing being made—and so softly for a purpose? Who were these people? Were they friends or enemies?

The echo of the voice reached her ears again—flatly and, it seemed, scarcely human in its timbre. But Ruth was confident that it was a man who spoke and that he spoke roughly.

She could not expect that any rescue party sent out from St. Sergius would be altogether made up of the hotel guests. The boatmen engaged on the waterfront for such a venture were likely to be rather rough men.

When she heard the voice for a third time and recognized the words as Spanish or Afro-Spanish the oldest Corner House girl shrank back toward the edge of the jungle in which the camp lay.

Had she heard English spoken by the party coming ashore she would have raised her voice in a glad shout. Now she hesitated, determining to wait upon the landing before she made her presence known.

"If they are looking for us they may say something or do something to prove it," she thought. Ruth knew a few Spanish words and she began to recall them to mind and get ready for an interview with the strangers when such a moment should arrive. "I suppose I ought to welcome the coming of anybody at all. But these——"

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A moving shape suddenly appeared in the mist. A keel grated on the shore. Several voices, all speaking a mixed Spanish, burst out. Ruth heard Agnes stir again and cry out faintly.

The older girl threw herself into the shelter and placed a hand over Agnes' mouth.

"Hush!" she commanded.

"Oh! Oh! What is it?" gasped the other.

"Wait. There is no danger—perhaps. But they are strangers."

"What are you saying?" Agnes Kenway demanded, and sat up promptly, pushing her sister's restraining hand away.

"I tell you somebody has landed."

"Not Mr. Howbridge and the boys?"

"Of course not! Would I fear them?"

"Then you are frightened, Ruthie?" said her sister. "Tell me."

Ruth, however, would say no more. She went back to the clump of brush overlooking the sands. If the visitors should prove to be friends she did not want them to escape before she called to them.

The voices did not sound kind at all. Ruth hesitated. Agnes, creeping out after her, likewise listened to the broken snatches of conversation which reached their ears.

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"Pirates!" exploded the younger sister, her lips close to Ruth's ear.

"Pirates your grandmother!" returned Ruth, exasperated.

"Wish Sammy Pinkney was here," giggled Agnes, for with all their trouble she could joke. "He ought to be a judge of pirates by this time."

"You needn't laugh."

"Maybe not. But I won't cry—yet," said Agnes, more cheerful than she had been for some hours.

The two girls, clinging to each other's hands in the shivery mist, waited and listened. The men who had landed from the boat evidently drew the craft well up on the beach. Then some of them walked up to the spring.

"Agnes!" ejaculated Ruth, impressively, but in a very low voice.

"Yes?"

"They know this island. They are familiar with it. They dropped their anchor right opposite this place in the dark, and now they are coming to the spring."

"We-ell," stammered Agnes, "maybe that is good news."

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"They are not likely, then, to be people sent to hunt for us," announced Ruth. "We must not speak to them."

"Why?" ejaculated Agnes. "Because we haven't been introduced?"

"Don't be a goose. You sound like Neale O'Neil. We must wait to get a good look at them by daylight before we let them see us."

"But—but, Ruthie," whispered Agnes, "maybe we might get them to go after the boys and Tess and Dot."

"They could not do that until morning. We will wait," Ruth declared firmly.

Her determination could not be shaken. Agnes at this point might have been braver than her sister, but she could not oppose Ruth in her present mood.

The two girls stole off through the scrub timber to the higher ground. They tried to make no sound that would attract the attention of the men who had landed on the island. And in this they evidently succeeded, for their movements were not observed by the strangers.

CHAPTER XXII—THE ODYSSEY OF TESS AND DOT

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Children, after all, are usually fearless when they face material things. Danger does not often frighten them if there is no mystery or weirdness connected with it.

The fact that they were sailing upon an unmanageable boat, upon an unknown sea, and were

quite helpless, did not disturb the slumbers of Tess and Dot Kenway. As Tess had thought, the motor-boat might bump into something; but staying awake on their part would not ward off that disaster.

The *Isobel* blundered along as the night fell, and the children went to sleep supperless. Dot did not even complain about this lack of a meal. There was nobody to complain to, for she knew Tess could not aid her.

The motor-boat drew closer in to the shore of the first island. The tide and current sucked the hull of the helpless craft nearer and nearer. As it chanced, there was a point covered with palm trees around which the *Isobel* drifted. She was then completely hidden from any part, even the highest part, of Palm Island. 218

When the sun arose the next morning, as far as the party back at the larger island knew, the motor-boat might have been sunk beneath the surface of the sea.

But that was not what had happened. The boat grounded, swung around with the tide, and when the sun got well above the sea its rays shone straight into the open cabin door and into Dot Kenway's eyes.

"O-oo! Tess!" she squealed. "I guess we landed and didn't know it. And the boat is pitching over. O-oo!"

It was a fact that the deck of the *Isobel*—more properly the floor of her cabin—lay at a steep angle. The boat was quite snugly run upon the sands. The tide had withdrawn and left her there.

The two wondering little girls climbed out of their berths and crept to the door and so out into the cockpit. They looked wonderingly over the rail to the shore.

"Why!" observed Dot in wonder, "isn't this Plam Island?"

"Oh, dear! I wish you'd say *Palm* Island—and it's not Palm Island," declared Tess. 219

"Then what's the use of saying it if it isn't?" grumbled Dot, who disliked being admonished about her faults of pronunciation. "But it looks like Plam Island, so now!"

"I guess all these islands look alike," sighed Tess, giving up her admonitory attitude for the moment. "We had better go ashore."

"What for?"

"Well! Aren't you hungry?" Tess demanded. "And do you want to stay on this pitched-over boat?"

"I'm hungry all right," agreed Dot. "But nothing more can happen to the boat now, can there? It's wrecked, and that is all there is about it. It is a good place to sleep in."

"Are we going to sleep here again, do you suppose?" Tess cried. "Why, of course Ruthie will send the boys for us! Of course she will!"

"She hasn't yet," said Dot pessimistically.

"Not in the night. It's too dark to see then."

"And she doesn't know where we are, does she?" demanded Dot.

"Just the same, they will find us. I'm hungry," Tess announced again.

"What shall we eat?" asked her sister.

But Tess was not nonplussed by that question. Little as she was, she was observant. Such fruits as had been good to eat on Palm Island she knew must be all right to eat here on this strange island. 220

Of course they had no fire and nothing to cook upon it if they had. The little girls did not know just how to go about finding turtles' eggs, although they had seen Neale O'Neil uncover the first nestful of those delicacies. But they found two or three cocoanuts which they broke open with pieces of coral. And it was easy enough to pick a lapful of fruit.

Down they squatted on the sand, each with her dress-skirt heaped with fruit, and proceeded to enjoy a repast. Before they had finished, the active mind of Dot demanded to be informed on another point.

"If Neale and Luke come after us, Tess Kenway, how are they going to know we are on this island?"

"Won't they see us here?" asked her sister.

"Not if we are behind the bushes. I don't mean to stay out in the sun all the time. You know it is awfully hot at noon."

"We-ell," considered Tess, "I s'pose I'll have to put up my skirt again. They won't sail by that."

"Oh, let's!" exclaimed Dot. Then she looked up into the palm trees and again began to question. 221

"You can't ever climb up one of those trees in the world, Tess Kenway."

"I—I can try," stammered her sister.

"You'll break your neck. You'll get hurt like Margy and Carrie Pendleton's father got hurt," declared Dot. "I wish Sammy Pinkney was here."

"Well!" gasped Tess. "What for?"

"He could climb it. He's a good climber. You know how he climbed the cherry tree in Mrs. Adams' back yard," said Dot earnestly.

"Yes," rejoined Tess with scorn. "And how they had to call out the fire department to get him down. I remember."

"Well," said Dot grumpily, for she almost always stood up for Sammy, "I guess he would have got down by himself if they had left him alone. But Mrs. Adams got so nervous. Anyhow, Tess Kenway, you can't climb one of these plam trees."

"Did I say I could?" replied her sister, rather snappishly if the truth were told.

But Tess was a very persistent person when once she had made up her mind to a thing. She walked along the shore for a long way, staring up into the tops of the palms. The trunks were rough enough, but they offered no means of climbing, even had Tess dared the attempt. There were no branches. 222

"I never did see such silly trees," she told herself. "I like the trees at home in Milton lots better. Even in winter there are branches sticking out so that you can climb into them if you need to. If—if a mad dog comes along, or anything like that. I wish we were back in Milton!"

Dot heard none of this, for she had settled herself down comfortably under a bush and proceeded to rearrange the Alice-doll's clothes. That young person was certainly sadly in need of a fresh outfit, as Dot had herself stated some hours before. But who could keep one's clothing fresh and tidy when cast away on an uninhabited island?

"It is too bad Sammy isn't here—too bad for him," Dot called to the anxious Tess, after a minute or two. "He'd so love to be wrecked, and in danger of drowning, and being eaten up by turkles, and all. He would be so excited."

"He'd be a nuisance," commented Tess, puzzling her brain over the matter of the signal of distress and nothing much else.

"Come on, Dot," she finally said. "Let's go up to the other end of the island—the end nearest Palm Island where Ruthie and the others are. Maybe we'll find a tree there." 223

"There are plenty of trees here. I don't see why you can't keep still, Tess Kenway. The sun's getting hot."

"Then we want to go right away before it gets any hotter," and as Tess started off at once, Dot was forced to get up and follow. She did not wish to be left alone with the Alice-doll, although they had seen nothing on the island as yet to affright them.

There was no hill, or even a small mound, on this little island. Just the level crust of earth over the coral rocks crowded with low vegetation out of which the palms shot in some instances to a considerable height. But near the western end of the island some of these trees had been laid low—possibly in the hurricane which had driven the *Isobel* and her crew to Palm Island. The condition of the tangled palms was as though they had writhed in agony and been uprooted at last by giant hands.

One tall tree—and Tess spied it long before she got to it—lay for fully forty feet almost along the ground at the edge of the jungle. But its top had been caught by a group of other palms. The trunk of the uprooted tree afforded a slanting walk right into the tops of the other palms! 224

"I can climb that!" declared Tess, quickly, and began to unfasten her skirt.

The palm trunk was rough and husky. Climbing it on hands and knees was a hard task, but not particularly dangerous. As she kept her eyes fixed ahead of her, Tess did not note particularly the height to which she climbed.

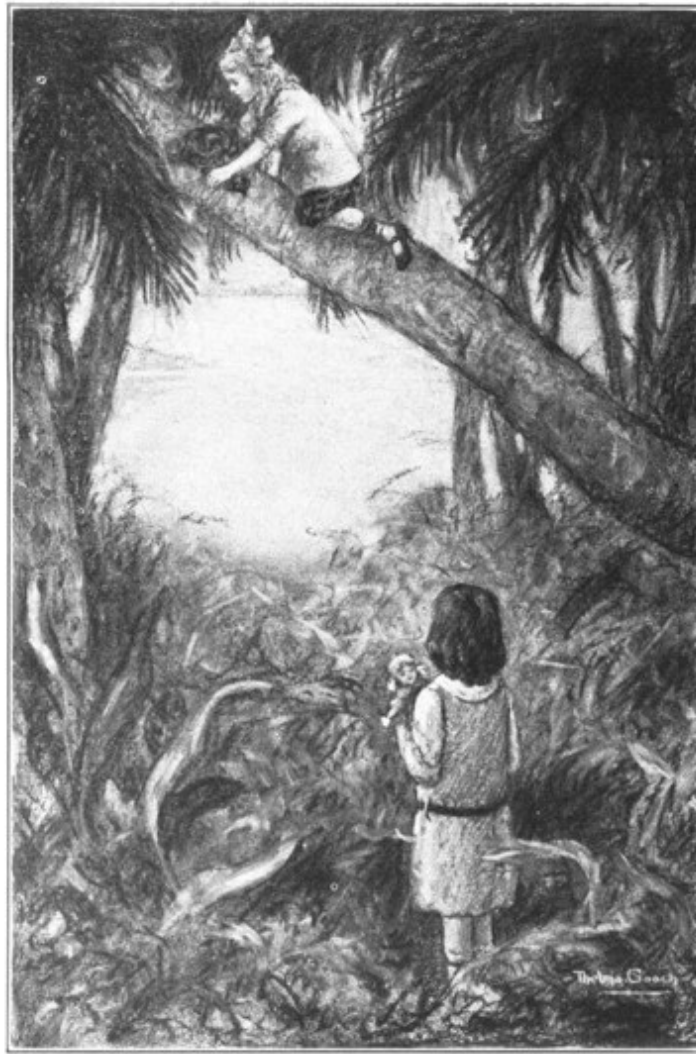
Once in the tops of the several palms she was easily able to fasten her plaid skirt out upon a frond which had a free sweep toward the water. This signal of distress was what the party on Palm Island had seen just before the raft set sail on its voyage of rescue.

Because Tess had climbed along the tree trunk and hung out her banner, she felt more brave. And even Dot looked at her sister in wide-eyed admiration.

"I guess Ruthie would have scolded you, Tess," she said. "But you can climb almost as good as Sammy."

"Oh, Sammy!" ejaculated Tess.

Having got into the wood, they went back afterward through the middle of the island. And in this way the two little girls came upon what to them seemed a very strange place indeed. The lianas and other vines made the walking difficult and Tess had just said they would have to go back to the shore when suddenly the two little girls stepped right out into an opening where there was a still blue lake as quiet and safe looking as a millpond. 225



Climbing it on hands and knees was a hard task but not particularly dangerous.

There was only a narrow ribbon of shore bordering this circular pond of water. The jungle grew almost to the edge of the water and the palms shaded it completely, for it was not many yards across.

As the sun's rays were now hot, the look of this pool was delightful. Dot got down on her hands and knees to drink. But in a moment she sat back again, sputtering and crying out:

"Oh! Isn't that nasty mean, Tess Kenway? It's salt like all the rest of the water down here."

"Why, there is no place where the sea runs in that I can see," Tess declared. She tasted the water gingerly, then shook her head. "I guess you are right, Dot. I don't understand it. But it is pretty in here, and cool."

The two little girls remained at this pool all day. Fruit was plentiful, fringing the open water. They saw fish jump, or swimming in the clear depths. Far below, among the coral formations, the delicate seaweeds waved to and fro. There was a submarine opening or openings into the sea, but Tess and Dot scarcely understood the nature or origin of this salt water basin in the center of the little island.

Occasionally Dot sighed and made dismal complaint that she wished Ruthie and the others would come for them. But the fact remained that being cast away on one island was just about the same as being cast away on another.

They were so far from the careened motor-boat that the sisters decided to remain where they were over night. Occasionally during the afternoon the two made a pilgrimage to the shore where they could see the *Isobel*; but they saw nothing else, and certainly did not catch sight of the raft with Mr. Howbridge and Luke and Neale upon it.

The fast falling evening caught the little girls by the edge of the pool in the middle of the island.

"I don't care," said Tess, when Dot began to sniffle a bit. "I don't care if we do have to stay here. Here the sand is warm and there are none of those big turtles to crawl out and maybe bite us."

"Oh! I wish you wouldn't," gasped Dot. "I had forgotten about those old turkles."

The two sisters fell asleep as calmly as though they were in their own beds at the old Corner House. This was by no means the first night they had been lost and had slept in the open air. And nothing had ever really harmed them; though it is true that they were frightened at times.

This occasion was no exception. They could not have been sleeping two hours when first Tess and then Dot was aroused. It was not the splashing of the silvery water in the pool that aroused them, but some sound—a groan or sigh that actually seemed to have been uttered right in their ears!

Up sat the two little girls, wide awake and with wide-open eyes. They faced the pool. Out of this, rising slowly and ghostily, was a glistening gray body like a drowned giant that might have suddenly come up to breathe.

And the sigh he uttered! It made the flesh of Tess and Dot Kenway quiver to hear that sound and the blood seemed to freeze in their veins.

“O-o-o-o-o-o!” moaned the mysterious ghost, while the water poured in a gentle shower from his shoulders.

CHAPTER XXIII—THE TURTLE CATCHERS

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The two older Corner House girls, like the two younger, were fear-ridden during at least a part of that second night of their separation. But perhaps Tess and Dot had much less to be really afraid of than Ruth and Agnes.

The latter spent the remainder of the hours of darkness after the strangers landed on Palm Island at the foot of the great tree that topped the hill above the camp that had been established for the girls before the boys had taken to the raft with Mr. Howbridge.

Crouched at the foot of the giant palm Ruth and Agnes clung to each other, sleeping but fitfully, until dawn. Aroused in the faint gray light, the sisters crept down to the shelter of the jungle again. They lay there, listening for sounds from the camp which they believed the Spanish-speaking crew of the mysterious craft had made at the spring.

The men were not early astir. When the sun was well up Ruth insisted upon going up the hill again and out into the open so that they could see over a low place in the jungle to the cove where the mysterious boat was anchored.

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It was there in the mist. Agnes clung to her sister’s arm and stared at it too. A somewhat slovenly looking craft, wide of beam, unpainted, with stubbed masts, old rigging, and a dirty smother of canvas that had not been even reefed when it was allowed to drop upon the deck.

If the appearance of the craft was a criterion of the character of her crew, the girls hoped not to see the latter at all!

“I am afraid to talk with them. I wish Mr. Howbridge and the boys were here,” said Ruth.

“Wouldn’t we better ask these men to go in search of Guardy and Luke and Neale?”

“Should we? I wonder,” sighed Ruth. “Perhaps they know something about the children.”

“Then we must ask them!” cried Agnes.

“Wait. They are up now. I hear them.”

In fact, within a very few moments the girls heard the strangers down upon the beach. The fog had lain upon the shore and sea in a low curtain for some minutes after the sun came up. Now by the shouting they heard, Ruth and Agnes knew that the crew ashore was chasing and capturing the turtles.

230

“I guess these men are just turtle catchers,” Ruth said reflectively. “They go from island to island capturing the turtles. It is not likely that a gentleman like Señor Benno would have engaged such men to search for us. I am afraid of them, Agnes.”

“So am I, dear. Unless we tell them that we have friends and a motor-boat near—”

“But they will want to know why the motor-boat does not come after us. No. We must remain hidden.”

They dared not go back to their camp under the rock. The turtle catchers would of course find that retreat. But as long as they did not know that the campers were girls who were still on the island, Ruth hoped the fellows would make no search for them.

After a while Agnes tired of staying hidden in the jungle. Besides, the insects became very troublesome as the day grew warmer.

“And how do we know but Mr. Howbridge and the boys are trying to signal to us? At least, they may have found the children and be in sight again.”

“I really hope you will keep quiet, Agnes,” said the older girl. “I do not want to attract these men. They do look awfully rough.”

231

“I know!” sighed Agnes. “Do you suppose the turtle catchers will remain long?”

“I don’t know just how they follow their—their profession,” hesitated Ruth.

“Profession!” giggled Agnes.

"But they will probably remain here until they have made a complete haul of the turtles that come to this shore. I do not think any great numbers were here last night. Neale said something about the numbers fluctuating very much, did he not?"

"That boy reads and absorbs so much," declared Agnes. "To think of his knowing about sea-turtles at all!"

"If we ever come into this locality again," said Ruth, "I shall want to be informed upon a lot of topics that I never considered of moment."

"You'd think Neale O'Neil had expected to be cast away on a desert island," declared the younger sister. "He makes a play of it."

"He takes it too lightly, I fear," sighed Ruth. "But let us hope he will not take the search for Tess and Dot too lightly. The poor dears! What might not have happened to them in these two days?"

"Well," rejoined Agnes, "we know what happened to them for part of the time. They were safe enough when they drifted out of our sight night before last."

"Safe enough!" repeated Ruth.

"At least, they had not been drowned," her sister said convincingly. "And I do believe, dear—somehow I feel it!—that nothing actually bad has happened to them. Guardy and the boys will find them safe and sound."

"I can only hope so. And I hope they find the boat safe and sound as well. If they can finish repairing it—Oh, dear me! Why was I foolish enough the other day to insist upon their stopping in the repair work and finding water first?"

"Well!" exclaimed Agnes.

"I blame myself," declared the older girl. "If I had been content the engine would have been working and the children could not have drifted away on the *Isobel*. Dear me! I am always doing something for which I condemn myself afterward."

"I know you condemn yourself, Ruthie, all right," returned Agnes. "But I do not think you are always just. See how you blamed yourself for our going to Carrie Poole's dance and getting cold. One would never think we ever had a cold now! You are as brown as a berry and I am positively getting fat."

"I am not so sure that I am to be the less condemned for our having foolishly taken chances with our health back home. If it hadn't been for that we should not be in this situation, that is sure."

"Goodness! You are unreasonable, I think," murmured Agnes, and said no more at the time.

She insisted, however, upon stealing up the hill to the foot of the palm tree and gazing off across the sea to the east in the hope of seeing some sign of their friends. Ruth could not restrain Agnes from doing this every couple of hours.

The binoculars had been left with them, and Agnes scanned sharply every observable foot of the nearest island. The spot where the *Isobel* lay was around on the far side, however; and what had become of the raft was as great a mystery to the girls.

About noon she came hurriedly back to Ruth, however, and told her that the thing that had been fluttering so long from the top of the palm tree on that other island was gone.

"Blown away?" remarked Ruth thoughtfully.

"I don't think so. The wind is not blowing very hard. I wish I had sat right up there and kept the glasses on that tree. I might have seen something."

"Do you suppose it was removed by Guardy or the boys?"

"Why not? If it was put up by Tess and Dot——"

"In that tall tree! Impossible."

"Well, then, are there two parties of castaways?" demanded Agnes, rather crossly. "Everything I suggest you pick flaws in, Ruthie."

But Ruth hugged her, and the younger sister returned her caress with real affection. Their trouble was too deep for them really to wrangle. The anxiety each felt drew them closer together.

If of late Agnes had felt herself shut away from Ruth's closer confidence because of the older girl's interest in Luke Shepard, this experience on the tropical island was renewing the sisters' old-time contact and appreciation of each other. It was true Agnes was hoydenish at times, and loved to play with Neale O'Neil and the other boys; but she was growing older every day, too, and many of the secrets and interests of girlhood she could share only with Ruth.

"Cheer up!" she now exclaimed, wiping the tears from her sister's eyes with the cleanest corner of her only handkerchief. "Surely we need not go through much more worriment. This situation is past being made any worse, that is sure."

"I wish it may be so," murmured Ruth.

"Of course it is. Things will take a turn. We'll soon see the *Isobel* scooting around the end of that island and heading this way."

But this much desired sight did not gladden their eyes. Even Ruth climbed to the palm tree to

watch. And it was because the two girls remained up there that the final incident of their adventure on the island came to fruition. They were seen from the deck of the frowsy schooner!

They were startled by a raucous shout from the sea. Turning her glasses in that direction, Ruth beheld a ragamuffin sailor half way up the foremast of the turtle catcher waving his cap at them.

"Oh, Agnes, they have seen us!" gasped Ruth.

"Let's—let's run and hide!" murmured the younger girl.

"I don't know that that will do much good."

"I know it will," cried Agnes. "That is, if we hide so well that they cannot find us."

"Perhaps it would be better to face them and make them think that we have men friends near at hand." 236

"No chance," urged Agnes. "We can't fool them. They will know that we have been hiding from them. If there were men in our party they would have already shown up. No, Ruth, we can't fool 'em that way."

"Perhaps you are right," sighed the older sister. "But where shall we hide?"

"Let's go back to the other point—where the *Isobel* was moored. When the boys return they will come there first, of course."

Agnes spoke much more confidently than she felt. Like her sister she had a strong dislike to meeting these turtle catchers. She had seen that class of natives on the water front at St. Sergius, and their appearance had rather intimidated even Agnes, who usually felt no fear of any of her fellow men.

CHAPTER XXIV—THE GROAN OF A GRAMPUS 237

The startled and sleepy children beside the pool on the smaller island clung together in speechless terror for the few minutes following their being aroused by the marine "ghost" that had risen through the waters. Its glistening, high-shouldered body was a most mysterious sight, that was true.

The starlight was so vivid, however, that soon Tess and Dot were able to distinguish the outlines of the beast more clearly. No denial could be made of its voice, for it puffed out a most astonishing sigh. Nothing like this beast had either girl ever imagined.

"O-oo!" murmured Dot. "Look at the whale!"

She came not far from the proper designation. It was a grampus. But a grampus is a cetacean, and that is the family to which whales belong. The grampus stood on its tail in the water, with the greater upper part of its body exposed, and sighed again as though its heart were broken. 238

Then it flung itself flat upon the water with a splash that must have echoed to the far end of the island. At least, Dot Kenway's shriek of fear echoed that far.

"Stop yelling. It's gone," said Tess.

"But he spattered me all over," sobbed the smaller girl. "Oh! I don't like this place, Tess. The whales come in and wake you up and—and—"

"Hush!" commanded Tess, hearing something new. "Listen."

"Won't hush," sobbed Dot. "Is it another whale?"

"It's—it's—Oh, Dot Kenway!" shrieked Tess suddenly, and darted up from the sand, "it's Neale O'Neil!"

This was a sufficiently impressive declaration to stop Dot's sobs and complaints. She staggered hastily to her feet, clinging to her sister, and joined her voice to the latter's in shrieking: "Help!"

Just what they wanted help for now that the grampus was gone, was a question quite beside the situation. The little girls continued to scream. Neale's voice answered them. They heard other voices. 239

"I guess we are rescued, Tess," gulped Dot. "They have found out where we are. No use yelling any more."

"I'm going to shout till I see them," said the practical Tess, who did not propose giving their friends any chance to get away from them.

Neale came crashing through the brush after a time. Luke and Mr. Howbridge were right behind him, and Luke carried a flashlight. The ray of this flashed into the girls' faces just as another splash and groan was heard from the pool.

"For goodness' sake! What's that?" demanded the lawyer, panting in the rear of the trio.

"No wonder the kids yelled!" exclaimed Neale.

"What is it?" cried Luke.

They were startled to see the glistening, ghostly object rise from the depths. But they loudly greeted Tess and Dot. The latter explained:

"Oh, it's a whale come up to breathe. He scared us dreadful!"

Luke named the creature correctly the next moment. "And they are not often seen, I understand. They're enough to frighten a high school at night, let alone a couple of little kiddies."

He grabbed Tess and Dot, one in the crook of each arm, and kissed them soundly as he raised them to his shoulders. Mr. Howbridge exclaimed over the lost children, too, and afterward Dot told Tess that she had no idea their guardian "could cry."

240

There was reason for Mr. Howbridge shedding a few tears over the recovery of the smallest Kenways. The stranding of the *Isobel* on this island in safety had been a miracle indeed. A hundred untoward things might have happened to the children.

A little after nightfall the boys and Mr. Howbridge had worked their raft into the shallow cove where the motor-boat lay and had landed. Looking for Tess and Dot in the dark of the tropical night was almost a hopeless task.

By chance Neale had heard Dot's shriek when she had been frightened by the marine monster in the pool. Charging across the island, he had led the way to the small sisters.

That night, about the fire on the shore, was a cheerful one indeed for the boys and the lawyer while the little girls slept soundly. Their discovery and recovery of Tess and Dot by the trio of searchers had been easier than they had hoped in their most sanguine moments.

"And Ruth will certainly be a happy girl again," Luke often repeated.

241

"Hope we can get back to them soon," Neale rejoined.

"Wish we could signal to them that the children are found," ruminated Luke.

The nearest they could do in the matter of signaling was to take down Tess' plaid skirt from the top of the palm tree the next morning. This Neale did after a while, and he praised Tess for thinking of putting up the skirt in the first place.

"If I finally decide to spend the rest of my life on a desert island, Tessie," Neale said soberly, "I'll take you along as a partner."

"No, you won't," said Tess promptly. "For I won't go, Neale O'Neil. I don't ever expect to be cast away again, so there!"

Early in the afternoon the trio got the motor-boat into the water again and anchored it off shore. The mechanism was already adjusted. It had to be tried out, changed a little, and finally set to running. There was sufficient gasoline to carry them a long way if the machinery ran perfectly.

Had Ruth and Agnes not been so frightened by the fact that their presence on Palm Island had been discovered by the turtle fishers, they would surely have spied the *Isobel* when she first came into view from behind the smaller island where Tess and Dot had been marooned.

242

The older girls hid in the jungle down by the rocky point and waited through the evening in much alarm. They heard and even saw some of the rough men passing and repassing the place of their concealment. They dared not go to sleep, and feared that they would have to remain awake, and in hiding, until another day.

But while the minutes crept by so slowly, Agnes, quick-eared as well as sharp of eye, began to hear a sound that at first puzzled then excited her. She seized Ruth more tightly in her arms.

"Oh, Ruthie! Listen! What is it?"

"Sh! They will hear you," murmured her sister.

"I—I want them to, I guess," choked Agnes. "Hear that? It's the chugging of a motor-boat, Ruth!"

"Oh, never!" exclaimed the older girl, but getting up to her knees.

"It is the *Isobel*. Surely it is. They are coming! Neale! Neale!"

Wildly excited at last, the younger girl leaped to her feet and bounded out of concealment. As she landed in the sand and struck out for the rocky point, Ruth heard a shout behind them and the heavy tread of men running down the beach.

243

"Agnes! Agnes! They will catch us!" she shrieked, and ran madly after her sister.

Agnes thought of nothing, however, but the fact, as she believed, that their friends were near at hand. She climbed upon the highest boulder in the neighborhood and shrieked a welcome.

"Neale! Guardy! Luke! Here we are!" cried the wild girl. "Are the children safe? Tessie! Dot! Tell Agnes if you are all right!"

Her wild cry was echoed from the sea. She could even observe the *Isobel* approaching. And the voices of the children and those of the boys and Mr. Howbridge were soon distinguishable.

Had the turtle fishers intended the two girls any harm, these cries from the water and the approach of the motor-boat must have warned the natives. Ruth and Agnes stood on the rock, and the fishermen approached to within a few yards of them.

They chattered much in Spanish, and then one spoke in English:

"Eet ees that the *señoritas* haf friend—*amigo*—in the boat—no?"

"Tell them that we've got friends coming, *yes!*" exclaimed Agnes.

Ruth could remember just about enough Spanish to make herself understood. She told the fishermen their friends had been away in the motor-boat but were now arriving. 244

"Ah! If the señors should weesh help of any kind, we are of the willingness to do—*si, señorita!*" exclaimed the man, and led his comrades away along the beach just as the *Isobel*, by the light of the stars, shoved her nose into the little inlet.

The boys leaped ashore the moment the motor-boat was near enough to the rocky landing. Such a noisy time as it was for a minute, with Tess and Dot shrieking greetings and the boys hurraing! Suddenly Agnes was heard to say sharply:

"I like your impudence, Neale O'Neil! Who said you could do that, I'd like to know?"

"Don't lay it up against me," drawled her boy chum. "Really couldn't help it. I merely followed Luke's example."

"Come, come!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "No quarreling there—especially on such a joyful occasion. Who were those men I saw?"

Agnes ran to meet him as he moored the boat and explained about the turtle fishers and told how frightened she and Ruth had been.

"Well, well! Perhaps they are harmless. But what do you say, boys? The engine is working like a charm, and the night is lovely. Had we better not head for St. Sergius before something worse happens to us?" 245

"Oh!" cried Ruth, clasping her hands, "that sounds sweet."

"Guess we all have got enough of Palm Island," said Luke.

The bigger girls had by this time got aboard the motor-boat to greet Tess and Dot. The four sisters cuddled down in the cockpit and chattered like four magpies. There was so much to tell!

The *Isobel* was therefore backed around and headed out of the little harbor once more. There was nothing much on the island that they would need. And, in any case, Mr. Howbridge considered it quite as well to get away without coming into contact with the turtle catchers.

Everything that had happened to the little girls had to be told over and over again, right down to the excitement of the grampus—which Dot insisted upon calling a grandpa.

"But he wasn't anything like Margaret and Holly Pease's grandpa—for he's real nice," added the littlest Corner House girl with her usual loose association of ideas. "He's got the nicest white hair and a gold-headed cane—"

"Not the grampus, Dot," groaned Tess, in despair. 246

"No; of course not that grandpa. Margaret and Holly Pease's. You've seen his gold-headed cane yourself, Tess Kenway. I wish you wouldn't always interrupt me. Now—now," and she yawned, "I forget—forget what I was going to say."

She proceeded almost instantly to go fast asleep with her head in Ruth's lap.

CHAPTER XXV—TYING ALL THE THREADS 247

The evening following, the *Isobel* poked her nose into the passage past the fort and ran into the harbor of St. Sergius. It was true that her appearance was not noted by the whole city and the welcome of the lost ones acclaimed by naval broadsides and the city factory whistles. Nevertheless, the cause of their absence had been suspected and the boat of the harbor police ran alongside the *Isobel* before she reached her usual mooring-buoy.

It seemed that Señor Benno had been to the other side of the island and had returned only that day and made inquiries about his friend, Mr. Howbridge, and his boat. Some inquiries had been addressed to the authorities by people at the hotel, too, and the authorities were very glad indeed to learn of the safe return of the Americanos.

"They needn't fret," sighed Agnes. "They are not half as glad to have us back as we are to get back. What say, Ruthie?" 248

Ruth hugged Tess and Dot and nodded. It had been a very difficult experience for Ruth Kenway. Secretly she was determined that the smaller children should never be out of her sight again as long as they remained at St. Sergius.

Agnes and Neale were welcomed with much hilarity by the young people of their clique at the St. Sergius Arms, and when they had heard of all the wonderful experiences through which the absentees had passed the two were more popular than ever.

Nalbro Hastings was really quite overpowering in her attentions to Agnes, and the latter was not

a little proud that the wealthy Back Bay girl should think so much of her. Agnes had begun to realize, however, that Miss Hastings was really worth while and that she was simple in tastes and kindly of intention.

"I guess I like her because she's her," Agnes confessed to Neale. "You said she was a good scout, and she is. But it must just be wonderful after all to be so rich."

"Wealth won't keep you from getting your teeth knocked out if you fall from a horse," chuckled Neale O'Neil. "Sure, she's a good sport. But she's nowhere near as pretty as you are, Aggie."

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Tess and Dot might have been inclined to brag a little about their adventures on "Plam" Island, as Dot insisted upon calling it. But they found waiting for them a letter from Sammy Pinkney, and that youthful scribe managed to invest his personal achievements with such a glamor of adventure that even the romance of being cast away on an uninhabited island paled into insignificance.

"Dere Tess and Dot:

"If mom wil let me alon and not mak me tak and lok into the spelin bok evry minit or so lle try to tel you what has ben goin on here at Milton sins you went down to thos wes innies.

"Yore Belgn hare that you wen off and lef is alright. And Bily Bumps is alright. And Uncle Ruf is alright. And Tom Jonah is alright. And Linda is alright. And Scalawag is alright. And Missus Mack is alright. And Con Murpy's pig eat his way out of the pen and got in the Willow Wyte sewer and the street depatmen had to come and get him out and Con was mad. So evrybody is well.

"We got a dandy slid on Power Street and Shot Pendlton went through the barb wire fens but I diden and droped off and he was cut up sumpn ferce and got a black eye fightin a feller that said his father stole. But it was another feller done it and Shot's father went back to work for Kolbeck and Roods."

Right at this point the Kenway sisters and their boy friends, as well as Mr. Howbridge, became very much excited. It was the first intimation they had had of the result of the inquiry into the Pendleton's troubles. Sammy Pinkney had nothing further to say about "Shot" Pendleton's father and his affairs, although his letter to Tess and Dot was both exhaustive and exciting. The next day's mail, however, brought a considerable communication from Mr. Howbridge's clerk in whose charge the lawyer had left the Pendleton case.

Ruth in particular had taken so deep an interest in the family that the news of the solving of the mystery about the stolen silks was a matter that held her attention, if it did not that of her sisters.

"I am so delighted to know that the shadow is lifted from that poor man's reputation," she said to Mr. Howbridge. "And all the while the man who appeared to befriend him was the guilty one!"

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"You possess intuition developed to the nth degree, Ruth," said Mr. Howbridge, smiling. "I remember that you said that Israel Stumpf seemed to be two-faced. And he was. Scandal in the Kolbeck family, my clerk writes. Kolbeck would not save Stumpf even to please his wife. The young man is out on bail, but he certainly will be punished for stealing."

"And have they taken Mr. Pendleton back?"

"So I am told here. At a little better salary and in a place of increased responsibility. Kolbeck is a decent man. He means to do what he sees is right, I fancy."

When Tess and Dot understood more fully the final outcome of the trouble that had for so long disturbed the Pendleton children—Margy and Carrie as well as their brother—they both wanted to write home to the little Pendletons about it.

"We're so glad that nice Mr. Pendleton isn't going to be called a thief any more," Tess remarked to Ruth, "that we want to let 'em know how we feel. Besides, I guess Mrs. Pendleton is happy now, too."

"And he's a very interesting man, I think," added Dot. "I never knew another man who fell out of a tree. Did you, Tess?"

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"No," drawled Tess. "I guess I never did. And it is so nice that he is proved to be honest. How happy Margy and Carrie will be."

So the little girls sat down that evening to write to the little Pendleton girls. This got Agnes and Neale started. They, too, had been warmly interested in the Pendleton case and in spite of the many and exciting things they had to think of at the St. Sergius Arms, the chums felt that they would like to express their congratulations to Mrs. Pendleton.

"Well, well!" said Mr. Howbridge, laughing, as he saw all the Corner House party preparing to bombard the Pendletons with written communications. "Suppose we get up a round robin of congratulation, all sign it, and send it to the Pendletons? And we will send them something with it that will be more material, if you all agree. What do you say to a case of fruit?"

"Oh!" gasped Dot, suddenly. "And an alligator. One of those baby ones. I guess Margy and Carrie would like one for a pet."

But Ruth managed to steer the littlest girl off that topic. The alligator went home to Milton later as a present to Sammy Pinkney. It was a memento of the Corner House Girls' stay at St. Sergius bound to fill young Sammy with delight and his mother with distaste. Still, as Neale pointed out,

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it was little worse when considered as a house-pet than the Belgian hare.

That single trip of exploration sufficed for all the Kenway party while they remained at St. Sergius. Professor Keeps had scarcely noticed Luke Shepard's absence, although it had been for almost a week. He was a very absent-minded professor, indeed. But once the young man was at his work again, the botanist kept him busy.

Luke was interested in the work too. He gave himself over to the botanical excursions and the Corner House girls had to find their fun and excitement without his help.

Neale was able to assist Mr. Howbridge in certain business matters as well. He rode often to Señor Benno's principal estate at the further end of the island, and this took him from Agnes more than that young person liked.

"There's not much fun without Neale around," she confessed to Ruth. "He aggravates me, and pokes fun at me, and all. But he leaves a sort of emptiness behind him when he's gone."

"Get better acquainted with the other girls," advised Ruth sympathetically. "There are some nice ones here."

To this statement Agnes Kenway agreed. One girl especially appealed to her. Nalbro Hastings proved upon further acquaintance to be just as sweet and companionable as she had seemed to be at first.

"And she is coming to see us," Agnes told Ruth. "She has promised to come to Milton this spring. Just think! The old Corner House will have to put its best foot forward to entertain *the* Nalbro Hastings. I'm glad we've got a car. But don't you think, Ruthie, we can afford a neat little maid with a cap and apron? Linda is so clumsy."

"Neale would say you wanted to 'put on dog,'" ventured Ruth, laughing.

"Now, dear! Consider! This girl is used to *everything*."

"Then she must be used to flat-footed Finn servant girls," declared Ruth gaily. "She must take us as we are." And although she seconded her sister's invitation very warmly to the Back Bay girl, Ruth made up her mind that she should not be foolishly catered to.

People came to the St. Sergius Arms to rest; but the Kenway party seemed to find little time for that. For the younger set there was something gay doing almost every day and evening. And when it came time for Mr. Howbridge to take his flock back to the north there was a gay masquerade dance engineered in honor particularly of Ruth and Agnes.

It was a very gay occasion, quite the gayest indeed that the sisters had ever entered into. Even the Poole dance early in the winter, where they had so unfortunately caught cold, had not delighted Agnes so much. And Ruth could not fail to be charmed, everything about the masquerade ball was so well done.

Luke would remain some weeks longer with Professor Keeps. But he was on hand for the ball.

Were Tess and Dot forgotten? They most certainly were not! Dot went as a fairy, gauzy wings and all, while Tess was Little Bo-Peep and carried a crook.

"Though you haven't got any sheep, Tess," observed Dot critically. "You haven't even got one of those big turtles to drive! So I don't see what good that big cane does you."

"I'd look nice trying to drive Mr. Methuselah, wouldn't I?" said her sister scornfully.

"I could ride on him," giggled Dot. "That was funny. I guess Sammy Pinkney would say it was funny. I wish Sammy could see Cristuff Columbo and Julius Cæsar—though that's the name of Bill Monnegan's horse."

"Now, Dot Kenway!" exclaimed Tess, "you are going to take home that alligator to Sammy. You can't take all the reptiles in the world to him. You couldn't put one of those turtles in our trunk."

"Oh, well," sighed Dot. "But I know Sammy won't believe it if he doesn't see those turkles. I say, Tess!"

"Well? What is it?" asked her unruffled sister.

"Do you know, I just believe that after we tell Sammy Pinkney about all we did and saw and about the turkles that the next time he runs away to be a pirate he'll go to Plam Island. I just know he will," and she repeated her statement with the utmost confidence.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND ***

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