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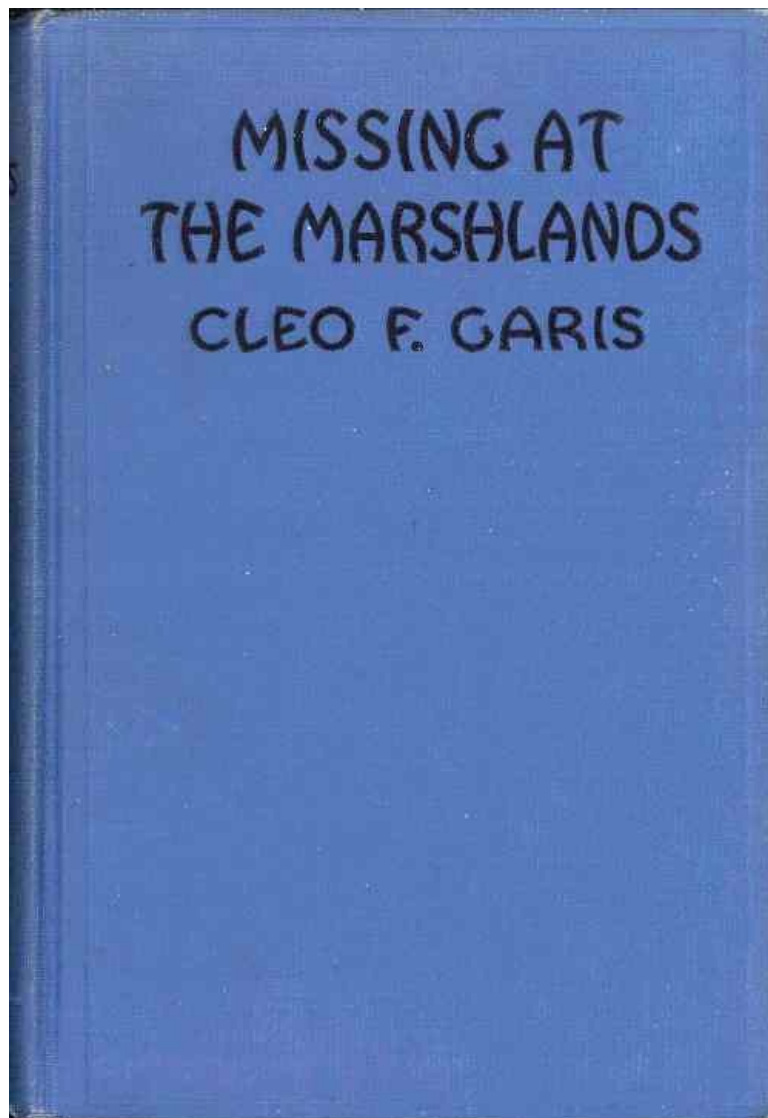
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MISSING AT MARSHLANDS ***





They were afraid, yet they knew they must go in.
(*Frontispiece*) (MISSING AT THE MARSHLANDS)

The Arden Blake Mystery Series

MISSING AT MARSHLANDS

By
CLEO F. GARIS



A. L. BURT COMPANY
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BY CLEO F. GARIS

THE ORCHARD SECRET
MYSTERY OF JOCKEY HOLLOW
MISSING AT MARSHLANDS

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Missing At Marshlands

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO MY FRIEND
DOROTHY O'CONNOR

*Who saw the Czar's snuffbox
and told me its tragic story.*

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
I A Stalled Car	9
II A Man, a Dog, and a Girl	19
III The Russian	29
IV A Girl and a Bracelet	42
V The Stranger	50
VI The Unwelcome Guest	56
VII A Noise in the Night	65
VIII Hard to Believe	72
IX The Snuffbox	78
X Beauty That Dazzled	85
XI Still They Come	92
XII A Friend in the Deep	98
XIII The Tragic Messenger	105
XIV Missing at Marshlands	110
XV Downhearted; Not Discouraged	115
XVI That Dark Woman	123
XVII Olga Makes Light of It	130
XVIII Reilly on the Case	136
XIX Tania Howls	142
XX Mrs. Landry Helps	147
XXI Melissa Has a Pin	157
XXII The Policewoman	164
XXIII On the Water Trail	170
XXIV The Man Arrives	178
XXV The Man in the Marsh	187
XXVI Melissa Again	192
XXVII Terry's Tactics	199
XXVIII Driven Away	205
XXIX The Barking of Tania	219
XXX All Is Well	227

CHAPTER I A Stalled Car

A bold morning sun thrust its warm glow into the crowded, cheerful room at Cedar Ridge, glinting on half-filled suitcases and revealing

with a cruel indifference the dust gathered on the abandoned textbooks flung in a pile on the window seat. It was a hot sun, for summer was upon the land, and the school term was at an end. Arden, Terry, and Sim were packing to go home.

It had been a year full of interesting activity and some genuine fun, but it had not been without hard work in the scholastic field. So, happy that examinations were over at last, and overjoyed that they had passed all subjects, except for a condition in mathematics for Sim, the three girls were losing no time in leaving their beloved college behind them and heading for a summer of rest and hoped-for adventure.

Sim Westover was sitting on a suitcase that refused to close and bouncing up and down in an effort to bring the yawning leather jaws together.

"Oh—Terry—help! I'll never get this old suitcase fastened, and we won't get down till after dark, and your mother will be worried and——" Sim's list of worries and trials was ended by Terry, a smiling, sandy-haired creature, thrusting Sim aside and putting a silk-covered knee on the offending luggage, which closed obediently under such superior pressure.

[10]

"There, little one, it's shut. Are you all packed now?" Terry Landry asked, patting Sim maternally on her fair head.

Sim ducked. "Don't *do* that!" she wailed. "You act like a maiden aunt."

"Phew!" A black-haired, blue-eyed girl crawled out from under a bed. "How did that shoe ever get under there in the first place? I suppose you threw it at a mouse, Sim. I should have made *you* crawl after it." Arden Blake straightened her smart tan-wool dress as she rose from the floor.

"No," answered Terry before Sim could reply, "you did it yourself three nights ago, I remember. And, incidentally, I seem to be the only one ready, even though you two say I'm always late."

Terry stood surveying the jumbled scene with amused eyes. Her two roommates at once renewed their activity. Arden thrust the recovered shoe into a bag with its fellow and announced that she too was finished. Sim, powdering an uptilted nose, declared that if Arden was ready there was nothing to wait for, so, opening the door of their room, called the porter to take their bags.

[11]

Down the long corridor they went, calling "goodbyes" at each open door and gayly knocking at those closed, as they marched down the hall.

For the last time that year they descended the five flights of stairs up which they had so often raced. At the outer door of the building they cast a quick look behind them, then piled into the waiting car. A five-passenger touring car, it was, belonging to Arden's father. In it the three girls were to drive down to Oceanedge, on the coast, where they would spend a month or two visiting Terry and her mother in a seaside cottage. Oceanedge was the development name of the

resort. Natives called it Marshlands.

It was the first time the three girls had been permitted to take such a long drive alone, and they were anxious to conduct themselves creditably. Early as the start was, and it was not yet nine o'clock, the girls would not reach the shore until nearly evening, so they were anxious to get going.

Relaxing comfortably against the cool leather upholstery, they soon left Cedar Ridge behind them. Mile on mile piled up as they drove along the uncrowded roads leading out of Morrisville. They talked little; thoughts were too insistent, for leaving school was indeed a big event, and all seemed completely to realize its importance.

[12]

At noon they stopped at a wayside Tea Shoppe for lunch, and when fortified by sandwiches and tea and a generous helping of chocolate cake they continued on their journey, becoming less like students and more like ordinary girls as they left college farther in the distance.

The country was now taking on a seashore look, maple trees giving place to patchy-barked sycamores and stunted, conventional pines, and grassy meadows fading into sandy wastes and dunes; the road stretching always before them, a dark ribbon between the yellow hills of sand, pebbles, and broken shells.

It was at just such a portion of country that they came upon the stalled car.

"Wait, Arden," Sim begged as they approached it, "let's see what the trouble is. There hasn't been a garage for miles."

"No, and there won't be another one for miles, either, not until we get to Oceanedge," Terry announced. "Perhaps we should see if we could help."

Arden promptly turned in to the side of the road, where they inspected a rather ancient car, sagging over a flattened tire and looking like anything but the power to move along.

"A blowout," Terry remarked laconically. "The owner is probably walking into town."

[13]

Curiously they looked into the abandoned vehicle when, suddenly, a huge white and tan dog, apparently aroused from a pleasant sleep, began to bark ferociously.

"No one could go near that car with that—that—what is it, Arden?" Sim questioned.

"A Russian wolfhound, and a beauty too," Arden replied, pursing her lips into a crooning little whistle and trying to soothe the animal with friendly assurance.

"Look at all the stuff in the back there," Terry called, where, from a safe distance, she was gazing in at the rear window. "Looks like a lot of pictures."

"I guess that's what they are. Well," Arden suggested, "shall we go on? We'll probably overtake the owner."

"Might as well," agreed Sim, and Terry nodded as she got back into Arden's car.

The dog stopped its barking, and as they drove off they could see it curled up again on the front seat to finish its interrupted nap; a nose of silky white and taffy-colored tan. It certainly was a beauty.

Again the road lay straight before them, without even a tree on either side to break the monotony. On the right, some distance away, they knew, the blue inviting ocean lay shining in the sunlight, and on the left miles of pine woods with a carpet of brown needles.

[14]

They had not much farther to go, Terry told them, pointing out a wary-looking wooden hand which indicated "Oceanedge, 5 mi."

"Whoever do you suppose might own the old car?" Arden asked curiously as they sped along.

"I don't care whose dog it is, or car, or what's in the back or anything about it," Sim said firmly. "I'm going to enjoy this summer, and I refuse to become interested in another mystery. That car looked to me just like one all ready to sprout."

"That's just talk, Sim," Terry remarked. "If we meet a handsome stranger, trudging slowly toward the village, would you say—pass him by?" challenged Terry.

"No, of course not," Sim amended. "We could give him a lift, and unless my eyes deceive me, we are even now approaching the person in question."

"You're right, little one," Arden announced, "it could be no other. Shall I pull over?" She had taken her foot off the accelerator, and the car slowed down.

Sim and Terry nodded "Yes," vigorously, and Arden drove over to the side of the road, stopping by the stranger.

"May we give you a lift?" she asked pleasantly.

[15]

The man looked at her sharply and seemed startled. He took a soft gray hat from his head politely but still hesitated in answering.

"Why, I—er—thank you very much," he faltered finally. "My car is back there. I was unable to get the tool chest open, and, really," he smiled ruefully, "I have no spare."

The girls thrilled inwardly. He was so good-looking! A "handsome stranger" in every respect, with just a suggestion of a foreign accent.

"We are going to Oceanedge," Arden continued, "but we could drop you at a garage on our way."

"Oh, now," protested the man, "that would be too much. I am used to walking. Besides," he said disarmingly, "your parents would perhaps not approve."

"Our parents," Sim flung in, "have faith in us—in our judgment. You simply must let us take you. It is absurd to walk in this hot sun when we are going that way."

He shrugged in complaisance and, dusting off his clothes a bit, climbed in the back seat, murmuring his thanks.

"I, too, will be at Oceanedge for the summer," he said as if to break the embarrassing pause. "I paint. I have rented a houseboat out where I can be alone and have quiet. I do not need people around me. I have Tania, my dog, and my paints, and so I am happy." He talked in a jerky fashion, as though translating from a foreign tongue, as he went on.

Sim, always the most loquacious of the three, volunteered the information that they were visiting Terry and her mother, that they were fast friends, and added, in a little burst of indignation, that of course they would not bother him or attempt to break up his "quiet." The girls frowned at her, but Sim was ever high-spirited.

At Reilly's garage, the only one in the sleepy village, they set him down after he had thanked them charmingly, and they continued on their way. They had to go back again to the main road a short distance, for the house, gayly called "Buckingham Palace" because it was so unlike the great palace, was on a neck of land reaching out between ocean and bay and south of the town.

"Queer fellow, didn't you think, Arden?" Sim questioned, still wondering about their reluctant passenger.

"Mysterious would be a better word, I think. Really, I got that impression of him. Very mysterious, as if he had something to hide."

"Rather fond of himself, I'd say," Terry flung in. "We won't bother him. He'll be quite alone on that old houseboat, and I hope the water rats find his best cheese."

"He was a little strange," Arden reasoned, ignoring Terry's joke. "Quite different, I expect, from the usual village Romeo, eh, Terry?"

"That dog, too, I'd hate to have that animal mad at me," Sim remarked, pulling a blonde curl into further prominence from under her beret.

"I can't imagine what a man like that would come to this forsaken place for," Terry mused. "Heaven knows it's quiet enough, if that's what he wants, but no scenery for painting. And wait until he sees that houseboat! It's been tied up in the bay for years," and she sighed comfortably. "Oh, well, as Sim says, let's not worry about *him*. We'll probably never see him again."

"He said he was happy, but he didn't look that way to me," Arden went on. "I thought he looked rather sad, and we don't even know his name. If that should ever matter."

"Arden Blake!" Sim exclaimed, "if you make another mystery out of this simple incident, after all we've just gone through, I'll never forgive you! I'm pos-i-tive-ly off mysteries for life."

"Terry's right. We'll probably never see him again. He would certainly know how to hide himself and his dog," Arden said slowly, and then, stepping on the gas, she drove as fast as she dared in the direction of "Buckingham Palace."

CHAPTER II

A Man, a Dog, and a Girl

With almost startling suddenness, the little house affectionately known as "Buckingham Palace" popped into view as the car swung round a turn in the road.

A white, two-story house, with brilliant orange awnings, that Terry's father had bought when Oceanedge had promised to become a thriving seashore resort. But the "plans of men" had gone "agley," and Oceanedge had never developed beyond Terry's house, the beginnings of a boardwalk, and a bridge over the small inlet of Bottle Bay.

Arden kept her hand pressed down on the horn, and amid the noise of the horn and Terry's shrill whistle with forefingers between her lips, announced their arrival.

"Yoo-hoo!" Terry called and once more gave her famous loud whistle.

It was a feat much admired by the other two, who, although they had practised faithfully under Terry's instruction, were never able to produce as much as a single "toot" from carefully pursed lips.

Terry's mother, a woman still young and pleasant enough to be Terry's sister, appeared in the doorway and waved a hand. The girls jumped out and hurried toward her.

[20]

"Oh, Mother!" Terry exclaimed, throwing her arms affectionately around her proud parent, "it's so good to be here. We made wonderful time and never a puncture, even."

"It's good to have you here, too," Terry's mother replied and with a welcoming smile kissed Arden and Sim.

"I'm glad you arrived safely, for I think we will get a storm before night, it has been so sultry today," she went on, and as though to give credence to her words a low, angry rumbling was heard in the west.

"But come in and get comfortable. You must be starved. We have only a cold supper, for we were not sure just when you'd get here. Ida," she called, "the girls are here, we can begin whenever you're ready."

"Yes, ma'm, Miz Landry, right away," came from the kitchen while the girls were on their way upstairs.

The house was not elaborate. One of those many rubber-stamp houses, four bedrooms upstairs, maid's room downstairs type, but it was bright and airy, and to the somewhat weary travelers it represented all that could be desired.

[21]

They quickly changed from "city clothes" into cooler cotton dresses and slipped fresh shoes on stockingless feet. They hoped before their visit was over to have acquired a tan that would defy detection of bare legs and make true skin

stockings look smarter still.

Downstairs in the dining room Ida had made a noble attempt at a cold supper. Potato salad, lettuce and sliced tomatoes, cold meat, and lemonade that made a great hit. They ate hungrily and drank glass after glass of the cool drink as the air became more dense and the storm more imminent.

Rolls of thunder growled nearer now, and the sky was dark and threatening. Mrs. Landry lit the low-hung chandelier over the table; and then, all at once, with a deafening clap of thunder, the storm was upon them.

"Terry, the windows upstairs!" Mrs. Landry called. "And, Sim and Arden, see if you can pull up the porch awnings. Ida and I will take care of the windows here."

Terry dashed upstairs, and Sim and Arden made for the screen-enclosed porch.

A cool, almost cold, wind whipped their hair in their eyes and snapped the awnings viciously as they hurriedly worked.

[22]

"Isn't it glorious, Sim?" Arden asked, pulling with all her might at an awning rope.

"I don't like it," Sim answered and gave a little squeal at a flash of lightning.

"Look at the ocean—it's all gray, and just a little while ago it was so blue. Oh, dear, Sim, let's pull together!" Arden wrapped the rope around her hand, and they both tugged vigorously.

The awning went up with a rush, and the girls hurried to the next one. Upstairs a window slammed as Terry went on with her job. The sky was as dark as night now, and the lightning flashed with increased brilliance; sometimes in flaming vastness, then again in piercing arrows.

Suddenly the rain came. Dashing down in silver sheets, it quickly drove Arden and Sim inside. Terry came running downstairs, and they all gathered in the living room, where they could watch the fury of the storm over the ocean.

"Are you frightened, girls?" Terry's mother asked, as she saw Sim wince at a thunderclap. "You mustn't be. The storm will follow the bay right out to sea. They never last long when it gets as black as this. It's mostly wind, and it blows out quickly."

"I love it," Arden replied. "I think it's beautiful. But it makes us seem so small and...." She hesitated. A new noise could be distinguished above the roar of the storm. The little group, with one accord, turned to a side window from whence the sound seemed to come. What they saw made poor frightened Sim gasp. It was a white peering face, with hair plastered down by the rain, and a questioning look in the eyes.

[23]

"Terry! Go to the door! Let her in!" Mrs. Landry called, quickly realizing this was a girl's face.

Terry sprang to obey. The front door opened; the screen door beyond it was blown back and slammed against the side of the house.

"Come in, come in," Terry shouted against the

screaming wind. "You'll be blown away!"

But the storm-born creature, holding a torn sweater closer around her, looked sharply at Terry, then turned and dashed away in the dim light and was almost instantly lost to sight on the winding pathway.

Terry, drying her face and smoothing her hair, came back to the harbor of the lighted room.

"She ran when I called her," she stated simply. "What do you suppose she wanted, if she didn't want to come in?"

"It's a queer time just to come for a look around," Sim agreed. "You must have scared her away, Terry."

[24]

"She's probably a water pixie," Arden remarked, still under the spell of the majestic storm. "She was most likely never there at all; we just imagined it."

"What's that?" Sim asked. "Do I imagine I hear a knock at the door? I'm sure I heard something."

They all listened. There was certainly a sound like knocking.

"She's come back!" Terry declared and once more opened the door. The storm by this time had abated a bit, although the rain still lashed down in lordly fury.

As Terry flung back the door, the girls gasped, for there stood their "handsome stranger" of the lift-ride, soaked thoroughly, with a shivering, bedraggled dog huddling close to him.

"Oh-h-h-h!" faltered Terry in her surprise. "Won't you come in?" she continued, recovering her composure.

"I'm afraid I am too wet," answered their strange caller, pushing a damp strand of hair back from his face. "I am sorry to trouble you ——" A sudden gust of wind fury almost pulled the door from Terry's grasp.

"Come in, come in," interrupted Terry's mother coming forward. "We don't mind a little water; and the poor dog!"

[25]

She stooped to pet the cringing animal and then drew back in alarm as a snarl greeted her.

"Tania!" called the man in rebuke, and then to Terry's mother he said: "You must forgive her, she is not used to strangers, but she will not harm you. Tania," he said again, "these people are friends." It was his voice, apparently, not his words, the dog understood.

Arden and Sim had pressed nearer to witness the little drama of the storm. The man and his white wraith of a dog now stood dripping puddles of rain water on Mrs. Landry's spotless floor. He looked shyly down at the widening pools at his feet, smiled, and said:

"I wonder if you could give me a few matches? I have not been very practical, for I neglected to buy some. And the old ones I have are all like this." He held up a soaked cardboard clip-container, soft from the rain. There was just a hint of a foreign accent as he continued: "I am,

in a way, a neighbor, and, though I fear I am making a great deal of trouble for you, I cannot light my lamp without matches." He made a helpless gesture.

"Neighbor?" questioned Mrs. Landry. "I don't understand."

"Oh, yes!" Arden exclaimed, recognizing the visitor. "You are the gentleman we drove into town this afternoon. He lives on the houseboat down the bay," she quickly whispered to Terry's mother. Then to the caller: "Will matches be all that you need?"

[26]

"I think so, yes; thank you. But please allow me to introduce myself and beg pardon for intruding like this. I am Dimitri Uzlov. I have rented the houseboat for the summer while I do a little painting and sketching. This is Tania, my faithful dog. She is not as savage as she appears. This afternoon your daughters were kind enough to —" He looked at Mrs. Landry and bowed formally. But she interrupted:

"Only one daughter, Mr. Uzlov," and she indicated Terry by putting a hand on her shoulder. "My other daughters are not here now. These young ladies are Terry's guests—her college chums."

Dimitri Uzlov bowed in acknowledgment. In so doing he turned the hat he was holding upside down, and water began dripping and splashing from the curved brim.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in some confusion.

"It doesn't matter," said Terry.

"Thank you. But the young ladies were very kind to me this afternoon. No doubt they have told you." Another bow to Mrs. Landry. "But I must not stand here dripping like this. If I could have a few matches for my lamps—" His slow, ingratiating smile came out again.

[27]

Terry hurried to the kitchen and returned with matches and candles as well. Mrs. Landry always kept a supply of both in stock, knowing, from past sad experiences, that the electric current at Marshlands was not always entirely dependable during severe storms.

Terry held out the matches, long wooden ones with blue heads, and several candles.

"You are very provident," said Mr. Uzlov, smiling once more as he took them, again bowing and splashing more water from his hat to the floor. "I must be wise in this same way. I thank you a thousand times! You are so kind!"

The rain-soaked visitor turned to go.

"Won't you wait a little longer," Mrs. Landry asked, "until the storm lets up a bit?"

"Thank you, but I must get back. I have stayed away too long already. My humble houseboat is alone. Come, Tania," he replied and, giving them all a shy smile, he stepped out on the porch.

"But you'll catch cold—the rain—" Arden began.

"It has almost stopped," Dimitri Uzlov smiled.

[28]

"We must not stay any longer. I am a solitary person. But thank you." And he was gone, leaving only the telltale puddles behind him.

As they watched from the window they could see him walking down the damp sand in the direction of the houseboat with Tania, the Russian wolfhound, at his heels, looking thinner than ever because of the way her silk hair lay matted with the rain.

Like a character from the "King of the Golden River" he looked, getting farther and farther away until a sand-dune suddenly cut off their sight of him.

Only the footsteps were left, big ones for Dimitri and a series of small holes where the dainty Tania had followed him.

"What a strange man!" Mrs. Landry exclaimed.

"I think he's just awfully shy," Arden said. "I suppose he couldn't bear to come in with all us women staring at him."

"Perhaps you're right, my dear," Terry's mother answered and once more turned to the window.

A big storm, a wild wraith of a girl, a real hermit, and a majestic wolfhound! What more could the girls have expected?

[29]

CHAPTER III

The Russian

When the storm was over and the late summer sun came out for a brief half hour before settling down for the night, there was hardly a hint of rain left. The sandy ground absorbed the water almost as quickly as it fell, leaving only tiny pock-marks behind.

The girls opened doors and windows to capture the cool air, and Arden let the porch awnings down and jumped back just in time to escape a small cascade as the rain water tumbled free of the canvas pocket.

Then Arden and Sim, Terry and her mother sat on the comfortably screened porch and watched night fold her dark-blue wings over everything.

"Funniest thing the way that 'Tess-of-the-Storm-Country' creature peeked in at the window and then ran away," Terry observed dreamily. "Who could she have been?"

"I suppose she saw Dimitri Uzlov coming up the path and was frightened. That dog of his certainly looked like nothing human," Sim replied.

"A case of 'see what the storm blew in,'" Arden chuckled. "But don't you think he's fascinating? I love his accent."

Terry's mother gave a little laugh.

"You youngsters always find something romantic

[30]

in the most everyday occurrences, don't you? But you mustn't bother Mr. Uzlov. He seems a serious young man, and he hinted, quite charmingly, that he would rather be alone. Well —" she smothered a little yawn—"I'm going to bed. It must be half-past ten. Good-night, girls."

"Oh—Mother—" Terry drawled—"as if we'd bother him."

That was one of the nicest things about Terry's mother. She never intruded, and any advice she gave was always offered in a way that they could not possibly object to. But this evening her well-meant plan of leaving them alone to talk was not needed, for they soon followed her into the house, and after talking a while in sleepy monosyllables, without much ceremony fell asleep in comfortable beds.

The next morning brought a blue-and-gold day with a stiff northwest wind kicking up whitecaps on Bottle Bay. "Buckingham Palace" stood on a little neck of land, with the ocean on one side and the bay on the other.

"Let's take the rowboat and go down the bay a bit," Terry suggested. "It's too cold for bathing."

[31]

"We could take a look at the houseboat without disturbing the hermit," Arden remarked. "Maybe —"

"Exactly what I had in mind," Terry said. "You're positively uncanny, Arden, the way you read people's minds. We don't need to mention it to Mother, though."

It was after breakfast, and the girls were sitting on the bottom step of the porch, idly watching tiny ants rebuild their houses that had been washed away in the storm.

"Let me row, Terry, will you?" Sim asked. "I'm going to start in training this very day, and when we go back to Cedar Ridge in the fall I'll be the champion swimmer of the college," she bragged.

"You can row, all right, I've no desire to raise blisters on my lily-white palms," Terry answered her, and going to the door of the house she called: "Mother, we're going for a little row in the bay. The girls want to take a look around. Yes, we'll be careful. 'Bye!"

On the bay side an old though seaworthy rowboat was moored, covered with a canvas which had kept out the rain. They quickly pulled off the cover, and Terry took the oars from their place. With a few uncertain pushes, they finally made one strong enough to get started.

[32]

They were wearing shorts with sneakers, and bright handkerchiefs knotted at their throats; no hats, but Sim had tied a ribbon like Alice in Wonderland around her head to keep her short curls in place. It was becoming, too, and perhaps Sim knew that.

"Now let's see how good you are, Sim," Terry suggested. "Hail the champion——"

"I'm not good at all, but I will be. Arden, you get in the what-do-you-call it—stern—the back, and, Terry, you sit there, too, then you can watch me and tell where we're going." Sim found a place to brace her heels and grasping the oars began

to back water until they could turn.

"Don't just row down there and bump into the houseboat. Pretend we're going some place else," Arden suggested. "We don't want to appear so curious."

"It won't make much difference; the wind is taking us there, anyway. Oh—ouch!" Sim exclaimed. "I caught my fingers between the oars." She shook her hands quickly to "throw off" the pain.

"Well, don't let the oar go, silly!" Terry cautioned quickly. "Oh, Sim, you lovely chump, there it goes!"

[33]

The oar, as though pulled by the water, slipped out of the oarlock and floated away entirely unconcerned.

"Here, give me the other one, I'll paddle," Terry cried, reaching for the one faithful remaining oar.

Sim tried to hand it to her and in so doing gave Arden a little bump on the head.

"Oh, Sim, you're hitting me," Arden squealed.

"Sorry!" grunted Sim.

"Fine bunch of sailors you are. You can't paddle against this wind. Look where we're going!" Arden was indicating the shore line. The houseboat was only a few hundred feet away now, in a little cove, down the bay from Terry's house, the distance being about a half mile.

"We're going right toward it. What'll we do?" Sim wailed. "We'll hit it in a minute!"

"Oh, hush, Sim! We can't help it. Stick out the oar, Terry, so we don't bump too hard," Arden ordered.

Terry tried her best, but the oar slipped to one side, and the boat rammed the houseboat with a little bump that, to the girls, sounded like a crash.

Instantly there was a ferocious barking, and the girls could hear a call: "Tania! Tania!" and then a rush of words uttered in a soothing tone.

[34]

They sat quite still, an embarrassed little group, while their lazy old craft hugged the side of the houseboat.

"Sim Westover," Arden hissed, "I could cheerfully duck you, clothes and all. What will the man think?"

"But, Arden—" began Sim, and then stopped as she heard footsteps on the upper deck of the boat near them.

Dimitri Uzlov had come on deck and was gazing down at them silently. They looked back, uncertain how to explain their presence. Arden spoke:

"We're sorry to have disturbed you, but we lost an oar and the boat drifted over here."

"I let it slip," Sim added a little nervously. "I'm not very good at rowing, I'm afraid." She smiled up at him apologetically.

He still looked down at them, saying nothing, half amused and half angry, apparently.

"If you could lend us an oar we could row over and get ours," Terry suggested. "We'd bring yours right back."

Suddenly the young man burst out laughing, and they all felt better, so much better that they joined in the laugh themselves.

"You are char-r-rming," he chuckled. "Of course you may take my oar; I will get it for you," and he disappeared from sight as if he had dropped down a hatchway.

[35]

"See!" Arden whispered gleefully. "Isn't he nice?"

Then they heard him call: "Can you push down to this end of my castle? My rowboat is moored here."

Terry poled the boat in the shallow water, for the houseboat was tied up at the shore, to the place Dimitri indicated.

There was a boat similar to theirs fast to the larger craft. Dimitri handed Terry the oar, smiling.

"Do you think you can recover your own?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, easily," replied Terry. "I'll row this time."

Sim climbed to the stern a little humbly and sat panting while Terry, with long strokes, pulled toward the deeper water where their oar was bobbing about in the sunlight.

"Grab it, Sim," she called when they reached it, "and don't murder anyone with it!"

Sim grabbed and recovered the dripping wooden shaft successfully and also gratefully.

"Now we'll take his back," Terry went on, and turned their craft toward the houseboat.

[36]

Tania once more barkingly announced their arrival, and Dimitri appeared at the signal.

"Will you come on board and rest for a minute?" he invited hospitably. "It was unfortunate that you lost your oar."

"I don't know whether we ought—" began Terry but Arden, seeing his smiling face take on an embarrassed look, interrupted with:

"We'd love to, for just a second. I've never been on a houseboat."

Terry tied their boat up near his, and the three girls went around to the stern of the houseboat over a little boardwalk and up the rickety stairs to the deck of the floating old craft.

There they hesitated. Tania was keeping up a barrage of barking, showing her fangs and growling at intervals.

"Please, if you will come with me," Dimitri said. "I will impress on her that you are my friends."

They followed him guardedly. "Tania, come

here," he ordered sternly. The big white-and-tan dog stood like a statue. "Come here!" her master repeated. Tania walked toward him with queenly dignity.

Dimitri then put his hand on Arden's arm. "These are my friends," he said; and then to the girls: "I will tell her that in Russian, and she will be sure to understand. Then if you will each pat her head, you will be fast friends." He smiled enthusiastically.

[37]

The little ceremony of introduction was carried out, and Tania ceased her worried barking. The dog put a dainty paw on Arden's white shorts as if to reassure them all most completely.

"Such a lovely dog," murmured Sim.

"And intelligent, too," added Terry.

"I will have pleasure in showing you my little floating home here, if you would like to see it," said Mr. Uzlov, smiling his invitation. "It is the first time I have ever lived on a houseboat. They are rather strange creatures, is it not so?" Again he smiled.

"This one is very old," Terry said. "I don't know how many years it has been here. It belongs to Mr. Reilly, the town chief of police. This is the first time it's been rented in I don't know how long. I think you hadn't better try to move it either by sail or an outboard motor," she warned with a laugh. "I fancy it would leak like a sieve."

"Doubtless," he agreed, also laughing. "But I shall be safe enough on my boat. I don't intend to move her, and probably she rests on the muddy bottom of this bay and marshy land."

The houseboat was not large. It consisted of a sort of large shed, with windows, doors, and a flat roof perched on what had once been a scow. There was a narrow space running all around the house part, between it and a low rail. There was a small float at one end to which a rowboat was made fast. From the float a cleated plank gave access to the lower deck of the boat, if a deck it could be called. There was also a short flight of rather rickety steps at the stern by which the girls had come aboard. The houseboat had once been painted green, but little of the original color remained.

[38]

"Will you follow me?" Dimitri Uzlov requested, opening a sagging door which led into the rear part of the houseboat. "This is where I do my work."

The girls saw that the interior of the craft consisted of really but one large room, divided by heavy hanging curtains into two apartments. The one they had entered did the double duty of a sleeping and working space, for there was a cot in one corner. On a table gleamed a bright brass samovar with some dishes about it. There was an easel and on a chair near it brushes in pots, tubes of paint, and a much-smearred palette. The curtained-off part was the kitchen.

"I am finishing a marine for a client," the artist said, indicating the half-finished canvas on the easel.

Arden and her chums noticed several canvases

[39]

stacked together near one wall, and standing beside a window was another easel with a picture on it. But what the subject of this picture was could not be seen, for it was covered with a sheet.

"Oh, how lovely it is here!" Arden exclaimed. "To have a place all your own to do just as you please in and no need to worry about neighbors looking in your windows!"

"At least I am sufficiently isolated here," the Russian agreed. "The houseboat is hard to come at. I always loved marshlands. That is one reason I was attracted to this boat, old and shabby as it is."

"It's wonderful, I think," murmured Sim.

"But a little lonesome," suggested Terry.

"I came here for lonesomeness—as one reason," Mr. Uzlov said.

Arden glanced at the exposed picture showing a stormy ocean with sea gulls fighting the wind. Dimitri smiled understanding as she said:

"It is lovely!"

The artist seemed to be losing some of his reluctance.

Arden walked over toward the other painting—the one covered with a sheet. She wondered what it could be.

"What is this?" she asked, extending a hand as though to lift the covering. "Is it your masterpiece?"

[40]

Instantly the young man's face clouded.

"Please—that—do not touch it—please! It is—unfinished. I cannot show it to you. I am sorry!"

His first words had been hurried—stiff—exclamatory. The girls at once sensed a change in his manner. But his last word had been almost pleading. Even then it seemed as if his friendliness, which had been so pronounced on the arrival of his visitors, was now as covered as was the picture.

Arden drew back as if hurt.

"I didn't mean to be curious," she faltered. "I'm sorry!" Even her words sounded empty of meaning.

Another change came over the face of Dimitri Uzlov.

"You will be so good as to pardon me for my seeming ill haste," he murmured. "But that picture—no—it must not be seen—yet."

Matters were becoming a little strained and awkward, but Terry went into the breach cleverly by saying:

"We had better be going. It must be nearly lunch time. Mother will be expecting us. Thank you for your help, Mr. Uzlov, and for letting us see your houseboat."

He did not try to stop them, nor did he express regret at their sudden departure, but simply said

[41]

good-bye and then watched them pull away in the waiting rowboat.

"Queerest person I ever met," Terry began. "One minute all sunshine and gladness, and the next, all worked up because Arden asked about his old picture."

"I wouldn't have touched it, anyway," Arden replied. "I was just trying to show a little interest. My goodness! Who would want to live in such a messy place? No one but the sort they call—artists!"

"I wonder what the hidden picture was?" Sim asked curiously. "Perhaps he's a spy, making maps of the coast and inlet."

"Now who said they refused to get mixed up in another mystery?" Terry jeered. "Well, let's go home, I'm hungry."

"So am I, but I would like to know what was on that easel," Sim remarked as Terry pulled with strong strokes back to "Buckingham Palace."

[42]

CHAPTER IV

A Girl and a Bracelet

By afternoon the sun was warmer, and the girls, dressed in bathing suits, were lying on the caressing sand of the little beach not far from the house. They had spread their beach coats out beneath them and were sprawled in favorable attitudes to acquire the all-important tan. At intervals one of the girls sat up and coated herself liberally with coconut oil. They did not seem to feel exactly like talking, as the sun made them deliciously lazy. Perhaps they were thinking of their adventure at school when, as told in the first volume of this series, *The Orchard Secret*, many surprising things happened. Or they may have been letting their minds wander to more surprising occurrences, as told in the *Mystery of Jockey Hollow*.

Sim, Arden, and Terry had been chums and schoolmates ever since they first began to acquire knowledge in Vincent Prep, and their friendship and loyalty continued until the present time, when they were just finishing their freshman year at Cedar Ridge, the well-known college for girls at Morrisville. This small city was not very distant from Pentville, where the three lived.

As Sim sat up to apply the oil again, she saw a dark object bobbing up and down far out on the ocean.

[43]

"Look, girls," she cried, "does that look like someone to you, or is it just a log?"

"Where?" Arden asked, squinting at the bright water toward which Sim pointed, and then they were left in no doubt, for the bobbing dark spot began to swim. With long, sure strokes it came nearer to them, and they could see the white foam where the thrashing feet churned it up in

perfect timing.

"Some swimmer," Sim said admiringly. "Wonderful form. I wonder who it is?"

"We'll soon see," Arden replied, and Terry nodded in agreement.

The figure was making rapid time, and as it neared the beach, waited for just the right minute and then coasted in on a blue-and-white breaker.

The girls watched while the swimmer crawled a stroke then sprang upright and shook off water like a happy young animal.

"Why, it's the girl who looked in at the window last night," Terry exclaimed. "She can swim, can't she?"

The girl saw them suddenly and was about to run up the beach and away when she hesitated. Sim saw an old gray sweater on the sand near them. It obviously belonged to the swimmer, and she would have to come quite near them to get it.

[44]

Sim smiled at her as she looked at them in an almost frightened way.

"You swim beautifully," Sim remarked to relieve the shy girl. "Did you learn in the ocean?"

"Yeah," she drawled, stooping for her sweater. "I learned in the ocean." That was all she said.

"Do you live here, at Oceanedge?" Arden asked next.

"Not right here," replied the swimmer. "I live on the other side of the bay with my father, but I come here to swim." After such a long speech she again seemed ready to run away.

"We live up there," Terry volunteered, indicating the house, the roof of which could be seen above low pines. "We're just here for the summer. Do you live here all year?"

"Yes, I'm a native," their new friend went on in a rather bitter tone. "I live, if you can call it that, with my father. He's a crabber and a worn crab himself. What's that oil for?" Arden was dabbing a bit on a rather red arm.

"To make us tan; want some?" asked Sim kindly.

The girl gave a little laugh. "My father would tan me if he caught me using anything like that. He says I'm so homely now, there's no use making me worse."

[45]

"Oh, but you're a marvelous swimmer. I wish you'd swim with me some day," said the sympathetic Sim. "What's your name? Mine is Bernice Westover, but everyone calls me Sim," she finished affably.

"Melissa Clayton," the girl answered. "That's a pretty thing." She indicated a brilliantly painted wooden bracelet on Sim's arm, the kind sponsored by the large department stores as being just the thing for beach wear because, perhaps, you couldn't forget you had it on.

"Do you like it? You may have it," Sim replied

and slipped it off her arm. "Here, I've got lots of things like these, and you might like to have this."

"Oh, can I really? I'd love it! I've never had a pretty thing like this in my whole life. My father thinks such things are no good and only give me wrong ideas. But I'll take care of it always." Melissa took the bracelet and slipped it on her tanned muscular arm, looking at it pathetically.

She wore an old, dark-blue jersey bathing suit, a little too large for her, and a white canvas belt. She had no bathing cap on, and her wet hair was beginning to curl a little as it dried in the sun. She looked at the wooden bracelet as though it were as precious as a diamond circlet, turning it around and around to admire it. A slow smile spread over her tanned face.

"Do you go to school here in the winter, Melissa?" Arden asked. This wild creature who swam like a sea nymph and smiled at a cheap wooden bracelet was something different and "terribly interesting," in Arden's opinion.

"I did go to school, but my father took me out last year when I turned fourteen; said I'd be getting ideas. So I don't go any more," Melissa replied, her white teeth gleaming and sparkling in her darkened face.

"But what do you do all winter when it's cold and there's no crabbing?" Sim inquired. "We're asking you an awful lot of questions; do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind. I don't very often get a chance to talk to anybody. Pa never says a word, hardly," the girl went on.

Arden, Terry, and Sim watched her sympathetically as she stood first on one foot then on the other in a nervous way, smoothing out the sand beneath her feet. They had never met a girl like her, and pitied her at once when they learned of her lonely life. But, sorry as they were, they realized that there was something about her that was different, a hint of a mind not as keenly alert as theirs. She was so slow to respond to their advances.

"Why did you run away the other night in the storm?" Terry bravely asked. "We wanted you to come in."

"I was afraid. I just wanted to look at you all in the nice bright room, but when you saw me——"

"Melissa!" thundered a voice behind them.

They all started and turned. A shabbily dressed man was standing back of them on the sand. They had not heard his footsteps. Had he purposely crept up on Melissa?

"What are you doing there?" he asked roughly.

"Nothing, Pa—I was just swimmin'." Melissa seemed to swerve visibly, and she looked nervously down at the bracelet Sim had given her.

"What's that you got? Haven't I told you not to take things?"

"I didn't take it, Pa. She gave it to me. I never

even asked."

"Give it back, right away, and come along home! You've been fooling around here long enough. Quick, now!"

Melissa's childish blue eyes pleaded to be allowed to keep the bracelet, but her father, reading her thought, stepped forward and pulled it from her arm.

[48]

"Here, miss—I don't allow Melissa to take things," the gruff man growled.

"Oh—but it's nothing," faltered Sim. "Please —"

Clayton ignored her entirely, as he did Arden and Terry. They might not have been there, for all the attention they were given. Their attempt at helping Melissa went for naught.

Melissa pulled the gray sweater on over her still wet bathing suit and, smiling ruefully, followed her father, who had begun plodding up the beach. She did not look back but plodded along herself, trying to keep up with his big steps but, apparently, not intending to walk beside him.

The girls watched the retreating figures. Clayton was talking earnestly, now and then flinging out a hand in gesture and turning to shake his fist at his daughter, watching her closely as he tramped on.

"What a mean man!" Sim exclaimed, fingering the returned bracelet. "That poor child must have a rotten time."

"He certainly was a gruff old fellow," Arden agreed. "But did it strike you there was anything strange about that girl?"

"Only that she seemed so awfully scared. Like a kitten or stray dog. And I imagine she wanted to make friends," Terry replied.

[49]

"I hope that man is kind to her. I hate people to be unhappy," Sim remarked. "I'd better not begin to pity her, or I won't enjoy myself, and I so want to do that." She smiled appreciatingly at Terry, and then, taking the cork from the bottle of coconut oil, coated her pink skin again before starting for another dip.

[50]

CHAPTER V

The Stranger

The water was too cold for a long swim, perhaps because of the violent storm of the night before, and the girls did not stay in long. Sim, who loved swimming above all other sports, had to come out reluctantly, as she, too, felt cold. They dried themselves and raced back to the house to dress.

It was late afternoon when they were finally dressed and sitting once more on the porch of "Buckingham Palace."

"It's lovely here, Terry," Arden remarked looking dreamily at the ocean.

"I hope you won't get tired of it. As you know by now, there's really nothing to do. Swimming, rowing, walking, and fishing if you care for it. But no country clubs. One movie that's better left alone, and a tiny village," Terry explained at length.

"Oh, but you're forgetting our Russian friend and the wild girl of the swamps."

Sim spoke up. "Not to mention the hard-hearted father and the ferocious wolfhound *and* the swimming. Don't you worry, we won't be bored. What I like best is the complete absence of mystery." This was so pointed, the remark made a good joke.

[51]

"How about your theory that Dimitri is a spy and that Melissa is a kidnaped heiress?" Arden asked Sim, who was lazily swaying on the porch swing.

"Well, I do think he's queer, and I may be right after all. It's not natural for a man as young as he is to want to be alone unless he's hiding something from somebody," Sim insisted.

"Perhaps he is. But I find Melissa more interesting. Seemed to me that man she called 'Pa' had hypnotized her. And how mean of him not to let her keep the bracelet," Terry remarked. "Just plain mean!"

As if that brought up different theories in each mind, their conversation dragged. The swim and the row in the morning left them feeling pleasantly weary and completely satisfied. Healthy fatigue was the real answer.

Sim moved back and forth in the rustic swing, while Terry and Arden gazed dreamily out to sea, where the dying sun turned white clouds to pink and painted the water a deep blue in the miracle of sunset.

They never even realized that a car was coming rapidly down the road behind the house, raising billows of sandy dust, until it stopped with screeching brakes at the back gate of Terry's house.

[52]

"Who's that?" Sim asked, as Sim would.

"I haven't the least idea, little one," Terry answered. "Unless it's some more spies or kidnapers."

"Let's go see," Arden suggested. "May we?"

But they were saved the trouble, for a woman was striding up the sand-edged path to the porch. She was dressed in black satin with a huge silver fox scarf, and glittering earrings showed beneath a small satin turban. She had dark eyes, and her lips were a scarlet gash. The girls waited apprehensively.

"I beg your par-r-don," the woman began. "Have you a houseboat around here? He calls it—" she fumbled in a handbag and taking out a paper looked at it closely—"he calls it *Merry Jane*. Can you tell me how to reach it?"

"There is a houseboat down the bay, if that's the one you mean," Terry answered. "It is, I

imagine, the only one around here.”

“No other houseboats?” the caller asked, showing white even teeth, pretty in spite of the carmined lips.

“No, only this one,” Terry told her. “But I didn’t know it had a name.”

“Then that must be it, my dear. Can you tell me how to reach it?”

[53]

“You’ll have to go back through the village, then along a swampy road to the edge of the bay. The road is rather bad because of the rain last night.”

“Through the village? Is there no other way? I did not understand one had to go through the village,” the woman remarked vaguely.

“Unless you go by boat. I don’t know of any other way of getting there,” Terry answered.

The woman seemed to be considering. She tapped her hand impatiently on the letter she had taken from her purse, and looked around her as though trying to get her bearings and to make some decision.

“But how can I get a boat? It is very important that I get over there. I don’t suppose—I would be glad to pay you—if— Could you take me over? Have you a boat?” the dark woman asked abruptly.

“Yes,” answered Terry. “I could take you over, and of course I’d be glad to do it.”

“Can we go at once?” the woman asked nervously.

“I guess so,” Terry replied. “Tell Mother I’ll be right back, will you, Arden? I won’t be long.”

“Of course, Terry. But don’t you want—” Arden asked in a meaning, unfinished way.

For answer Terry turned aside from their strange caller and winked understandingly at Arden and Sim. Arden did not press her point further, but nodded her head and said no more. Both were thinking: “Now for another adventure!”

[54]

Terry quickly went for the oars and, with the dark flashy woman following, made for the rowboat. The passenger got in gracefully despite her extremely high-heeled shoes and sat in the stern while Terry pushed off.

“There it is, down there.” Terry pointed to the moored boat where Dimitri lived.

“That?” her passenger asked incredulously. “That—that *thing*? Dimitri is an odd one. Fancy him living there!” she sneered openly.

Terry maintained an embarrassed silence and rowed more vigorously. They soon reached the side of the houseboat, and at the sound of the oars Tania appeared on the narrow little deck, barking furiously.

“Dimitri! Dimitri!” the woman called. “Have you still got that beast? Tie her up. I’m coming aboard.”

Dimitri, in answer to the call, opened the door and came outside. He looked almost shocked as he saw Terry and her queer passenger, and for a minute seemed awe-struck. Then he smiled at Terry, for it was impossible to be heard above Tania's wild barking. He shrugged his shoulders and grasping Tania by the collar had literally to pull the huge dog away from the edge of the boat.

Terry came closer and grasped the side of the houseboat that the woman had spoken of as *Merry Jane*. She waited until Dimitri returned without Tania. He leaned down and, holding the woman by the hand, assisted her to climb aboard. Then, turning to Terry, smiling queerly, remarked:

[55]

"I don't know whether to thank you, my friend, or——"

Terry's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Dimitri," the woman said between shut teeth. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing. Come inside, Olga," he replied, and nodded to Terry as he held open the door for his apparently uninvited guest.

Terry knew at once she had no place in this strange little drama and prepared to leave. From the houseboat came the sound of a feminine voice raised in anger. But Terry could not understand the words beyond a pleading "Dimitri."

She rowed quickly away, back to safer if not saner surroundings.

[56]

CHAPTER VI

The Unwelcome Guest

Terry bent to the oars, pulling hard and taking long strokes with the blades just missing the water. She could row with quite some skill when she particularly wanted to, and now she could scarcely wait to get back to tell Sim and Arden what had happened.

As she reached the little dock where they tied up their boat, she looked around and saw Arden and Sim inspecting the flashy green roadster which the woman "Olga" had left parked near their back door. Terry put her finger to her lips and whistled shrilly. Arden and Sim at once came running to meet her.

"What happened, Terry?—surely something?" Arden asked, climbing into the boat. Sim followed, and all three settled down to talk on the quiet water's edge.

"Yes, lots!" Terry exclaimed. "He was furious when he saw her, and Tania was wild."

"Who was furious—what about?" Sim wanted to know.

[57]

"Dimitri, stupid," Terry went on. "When he saw

whom I had in the boat I never saw a man look so mad."

"What did he do?" Arden asked with great interest and hopeful expectancy.

"Oh, he was polite enough in a cold way," Terry told them with a show of relish. "He tied up Tania and said he didn't know whether or not to thank me. I heard him call her 'Olga.' When I left they were jabbering away as though they were mad at each other. Talking Russian, I guess," Terry said rapidly. The sudden appearance of the spectacular woman had given them more excitement than mere words might explain.

"Why do you suppose she didn't want to go through the village?" Sim inquired cannily.

"It looks to me as if she didn't want to be seen," Arden ventured.

"She seemed to know the artist pretty well," Terry resumed. "She spoke as if it was queer that he should live in the houseboat."

"Let's go back to the house, the mosquitoes are beginning to bite," Sim said, slapping her stockingless leg. "We can talk better there, anyway. Our voices might carry over the water."

They all agreed this was a good plan and scrambled out of the boat. Terry tied it up and took the oars, and they went back to the porch.

[58]

It was almost dusk now, and the bay was hardly rippled by a land breeze that carried the annoying little mosquitoes with it. The porch offered the most comfortable place, screened in and commodiously furnished. Once there, the girls got ready for a "good talk," and presently Terry's mother joined them.

"I wouldn't make too much out of this," she warned. "You girls will become gossips if you don't be careful," she laughed.

"But, Mother," Terry insisted, "he was so mad, and Tania was quite wild with rage. There must be something wrong about it."

"Tania is a nervous dog, she barks at everyone," Mrs. Landry remarked.

"She knows us now. I don't think she'd bark at us ever again," Terry decided rather triumphantly.

As though to prove this assertion, at that very moment Tania came bounding up the path. Her beautiful silky fur was coated with mud from the marsh, and water was dripping from her as the dog pranced along. She reached the screen door and gave a little "woof," asking to come in.

Arden got up and opened the door. At once Tania, in high spirits, planted her muddy feet on Arden's shoulders and licked her face. Arden staggered backward from the weight of the dog and stumbled over a chair. Tania could not keep on her own feet, and the two went down with a mighty bump. In the scramble Tania again playfully licked Arden's face in the most reassuring if not the most dignified way.

[59]

Terry and Sim were laughing so hard they could do nothing to help, and Arden rolled over and

buried her face in her hands. It was so sudden and so funny.

"Tania!" called Mrs. Landry sharply. "Stop it! Come here at once!"

At the sound of her name, Tania looked up and walked with her usual dignity to Terry's mother, obediently resting her head in the woman's lap. Mrs. Landry rubbed the silky ears and gently scolded the dog, while Arden scrambled to her feet and attempted to brush off the mud.

"See, Mother," Terry said as she stopped laughing. "I told you she knew us."

At that Terry reached out a hand to pet the animal and then exclaimed in surprise: "Look! Tania has a note under her collar!"

Quickly Terry pulled it out and began to read.

"It's from Dimitri," she announced as her chums waited to hear. "He wants to know if we can go back and get his guest, as his boat has sprung a leak and he can't use it. Oh, Mother, may we go?"

"You'll have to, I guess, since you took her over there," said Mrs. Landry somewhat reluctantly. "But not all of you. With Tania and your queer lady passenger the boat would be too crowded. Just two of you should go, I think."

"Oh, Mother, can't we all go?" Terry begged, reasoning that she, as the best rower, must necessarily go, and hating to leave one of her chums at home.

"No, I think it would be too crowded. I'd worry. Why don't you toss a coin and decide which one is to go with you?" Mrs. Landry suggested. She always worked with the girls, never against them.

Terry dashed into the house and, coming out, cried: "Heads Arden goes—tails Sim does." She flipped the coin into the air and caught it on the back of one hand, cleverly, covering it for a moment with her other hand. Then she announced: "You win, Arden. It's too bad, Sim dear. But you can take care of Mother, and we'll come back just as soon as we can and tell you every little thing; won't we, Arden?"

"Oh, surely!"

As was natural, perhaps, Terry and Arden were too excited to notice whether or not Sim minded very much being thus left behind. The two hurried down to the rowboat with Tania trotting after them. The dog curled up on the broad stern seat, and Arden sat near her to restrain her if necessary. But there was no need. Tania seemed very much accustomed to boats and hardly stirred.

Terry rowed quickly in the direction of the *Merry Jane*. From her position Arden could see Dimitri and his somewhat mysterious guest out on the narrow, railed walk that extended all around the house part of the boat. The Russian was obviously waiting for those whom he had summoned by the note on his dog's collar. The woman Olga was talking to him rapidly, as Terry and Arden could hear. They noticed, as they drew nearer, that her face seemed paler than

[60]

[61]

before, and her eyes were flaming. Dimitri looked quizzically at the approaching boat, and when they pulled alongside he quickly grasped Tania by the collar. The dog was transformed, suddenly, from the dignified white animal who had sat so quietly in the boat, to a raging, snarling beast. Dimitri hustled her on the houseboat and made her secure somewhere inside. He reappeared almost at once and said to Terry and Arden:

"It is most kind of you to do this. I do not like to be such a nuisance, but I promise you it shall not happen again." The girls thought he seemed too cross even to talk to them.

[62]

He motioned to Olga, who jumped lightly into the boat.

"Good-bye, Dimitri," she said clearly. "You have won this time, but it is not the end, by any means."

"*Au'voir*, then, Olga, till we meet again. I hope it will not be—too soon," he said, totally ignoring all politeness and smiling, the girls thought, bitterly.

"Thank you, comrade," he said to Terry. "Will you take her back now? She is driving to New York tonight."

Though he spoke to Terry, his remark almost seemed like an order to the dark woman, an order delivered in such a tone that it would seem foolhardy to overlook it. So Terry nodded her sandy head, and Arden said, "Good-bye," almost inaudibly. Then they started back once more to Terry's landing.

When they were out of earshot the woman apparently regained some of her composure; at least, she did not seem so angry.

"You know Dimitri, then?" she asked in an attempt to be pleasant.

"We gave him some candles one night, and he lent us an oar once," Arden answered. "We don't see him very often."

[63]

"No, and you won't," the woman added. "He is a queer one. Did he ever show you any of his things? Any jewels, maybe?"

"Only some pictures. Why?" Arden asked frankly.

"I just wondered. Of course, he is very fond of his pictures and that dog of his," she went on. "The largest picture. Did you see it?"

Arden shook her head.

"Oh, well," Olga shrugged her shoulders and adjusted her silver fox scarf. "He won't bother you again, I'm sure," and she smiled to herself.

They reached "Buckingham Palace," and Olga stepped out. With a perfunctory "thank you" she hurried to her car. There was Melissa Clayton gazing at it in raptures. Running her fingers over the shining fenders and pushing the upholstery to test its softness, Melissa was enchanted.

As Terry and Arden watched, they could see

Olga speak to Melissa. The girl answered, her face wreathed in smiles. Then, as Olga spoke again, Melissa hurried around to the side away from the steering wheel and got in the car, shutting the door after her.

Olga, settling herself, started the motor, reversed the car on the narrow sandy road, and turned back the way she had come, with Melissa beside her.

[64]

For a moment the girls were speechless.

Melissa going off in the strange woman's car!

[65]

CHAPTER VII

A Noise in the Night

"Well, what do you think of that?" Terry exclaimed as Arden and she, still in the boat at the little dock, watched Melissa get into Olga's car and drive away.

"Suppose she kidnaps little Melissa?" Arden facetiously suggested. "We must tell Sim. I wonder where she is."

"Sim! We're back!" Terry called. "Where are you?"

"Here," Sim answered from inside the house. "I was writing a letter. Come on up to my room and tell me all about it."

Arden and Terry, each carrying an oar, almost ran from the dock to the house, and Sim, who could not wait for them to come up to her room, met them at the door.

"Tell me all about it! I'm sure something exciting happened. I can tell by your faces," Sim exclaimed quickly.

"First, we'll tell you about the lovers' quarrel," Terry joked. "And if *they* are lovers—"

[66]

"They are not," flatly declared Arden. "More like partners in crime—"

"Hey, there!" warned Sim, "no crime in this. Go ahead, children. What happened?"

"Well, he was mad as hops when we got there," began Terry.

"And she was, too," Arden added.

"He practically said he hoped he'd never see her again," Terry resumed.

"She was positively *livid* when she got in the boat, and then she calmed down and tried to be nice to us," Arden took up the tale.

"He called me 'comrade.' Wasn't that sweet?" Terry wanted to know.

"I can't figure it out at all," Sim confessed. "And from the window I saw Melissa Clayton get in the gay car—imagine that! Melissa's been

hanging around here all the time you were away. She walked around the house once, and then I saw her peek in the kitchen window.”

“What can she want, I wonder?” Arden mused. “She’s a peculiar girl. Hope she isn’t in any trouble with that sour old dad of hers.”

“Looks to me as though we’ve dropped right into the middle of another mystery,” Terry announced, nodding her head wisely. “Maybe there are always mysteries, but only *wise girls* really discover them.”

[67]

“Oh, Terry!” Sim exclaimed woefully. “I did so want to be lazy this summer. Mysteries are terribly wearing.”

“Well, you can be as lazy as you want to be, but for my part I’m in this mystery up to my ears already, and I find it thrilling,” Terry announced firmly.

Dinner that night was a somewhat hectic meal, for no one had a chance to finish a sentence about the mysterious Olga and the departure of Melissa before someone else would break in with the announcement of a new theory.

Ida, the maid, did her serving wide-eyed with amazement. She was not a girl to be easily frightened, but she possessed a great deal of natural curiosity. Despite Mrs. Landry’s efforts to shift the conversation into other channels, the names Dimitri, Olga, and Melissa popped up constantly.

Eventually the little house was quiet, with its occupants settled down for the night. Sim and Arden in one room and Terry alone in her own.

Sim and Arden literally talked themselves to sleep, but Terry lay awake for a long time listening to the lap of the waves on the shore and the chirp of the crickets and grasshoppers in the sedges.

It seemed as if Terry had just gone to sleep when she was awakened by a sound somewhere in the house. She listened. It was a barely perceptible squeak, as if a window were being pushed up very gently. She started, then sat upright. Yes, there it was again. Then, without waiting for robe or slippers, she jumped out of bed and ran down the short hall to Sim and Arden.

[68]

“Arden! Sim!” she called. “Wake up!”

“H-m-m?” grunted Sim sleepily.

“Someone’s trying to get in!” Terry whispered hoarsely.

Arden was awake instantly. “Where, Terry?” she murmured.

“Downstairs, I guess. Sh-h-h! Listen!” Terry put a warning finger to her lips.

Sim was sitting up now, and the three girls were as quiet as statues in the eerie moonlight streaming in the open window.

“There it is again! Did you hear it? Just a tiny squeak,” Terry asked.

"It seems to be coming from the dining room. Had we better call your mother?" Arden asked in a low voice.

They listened again, with hearts pounding and eyes questioning. What could it be? Or rather who could it be? Down at Oceanedge it was customary not to lock doors, and windows were usually left wide open. But Mrs. Landry, being city-bred, could never get out of the habit of locking up for the night. Whoever it was, seemed deliberately trying to force up a window, and it sounded as if the hands were slipping on the glass.

[69]

"Can you light the downstairs lights from up here, Terry?" asked Arden. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to show them we're awake?"

"Yes, of course, Arden," Terry quickly replied. "I should have thought of that before. I'll turn on the hall lights downstairs and give them an alarm!"

She slipped softly out into the hall and pushed a button. With a little snap the lights flashed on. Then silently the alarmists waited with apprehension. What should the next move be?

The sound was not heard again, and the girls in Sim's room breathed a little easier.

"Do you think—they're gone?" Sim whispered.

"I don't hear anything; do you?" Arden asked.

"S-sh-h-h!" Terry hissed, and she went to the window.

The scene below was flooded with moonlight. The sandy stretch, so clear and unbroken, could not possibly hide a marauder. Terry was hoping to see the intruder make a dash for the safety of the garage shadow.

"Look!" she whispered to the girls. "It's a woman!"

[70]

Arden and Sim dashed to the window just in time to witness the flight of someone, who, they did not know, in the bright moonlight. The figure was oddly distorted both by the light and the height from which they were looking.

"Who?" Arden asked cryptically.

Terry shrugged in reply. The figure ran swiftly and was almost instantly lost to sight in the shadow of the garage.

"There's nothing we can do now," Terry remarked. "And there's no use waking Mother. She'd only worry."

"Perhaps we had better tell Chief Reilly in the morning," Arden suggested. "Isn't it something new, having burglars around here?"

"I never heard of one before. I didn't think they ever came down here," Terry remarked. They were still looking out toward the garage.

"But this could hardly have been an ordinary prowler," Sim reminded them. "We may as well go back to bed. She surely won't come back, whoever she was."

"I'll leave the lights on downstairs. We must try to get some sleep," Terry said, her stifled yawn entirely agreeing.

"Want to come in here?" invited Arden to Terry, who roomed alone. [71]

"Oh—I don't know. I'm not afraid," Terry answered a little ruefully. "But since you suggested it, yes, I guess I will. Move over, Sim."

After all, three girls might be better than one for almost any midnight alarm. [72]

CHAPTER VIII Hard to Believe

Smiling to herself in the darkness, Sim pushed over in the twin bed so that Terry could get in. Even at that, neither one would have very much space, and Sim was amused to think that Terry, the trenchant, should feel like spending the rest of the night with her rather than alone in her own bed.

"I'll see that Rufus Reilly hears about this," remarked Terry, burrowing under the covers. "The idea of disturbing honest peace-loving people in the middle of the night! What Oceanedge is coming to, I don't know."

"Who's Rufus Reilly?" asked Arden.

"He's the police force," Terry replied. "He owns the only garage in the village and Dimitri's houseboat too."

"Quite a factor in the life of the community, isn't he?" Sim murmured sleepily.

"Don't make fun of him, Sim," Terry rebuked. "He's a very important man. He says so himself."

"Well, I'm going to sleep," Arden declared, yawning freely. "I want to look my best when I meet the chief." [73]

The conversation dragged, and feeling secure in the knowledge that the midnight intruder had gone, the girls finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, after breakfast, and with Mrs. Landry's consent, they started for the village to report to Chief Reilly.

Leaving by the front door, they were on their way to the garage at the back when they came face to face with George Clayton, Melissa's father.

"Good-morning," he said a little sheepishly. Perhaps he was conscious of his somewhat fishy-scented clothes and muddy hip boots.

"Morning," Terry replied, and waited for him to speak again. All the girls felt rather antagonistic toward him, since they had witnessed his treatment of Melissa.

"I wuz wonderin'," he began again, "that is—

have you young ladies seen anythin' of my daughter Melissa?"

"Why, no. Not since early last evening," Arden replied. "Why?"

"I wuz a little worried about her. She ain't been home all night, and I thought maybe——"

"The last time we saw her, she was riding in a green car that some woman who came to see the artist on the houseboat parked here," Sim volunteered.

[74]

George Clayton blinked his eyes rapidly and seemed at a loss for anything to say to that surprising news.

"U-hum-m!" He shook his head. "Melissa ain't entirely responsible, you know. She's overly fond of bright things. Like a blue jay. She just can't resist 'em."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Arden. "I do hope nothing happened to her."

"We were just going to the village to tell Rufus Reilly about a burglar we had around here last night," Terry explained. "Shall we tell him to look for Melissa?"

"Oh, no, miss, please!" Clayton exclaimed. "He knows all about Melissa. Thinks I ought to send her to some institution. But I can't bear—to do that," he concluded rather pathetically.

"Why didn't you let her keep the bracelet the other day?" Sim asked suddenly. "It was only worth a quarter. Perhaps she ran away because you——"

"I know, miss," Clayton interrupted, "she possibly told you how mean I was to her. But if I let her keep it she'd follow you around all the time, looking for something else." After all, perhaps the man was not so mean as they had thought.

[75]

"Say!" exclaimed Terry suddenly. "Maybe that was Melissa we heard last night, coming back for the bracelet!"

"It did look like her, I mean her height and all," agreed Sim. "I'm sure that's just who it was."

"She might have done it," the fisherman admitted reluctantly. "You won't tell Reilly, will you?"

"If you can keep her away from here so she won't scare us out of our wits again, we won't," Terry agreed. For the girls still believed in their hearts that Melissa was to be pitied and, though he said not, they felt that her father was a hard man to deal with.

"When she comes back I'll——" Clayton began but never finished, for there was Melissa herself walking toward them along the little path. Her pale pink cotton dress was a mass of wrinkles, and her hair in uncouth disarray. One white string of her sneakers flapped as she walked.

Instantly her father was a changed man. As soon as he saw her he drew himself up to his full height and assumed an aggressive manner.

"Melissa!" he shouted. "Come here!"

"Yes, Pa," she answered meekly and came slowly forward with one arm held up near her face as though to ward off a blow.

[76]

"Where wuz you last night?" he demanded.

"Here, Pa. I slept in the car in the garage," came the surprising reply.

"Why didn't you come home?" he shouted at her.

"I was afraid to. The lady took me for such a nice ride, it was late when I got back." Poor Melissa, thought the girls.

"What lady?" snarled her father.

"I dunno her name. The pretty one with the nice fur. She asked me if I'd like a ride, so I said yes. She gave me a quarter, too." Melissa held out her tanned hand and showed them the money.

"Don't you know any better than to go riding off with strangers?" her father shouted. "And scarin' these young ladies, who was so nice to you, out of their wits? Wuz you around this house last night?"

"I was just lookin' in a window. I didn't mean any harm." How cruel for a poor girl to be helpless!

"Well, you come along home with me."

Melissa looked woefully at the surprised girls and started off to follow her father, who went clumping down the path in his hip boots.

"Mr. Clayton," called Arden after him. "Please don't punish Melissa; she didn't do any harm."

"I'll take care of Melissa," he answered shortly, completely forgetting how anxious he had been only a short time before to appear the worried father.

[77]

"If you touch her I'll, I'll——" Arden said, but he continued on his way, not even listening to her.

"What a horrid old man!" Terry remarked anxiously. "First he shows his concern and then ——"

"His teeth," finished Sim.

[78]

CHAPTER IX

The Snuffbox

Several days after their rather unpleasant meeting with Melissa's father, George Clayton, the three girls were "soaking up the sun" on the beach. Of course, as it developed, there was nothing to report to Chief Reilly. They were quite sure that Melissa had been their erstwhile burglar. More than ever the girls felt Melissa needed a friend. They talked over the situation, trying to piece together the girl's story and her father's denial of that part which blamed him.

But whether he was entirely fair and just, trying to protect his daughter, or whether his allusions to her "being queer" were merely a pretext to excuse himself, not even Arden the wise ventured to decide. But in the end the opinion was unanimous that Melissa needed friends, and they each and all resolved to do all they could to befriend the strange, wild creature.

But finally the delightfully warm air, the friendly sun, and the inviting ocean drove all such serious thoughts from their minds. What could be more perfect than such a day in such a place for such girls!

[79]

Sim was almost asleep, while Arden and Terry were blissfully drowsy. They were turning a golden tan, most becoming to all save Terry, who, as she herself declared, was "raising a fine crop of freckles."

Arden rolled over on her back and then sat bolt upright in surprise. Far out of the corner of her eye she could see Dimitri Uzlov in bathing togs coming toward them.

"Wake up, kids," she hissed in a stage whisper. "Here comes our hero, and he's tramping right this way. Don't look now! He'll know I told you."

Of course they did look, even though Arden had warned them not to. But the oncoming "hero" didn't seem to mind. In fact, he smiled pleasantly and deliberately sat down on the sand by Arden.

"Hello," said Arden casually, while Terry and Sim smiled vacuously.

"Hello," he answered. "It was awfully kind of you to bring my—" he began—"I want to thank you for rowing over to the houseboat and back with my— That is, I hope it did not trouble you too much," he stammered.

He was clearly embarrassed and not at all sure how to proceed.

Arden realized at once that Dimitri was attempting to explain and for some reason apologize for the visit of the mysterious Olga.

[80]

"Not at all," Arden replied reassuringly. "We didn't mind a bit."

"I did not expect her. I was quite surprised. I do not think she will come again."

In his embarrassment his accent was becoming more pronounced, and Sim and Terry shot a sly glance of delight at each other.

"Please don't let that little thing worry you," Arden hastened to add. "It was nothing at all."

"You are very kind," Dimitri smiled. "I would like to ask you all, and your mother," he nodded to Terry, "to take tea with me on the houseboat. Perhaps it would amuse you to have tea in the Russian manner. Yes?"

"We'd love it," Terry replied quickly, "and I know Mother would, too."

"Would I be giving you too short notice to ask you today? I am letting up a bit in my work, and tomorrow I must begin again with new vigor,"

the young man stated simply.

"I'm sure it will be all right," Terry answered. "We don't have many dates down here, and if Mother can come, we'll all be over this afternoon."

"That will be charming," Dimitri said. "I will expect you. And now I must go home and bathe Tania so she will look her best at my little party."

[81]

He rose and bowed, quite as dignified as if he had been fully dressed instead of merely wearing the informal bathing suit; then he left them smiling after him.

"What a surprise!" gasped Sim.

"What a lark!" insisted Arden.

"What fun!" squealed Terry.

"He's so young and good-looking to have such an ugly old name," went on Arden, as if anxious to reconstruct the "hero" into somebody more American.

"Adds to the glamour," drawled Terry with assumed sophistication. "I always did adore those foreign names."

"Too, too divine," mocked Sim.

"Hey, there!" exclaimed Terry. "We have got to go right now and tell Mother. He said this afternoon."

"Not yet," Arden rebuked. "Wait until he gets out of sight. He'll think we've never been asked any place before if we act so—grabby."

Impatiently they sat and waited until Dimitri had gone behind the small pavilion; then they scrambled up and hurried to tell Terry's mother.

She was much amused at their exuberance and laughed at the serious way they had of deciding what they would wear. A simple tea on a houseboat and all this to-do!

[82]

Eventually the hour rolled around, and they set out in high spirits, Terry puffing as much with excitement as with effort as she rowed the boatful down the bay.

Once on the houseboat they were somewhat ill at ease. But Dimitri was a perfect host and with Old World courtesy succeeded in making them feel, as Arden said later, "like the visiting Czarina and her daughters."

Tania was beautifully white and fluffy, greeting them all with a friendly "woof" and briskly wagging tail.

"Oh, a samovar!" exclaimed Arden as she sighted the polished brass urn with a dull glowing charcoal fire underneath.

"It is only to boil the water. I could have done it on the oil stove, but I thought you would like it this way," Dimitri said, smiling.

"We are enjoying it," Terry assured him. "Won't you show Mother some of your pictures?" she cautiously interposed.

"They are really not worth looking at," he replied modestly. And he seemed sincere about it, too.

"Of course they are," Arden interrupted. "They're lovely."

[83]

Dimitri pulled one canvas out from a pile leaning against the wall. It was a marine, done in dark and light blues, a fair sea and a clear sky. The girls looked at it politely but hoped he would show them the covered canvas, and in fact Arden stood near it, waiting. Dimitri noticed her and gazed at her keenly for a second, as though understanding her wish.

"Now, I will show you something really lovely," he said. "Because I am proud of it and because it is a thing of so much beauty. I do not show it to everyone; few people know I have it, and I ask you, please, not to mention to anyone that I have it in my possession. Pardon me a minute, please."

He pushed aside a curtain that divided the room into two parts and disappeared behind the improvised screen. They could hear him moving something like a heavy piece of furniture, and then they heard the squeak of a key in a lock. They looked wonderingly at each other, but no one spoke. What could he be going to show them? Why all the mystery?

He came back almost at once, holding something in his hands as though it were too precious to be exposed to the air. Silently they gathered around him, and cautiously, almost solemnly, he opened his hands!

Then they beheld the treasure!

[84]

There, shining dully on his carefully outstretched palm, they beheld a box, a tiny snuffbox of burnished gold!

"Oh!" came a chorus. But no other word was spoken.

Somehow this all seemed like some sacred rite to their still bewildered eyes which could now discern jewels, even diamonds, surrounding the box.

It was about four inches long and an inch deep, with a delicately painted medallion top, the medallion framed by precious stones: diamonds and rubies!

Dimitri was watching them intently, his own eyes glittering with the beauty of his valued possession.

Terry's mother took a step nearer. Even she had fallen under the spell of this strange treasure.

[85]

CHAPTER X

Beauty That Dazzled

"How perfectly beautiful!" exclaimed Arden. "What is it?"

"It is a snuffbox that once belonged to the Russian Czar. It is of great value. A fortune almost." He held it so they could all see it. "Now watch."

With his thumb he pushed down a section of the golden side. This uncovered a small compartment in which rested a little key. He took out the key and turned the box upside down. Then they saw that the under side was as elaborately designed as the top. Daintily painted miniature woodland scenes with birds and a bounding deer. He inserted the key in a tiny hole and gave it a few turns, then very carefully placed the box on a near-by table.

The beautiful medallion in the center of the box showed a brightly plumaged bird on a tropical tree, and around the medallion, like a frame, was a row of marvelous diamonds and rubies. The box suddenly opened, as the group watched, and a tiny bird, not much over a half inch in height, sprang up, turned his little head from side to side, and moved his wee feathered wings up and down magically. As they waited, awe-struck, the tinkle of a song was heard, and it seemed as though the little feathered creature was actually singing. Then in a flash the fairy songster ceased his song, folded up his wings, and the medallion snapped shut, leaving the golden and bejeweled box as the cage of the little wizard.

[86]

"Oh!" gasped Arden, the first to speak. "It is so lovely it almost makes me feel like crying," she stammered. "Could you make him do it again?"

"Of course," Dimitri replied. "Did you see this little watch in the side and the real feathers on the little bird?"

"I have never seen anything like it!" exclaimed Mrs. Landry. "It must be worth a fortune."

"It is," solemnly answered Dimitri. "It is the only really valuable possession I have left except——" He turned aside without finishing the sentence. Again he wound the spring, and once more the remarkable performance was repeated. The artist let them each examine the treasure, and at last taking it from Arden he looked at it fondly and very deliberately carried it back to its hiding place. When he returned he remarked:

"I could not bear to lose it, and perhaps it is childish of me to keep it with me instead of in some deep bank vault, but it belonged to my mother, and I like to have it near me to look at when I become discouraged."

[87]

The girls were still spellbound, while Mrs. Landry assured him that it was the natural thing to do and hoped it would be quite safe in his affectionate keeping.

"I have hidden it well, I hope, and I need not tell you why I have trusted you all."

There was something so pathetically frank about the artist's proud display of his treasure that even the girls, who had joked and speculated upon the mysterious man, were now profoundly impressed.

"We will never violate your confidence." Mrs. Landry spoke for the group, but even that polite

assurance seemed unnecessary.

Somehow the artist knew he could trust them; and he had!

"And now, will you try some tea, Russian style?"

The girls agreed all at once and wanted to help, but he waved them aside and served them quite as though he were accustomed to having four guests every day in the week on this wobbly old houseboat.

They sat, sipping from glasses the clear amber liquid though Dimitri, as a concession to their American tastes, offered them cream as well as sliced lemon. He sweetened his own clear tea liberally.

The houseboat, for all the masculine untidiness, was a bright pleasant place, and the little party chatted like old friends until Mrs. Landry announced they must go.

[88]

"We must not wear out our welcome, you know," she said lightly, "and perhaps you will come and have dinner with us some time, Mr. Uzlov."

"Thank you, I would be pleased to," he suavely answered.

Then, saying good-bye, they left, a smiling, happy foursome, and started away in the old rowboat over to the Landry landing.

As Terry pushed out in the boat they heard a light step, surely a girl's step, and a few seconds later they saw Melissa rowing quickly away from the side of the houseboat.

"There's Melissa," Sim exclaimed needlessly, for they had all seen her. "No need to worry about her comings and goings."

"She's always around from one place to another. I suppose she doesn't know what to do with herself all day," Terry answered between strokes, taking it all very casually.

"Where is her home, Terry? Is it near here?" Arden asked.

"Not very. It's clear across the bay; two or three miles, anyway, isn't it, Mother?"

[89]

"Every bit of that," Mrs. Landry replied. "Poor creature! She doesn't lead a very happy life. I hope you girls will be kind to her if you can."

"Of course we will, Mrs. Landry," Sim assured her, and then in another mood she asked, "Wasn't that a knockout snuffbox? Imagine keeping nasty old snuff in it."

"Dimitri doesn't keep *anything* in it. He loves it because it's so beautiful," Arden announced. "There's a true artist for you." She was very much in earnest.

"You like him a little, don't you, Arden?" Terry asked whimsically.

"Don't be silly, Terry! You like him, too," Arden snapped back.

"We all do, even Mrs. Landry, don't you?" Sim wanted to know, joining in the complimentary chorus.

Terry's mother smiled and nodded.

"Well, I think it's strange, just the same," Arden said almost to herself, "very strange."

"What, the box?" Sim inquired.

"No; but I mean the way he spoke about Olga, and the way he keeps that picture covered," Arden answered. "And a lot of things not really—well, not exactly wordy things but *queer* things," she wound up vaguely.

"Melissa is odd too. Why do you suppose Olga took her riding and gave her money?" Terry asked, adding more interest to the mystifying questions.

"I can't imagine. It's strange the way she always pops up," Arden added. "I mean Melissa, not Olga."

"I don't like her father, either," Terry went on. "He's the meanest man I ever saw, and I don't believe a word he says!"

"Now, Terry," Mrs. Landry rebuked, "you know nothing about him. He's just not like the city people we're used to, and you probably misjudge him."

"But he seems so cruel and crafty. I wonder if he punished Melissa for staying away the other night? The night she stayed in the garage."

"Oh, he couldn't!" Arden exclaimed. "I'll ask Melissa the next time I see her. I wonder where she went just now? I don't see her boat anywhere. She seems to have disappeared all of a sudden."

"Playing hide and seek with us, maybe," Terry suggested. "Hope we don't catch any of this queer business," she finished, easing a little to look at her burning hand.

"I think this whole place is queer," Sim said, looking over the untroubled bay. "I don't like that Olga, nor George Clayton, either, and I'm sure he's up to some shady business—not to say dark and dangerous."

"Now, Sim," Mrs. Landry said gently, "you mustn't make a mystery out of everything. He's probably just an ordinary crabber and fisherman with a difficult daughter to look out for, and in these wild places girls cannot be allowed to run wild, you know."

They were almost home, and everyone seemed willing to think a little and stop talking. "Buckingham Palace" stood out with reassuring friendliness against the late afternoon sky and looked decidedly more inviting than the moldy houseboat.

"You may be right, Mother," Terry said, pulling the oars gently as they drifted up to their little dock. "But there's something going on, I'm sure. Something we don't know anything about—yet," she ended significantly.

And no one there was to say "nay" to that possibility.

[90]

[91]

[92]

CHAPTER XI

Still They Come

The girls did not really enjoy the tea as it had been served on the *Merry Jane*. Not that the tea wasn't good; it must have been, for Russian tea is famous. But it tasted that way, they thought—"famous." Home-made tea was much more congenial. Consequently, at home again, the tea given them at "Buckingham Palace" when supper was served was even more appreciated than usual.

"Maybe that water from the samovar——" began Terry.

"No, those old brass urns are lined with—well, I think it's tin or lead," Arden informed them. "Grandfather had one; bought it from a man who used to work for Tolstoi. It had the stamp from what this man called the president's factory, which meant, I believe, it was made in a sort of royal shop," Arden concluded.

"Why, what a lot you know," teased Sim. "Why didn't you tell the artist? He might trace some relationship——"

"Oh, say!" interrupted Terry. "You and your old samovar! What about the jeweled box? Don't you feel guilty to have seen a thing—so—well, so precious?"

[93]

This brought on a discussion so animated and so filled with questions and exclamations that the beauty of the snuffbox must have been greatly enhanced by so much young enthusiasm.

Afterwards they were sitting, as had become their custom, on the screened porch. The first one out always claimed the comfortable swing. Next in favor came two large, low wicker chairs covered with bright striped linen. Tonight Terry was in the swing and Arden and Sim curled up in chairs.

They must have been talking very loudly or else have been asleep, they facetiously decided later. How else could they explain the fact that a car had driven right up to the back door and they had not heard it?

In fact they all jumped with surprise when Arden called their attention to a young man, coming up the sandy path.

"Sit up, girls, here comes another visitor," she exclaimed. "What now, I wonder?"

The young man hesitated as he reached the screen door.

"Good-evening," said Arden pleasantly.

"Good-evening," responded the caller. "I hope I have not disturbed you, but I wonder if you could tell me how to reach a houseboat? I understand it is somewhere near here."

[94]

"Oh, you mean *Merry Jane*," Sim piped up brightly. "Lots of people ask us that. That is, you're the second one who has inquired," she replied, feeling a little foolish at being so

friendly.

He smiled amicably and said he hoped they had not been bothered in that way.

"We didn't mind," Terry chimed in. "We don't have much to do here, anyway." The girls really were being silly.

"It's down the bay, but you can't reach it by car. The road is too soft this time of year," Arden said helpfully, the first one really to answer his question.

"Is one obliged to walk, then?" the man asked. His wording was foreign and a slight accent made it seem more so.

"No; walking would be dangerous, too," Arden explained. "The only way is by boat." She waited to see what effect this announcement would have, but Sim spoiled it.

"We have a rowboat you could use. We could take you," she announced, still pursuing the rôle of the very young.

"But couldn't I take myself? That is, with your permission and if you wouldn't be using the boat?" He looked questioningly at them.

[95]

"I guess we won't be going out again tonight," Terry remarked. "You'll be careful not to lose the oars, won't you? I'll show you where we keep the boat."

Terry, followed by Arden and Sim, led the way to the dock, stopping to pick up the oars as they went.

"Let me take them, please," the caller protested. Terry handed him the oars.

They wanted very much to ask if he knew Dimitri and try to get some more information, but they could not naturally work the talk around to it. The young man volunteered no information at all. He seemed quite sure of himself, and Arden fancied she saw in him a slight resemblance to Dimitri.

When they reached the old rowboat, Terry pointed down the bay.

"The *Merry Jane* is just around the bend; if you stay close to shore, you can't miss it," she instructed the stranger.

They all looked admiringly over the still green water where the fish were beginning to jump in the stillness of the evening. The beauty of the bay was inescapable.

"Tania, the big dog, will bark, and you can row in the direction of the noise, if you should be doubtful about the location," Arden suggested.

[96]

The man raised an eyebrow. "You know Dimitri, then?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed," Sim answered. "We're good friends." She felt justified in saying that.

"I am a friend, too," their caller replied as he got into the boat. "I'll take very good care of your skiff and tie it up very carefully when I return." He pushed off and began rowing easily down the

bay. "Good-bye," he called to the girls. "And thank you, a thousand times!"

"Good-bye," Terry answered, while the others mumbled something.

They waited until he was out of sight, and then began the flood of "What do you think's" and "Maybe's." But of course they all agreed on one thing. That he was very charming and well mannered and that perhaps all foreigners were that way. But they decided it was indeed queer the way Dimitri's friends all came to them for advice on reaching the old houseboat. The newest caller gave rise to plenty of speculation, but the girls retired earlier than usual, and it was, perhaps, for this reason that Arden awoke sometime near morning, although it was still dark. Deciding she could not get back to sleep, she lay tossing restlessly.

The events of the day marched before her now active mind. The gold snuffbox, Olga, Tania, Dimitri, the man who had come that evening. It was all very puzzling. She turned over and looked at Sim, sleeping peacefully. Nothing bothered her. Arden sighed and then started. What was that noise? Another mysterious visitor? She strained every nerve to listen. Then she smiled as she realized it was the motor of an auto purring along. Going to the window, she saw the stranger's car move slowly as it was started and disappear as it gathered speed. She looked at her wrist watch. The dial showed four-thirty, and he was just coming back from the houseboat!

"Curiouser and curiouser," Arden said to herself as she climbed back to bed. "Alice in Wonderland had nothing on me. I wonder, too."

[97]

[98]

CHAPTER XII

A Friend in the Deep

"Well, Sim," said Arden, stretching luxuriously, "I feel merry as a grig this morning."

"You don't say," Sim replied with sarcasm. "I guess you haven't looked outside then. I think we're in for a storm. What is a grig, anyway?"

"I don't know exactly," Arden continued, "but that's how I feel. It's very merry. How do you feel?"

"I feel like a chocolate nut sundae," Sim answered, making a wry face.

"You're a little cross, too. What's the trouble?" Arden asked.

"Oh, nothing. But I'm thinking, if we do get a northeaster, there won't be any bathing for days. I think I'll go in today just to get a swim before it comes," Sim answered. "Look at that," she continued, pointing to the little weather vane on the garage roof.

It was quivering in the wind and pointing due

[99]

northeast. A brave morning sun was trying to pierce the leaden clouds, but not making much headway.

A week before, Arden had seen the second mysterious caller drive away in his car after tying up their boat. Since then they had neither seen nor heard from Dimitri, and in an orgy of swimming and sunbathing had almost forgotten about him, so perfect had the weather been and so completely had the girls enjoyed it.

Now Sim and Arden were in their room making plans for the day, and Terry, in gay bathrobe and slippers, strolled in to talk things over before breakfast.

"Don't go in today, Sim, there's bound to be a bad undertow; and besides, I have to go to town," Terry remarked as she had heard Sim's decision.

"But the tide will be coming in, and I'll only take a short dip. I'll be ready when you want to go. Let's eat now, and by the time we have our rooms in order I can go in for a swim. Then we'll drive to the village. How's that?" Sim asked, smiling.

"You seem to have it all planned. I suppose it's all right. It's nearly ten now, so let's go down for breakfast," Terry suggested. "I'm hungry."

Sim and Arden, donning bathrobes and slipping their feet into soft mules, pattered downstairs after Terry.

They ate and put on their bathing suits when they went upstairs again, a habit they had fallen into since the lovely weather had begun.

[100]

When they went out a little later, Sim wished she hadn't been so insistent about swimming. The breakers were piling in, slapping down on the beach and churning up a white sudsy foam.

"I'm not going in *that* sea," Arden decided, "and I don't think you should either, Sim."

"Nonsense, Arden," Sim said scornfully. "It looks a lot worse than it is."

"We'll have rain before night," Terry stated positively, "and the ocean is getting rougher all the time. Go on in, Sim, if you're going to, but be careful."

In a moment of bravado, Sim flung off her sweater and ran down to the water. She hesitated for a second as the cold water whirled around her feet, then, running swiftly, she plunged in head first. She was lost to sight immediately, but presently came up again and waved a hand to Arden and Terry, who were watching. Then she turned and began to swim out into the sea.

"I wish she wouldn't go out," Arden worried.

"Oh, she'll be all right. Sim's a good swimmer," Terry reassured her.

As they watched they could see Sim's scarlet bathing cap bobbing in the rough sea. She swam easily for a while and then floated on her back. Did they imagine it, or was she having trouble? Arden and Terry strained their eyes to see. Sim

[101]

was swimming hard toward the shore but seemed to be making no headway.

"She's having a hard time getting back. Do you think she's all right?" Arden asked anxiously.

"Wait—" Terry cautioned—"I'm not sure——"

Sim was still swimming but seemed to be tiring. She turned over on her back for a brief rest and began again. But it seemed no use. Apparently she was caught in a sea-puss and was still making no headway.

Terrified, Terry and Arden looked at each other, unable to utter a word. In that instant a figure flashed by them and disappeared with a splash in the waves. Still speechless, they both knew ——

It was Melissa!

She was going to help Sim to safety. The girls watching on the beach felt the relief so suddenly and so completely that each grasped the other.

"Melissa!" breathed Terry.

"She'll get her," answered Arden.

What little they had done to make friends with the girl came now in a rush of grateful memory.

Yes, Melissa would help them. She was their friend.

[102]

In almost no time at all Melissa and Sim walked out of the wild sea, a little further down the beach. Arden and Terry ran down to greet them.

"Sim, you idiot! I told you not to go in. Are you all right?" Arden asked breathlessly.

"Of course I'm all right," Sim panted.

"She was caught in a sea-puss. There's a trick in getting out. It's because the storm is coming and the inlet to the bay is so near," Melissa answered modestly.

"It was very brave of you to go out, just the same," Terry insisted. "It was just fine!"

Sim looked a little sheepish and pulled her sweater on over her dripping suit.

"Don't tell your mother, Terry; you know how she would worry," Sim said. "Melissa, you were swell!" she exclaimed.

Melissa smiled happily. It was seldom, indeed, that her actions pleased anyone. Her whole day would be happy now, and at night she could lie in her hard little bed and remember how the girls had praised her. It took so little to brighten the dull life of Melissa.

The girls thanked her again and cautioned her about telling Mrs. Landry. Then, waving good-bye to Melissa, they left her, digging her toes in the sand in embarrassment, with her confused thoughts.

[103]

The three girls, a guilty little group, went back to "Buckingham Palace" and dressed quickly, never mentioning the almost tragic adventure to Terry's mother.

Sim's feet and hands were still cold when she climbed into the car beside Arden and Terry, a while later, as they started for the village.

The storm was coming in rapidly now. The sun was obscured, and sudden strong gusts of wind swerved the car as they drove along. It had not yet begun to rain. But Chief of Police Reilly cocked his weather eye and "reckoned" it would not be long in coming. He was filling the gas tank of the little car and chatting with the girls as he worked.

"How do you like your new neighbor, Miz Landry?" he asked, showing a shining gold tooth.

"We like him all right, but we don't see much of him," Terry answered, smiling.

"Funny feller," he chuckled as he wiped off the windshield. "Wrote to me 'long 'bout last April and rented my ole boat. Never even saw it." He gave the windshield a grand swipe.

"Do you know Melissa Clayton?" Sim asked, abruptly changing the subject. Her adventure in the ocean was still fresh in her mind.

"Sure; everyone knows Melissa," the chief answered.

[104]

"How about her father? What kind of a man is he?" pursued Sim.

"George Clayton? He's all right. None too smart, but he gets along," Reilly answered indifferently. "Can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, you know."

But Sim was not satisfied. She wanted to find out if Melissa's father was as cruel as they imagined him to be. The chief, however, in his good-natured way, didn't see what Sim was driving at and gave her no satisfaction. Finally she questioned him no further. They agreed on the weather and said they'd see him soon again, just how soon, none of them knew.

Then they drove back home and unloaded the last of the groceries from the car just as the first drops of rain showed on the windshield. Like all bad news, it was better to have it started. The sooner begun the sooner it would be over.

[105]

CHAPTER XIII

The Tragic Messenger

The wind increased in violence, and with the high tide of the afternoon the surf pounded with wild fury. At Terry's home the rain lashed the windows, and the awnings protested noisily against the gale. Arden announced blandly that she no longer felt "merry as a grig."

"Let's play rummy, the storm makes me restless," Sim suggested.

"If you feel restless now, I hate to think how you'll feel after three days of it," Terry reminded

her.

"Three days!" Arden exclaimed. "I'll have to get out my tatting to keep me busy, I guess."

"You can't tat, silly," Sim smiled. "Come on, let's play cards."

Terry opened a painted card table, and they began a half-hearted game of rummy. But Arden couldn't concentrate, so Terry and Sim told her to "give up," whereat they abandoned the cards.

"Listen to that old ocean," Arden remarked. "If you were out there now, Sim, it would take more than Melissa to pull you to safety."

[106]

"Wasn't she great?" Sim asked. "She knew just how to go about it. I wasn't scared, but I was beginning to tire. Melissa took me out beyond the current, and then we struck a stroke and got in easily. Were you frightened?"

"We were a little," Terry admitted. "We weren't sure whether you were all right. I was ready to come out when Melissa dashed by us like a shot, and then it seemed only a few seconds till you were back on the beach."

"She's a marvelous swimmer," Sim said admiringly. "I wish she could lead a more pleasant life, poor girl."

"Chief Reilly didn't seem to think her father was so awful," Terry remarked.

"Oh, Chief Reilly!" Arden exclaimed. "He doesn't seem to think much anyway."

"He doesn't have to think much. There's nothing for him to think about down here. I don't know what he'd do if he ever had a real case," Terry went on.

"The excitement would probably be too much for him. I'll bet he reads detective stories and has it all planned out just the way he'd conduct a murder inquiry," Arden laughed.

"Yes," Sim agreed. "He'd probably go measuring footprints and looking for clues. Do you suppose he'd use bloodhounds?"

[107]

"Why not?" Terry asked. "None of our well-known detectives ever used bloodhounds, so it's reasonable to suppose that Detective Reilly would."

"We're not so bad ourselves at solving mysteries. How about the Apple Orchard and Jockey Hollow?" Arden reminded them.

"Of course—we're really very good," Terry agreed facetiously. "I could do with a nice mystery. This is ideal weather for it. Angry sea, howling wind and dashing rain, big black clouds —"

"Do you ever have any murders or serious crimes down here, Terry?" Sim asked suddenly.

"Yes—we had a very important one about three years ago. Reilly saw a headless tiny body floating in the bay," Terry said dramatically.

"No, really?" Arden and Sim were all attention.

"Really," answered Terry. "But when they picked

it up, it turned out to be a doll some youngster dropped in the water."

"Oh, Terry," Sim said throwing a pillow at her. "You had me all worked up."

Terry laughed mischievously and threw the pillow back. A well aimed throw from Arden caught Terry squarely in the face with such force that the chair in which she was sitting went over backwards and Terry with it. In the scramble that followed they did not hear the scratching at the door. It was not until they took a little breathing spell that Arden cautioned them to be quiet.

[108]

"Ssh-sh a minute," she said. "Did you hear that scratching?"

They listened. It came from the front door, and this time a bark also could be heard.

"It's a dog!" Sim exclaimed, and getting up from the pile of cushions on the floor she went to open the door.

"Why, it's Tania!" Arden declared. "The poor dog! Look at her!"

Poor dog indeed! The silky, white fur clung to her thin frame, and a piece of rope trailed from her collar. Like all dogs of her breed, she was thin when in the best of condition, but now she looked worse than that. She seemed really like a poor starved animal.

"She looks terrible," Arden exclaimed, and disregarding the wet fur she began to stroke the regally pointed head.

"She's hungry. Look how thin she is. Let's give her something to eat," Terry suggested, already starting toward the kitchen.

Tania was extremely grateful for the food Terry put before her and ate ravenously, while the girls murmured soothingly to the grateful dog.

[109]

"But how strange that she should get like this," Terry reminded them. "Dimitri always takes such good care of her."

"And that old rope, the end looks frayed off. Do you suppose——" Arden looked at her chums with terror in her eyes. This, coming directly after their talk, joking as it was, about murders, gave them all a shocked, sudden pause. It seemed horrible even to imagine that Dimitri——

"Oh, Arden! How awful! We haven't seen Dimitri for a week. Do you think——" Terry was too frightened to put intelligible questions.

Arden nodded her head solemnly. "I'm afraid so," she said in a quiet voice. "Something must have happened on board the *Merry Jane*."

For the first time the girls realized how interested they had become in Dimitri. His charming manners, his accent, his appearance, and the almost mysterious aloofness he maintained, all went to make him most attractive. Now that they feared foul play might have overtaken him, it was dismaying even to guess what had happened on the lonely houseboat.

But poor mute Tania could not tell them her story.

[110]

CHAPTER XIV

Missing at Marshlands

"Oh, Tania!" Sim exclaimed, taking the intelligent head in her hands. "What happened?"

But the dog only wagged a bedraggled tail and blinked her eyes with pleasure.

"We must go over at once and see," Arden decided. "We'll have to walk, too. We couldn't row in this wind."

Quickly they got into old coats and heavy shoes, pulled soft hats well down, and started for the *Merry Jane*.

Outside the little cottage the wind tore at them fiercely, and the blown sand mingled with rain stung their legs and faces. Carried through the air by the gale, flakes of foam from the ocean were borne far up the beach like a strange summer snowstorm.

Tania slunk along behind them as they bent to the wind, clearly hating to be out in such nasty weather when she apparently had hoped to remain in the warm dryness of "Buckingham Palace."

"Isn't this wild?" Sim said holding her coat close to her. "I do hope nothing serious has happened."

[111]

"We all do," Arden answered. "Terry, can you find your way through the marsh?"

"I think we'd better follow the shore line of the bay. It will be safer," Terry decided. "There isn't much shore left now the water has blown in so far, we'll have to walk single file."

Terry took the lead, followed by Arden and Sim, with Tania picking her way along daintily after them.

They made good time, for the wind was at their backs and served to push them forward. Just ahead, its sides slapped by the lapping waves, they could see the old houseboat looming up darkly in the rain.

Silently they went around to the land side, where the wooden steps led to the narrow promenade that ran completely around the boat.

There on the rain-swept deck they hesitated. Not a sound, except the noise of the storm, reached them. They were a little afraid, yet they knew they must go in.

Arden went forward, found the door unlocked, and pushed it open. Her companions followed her, and cautiously they entered the picturesque main room. It was just as they had last seen it. The mysterious painting covered on the easel, the jars of paint brushes on the table, and the

odds and ends Dimitri had left lying about, were all, apparently, untouched. But the artist himself was not there.

Terry pushed aside the faded curtains that kept the little kitchen separate from the rest of the boat.

[112]

"He's not here," she said simply.

"From the looks of this place he hasn't been here for quite a while," Sim amended. "See the grease on that pan."

Arden, however, made a more important discovery. She pointed to a little wall cupboard. The door hung crazily on its hinges, disclosing the empty space within.

"Look," she exclaimed. "That door has been broken open. I'll bet that's where Dimitri kept the snuffbox!" The words came so suddenly, the girls gasped involuntarily.

"I believe you're right, Arden," Terry said quickly. "Then either Dimitri left and took the box with him, or somebody broke in and stole it. But if Dimitri took the box he wouldn't have had to break the cupboard open. He had a key. Some thief has been here."

"If that happened—where is Dimitri?" Sim asked excitedly.

"That's what we've got to find out," Arden declared. "We'll have to look very carefully in case there are any clues about. Come on."

Systematically they went over the old boat, but after a careful search they had learned no more. When they completed their tour, they assembled again in the main room.

[113]

There the covered canvas loomed up as large, in their disturbed imaginings, as a forbidding specter. Sim touched a corner of the cloth.

"Don't, Sim," Arden stopped her.

"Perhaps we ought to," Sim suggested. But Arden shook her head. They should not raise the cloth.

In their search they had found nothing significant except the place where Tania had been tied up; it was outside, near the stern of the boat. There was no dust, of course, to tell them how long the place had been unoccupied, but an open window through which the rain had come, soaking cushions and the floor, gave evidence that at least no one had been there since the storm had begun. Or, if they had, they had not troubled to close the window.

"These brushes are stiff with paint," Terry remarked, picking up a long-handled one that lay near a color-filled palette. "And the paint on the palette is hard too," she continued. "That's unusual; all the other brushes are soaking in turpentine, and when we were here before, Dimitri had just cleaned his palette."

"He must have left suddenly, then," Arden guessed. "He was very neat in his painting. It looks pretty serious to me," she concluded.

[114]

Terry shook out her damp coat. They were all

quite wet, but the day, despite the storm, was warm, and they had given no thought to themselves since they left home. Following Terry's example, the others now shook their coats.

Tania curled up in a dry corner and prepared to sleep. The adventure was not to her liking; besides, though the girls did not know it, she had been over the boat countless numbers of times looking for her master. It was not until hunger had driven her that she left her home and sought out her friends. Instinctively she went to them—trusted them.

Sim, still standing by the covered picture, took hold again of the cloth. Some power she could not resist made her pull it off before Arden had time to stop her.

"Oh, Sim!" Arden exclaimed reproachfully. "I asked——"

A change came over Arden's expressive face. Her blue eyes clouded with tears. Surprised and startled, the three girls stood looking at the canvas, almost unable to believe their own eyes at what was revealed to them.

[115]

CHAPTER XV

Downhearted; Not Discouraged

Spellbound they gazed at the revelation.

It was a large picture, almost finished, and its bold strokes had been laid on with a sureness that told of the joy the artist had put into his work.

But the subject was what held them so amazed. For there, instead of the usual landscape, was a portrait of Arden, sitting on a mound of warm-colored sand with Tania at her feet. One slim hand was almost buried in the white fur. The sky back of her hinted at an approaching storm, and a portion of sea showed the ocean that peculiar color which comes just before a change. Arden in the picture was gazing wistfully out to sea, her eyes dreamy yet questioning, as though she were wondering what life held in store for her.

"Oh, Arden," gasped Sim, the first to speak. "How lovely!"

"And to think we never knew or even guessed," Terry added. "He must be in love with you," she finished softly.

"Don't be silly, Terry," Arden scolded, her face crimson with blushes. "He just happened to use my face. It doesn't look much like me, anyway. I'm not that pretty."

[116]

"It looks exactly like you," Sim insisted. "There's no use being falsely modest about such things. You know you're pretty."

"Oh, stop!" Arden begged, and her friends saw that her eyes were filled with tears. "He's gone

now, and whatever happened to him, I'm afraid to guess. But I know one thing. He never would have gone away without leaving some word unless he was taken against his will."

"What shall we do?" Sim asked, coming as usual straight to the heart of the matter and for the moment disregarding the portrait.

"I don't know," Arden replied helplessly. For a time the girls listened while the storm howled outside and the waves slapped harder against the fat sides of the *Merry Jane*.

"We can't stay here very much longer," Terry reminded them. "The tide is coming in, and there won't be any place left to walk on back home."

Arden nodded grimly; then, without a word of explanation, she went out the door and back to the stern of the houseboat. She returned as quickly as she had gone.

"I just wanted to see," she explained, "if Dimitri's rowboat was still tied up. It is, and his old car is there, too."

[117]

"Then, of course, wherever he went or was taken, he didn't go in his own boat or car," Terry reasoned.

"I don't know what we can do," Arden said again. "But I think we should wait a little while before we spread an alarm. After all, he may have stayed in town because of the storm."

"Of course. Why didn't we think of that before?" Sim agreed, sighing with relief. "We'd better lock Tania in and get back ourselves. Then we can drive to town and look around for him there."

They were relieved at having something definite to do, some real plan to work upon. Terry with difficulty closed the open window. Arden coaxed Tania out to the kitchen and left water for her to drink, besides two dog biscuits she found in a box. Sim carefully covered the picture again, still conscious of the thrilling surprise it had given them.

Finding they could not lock the door from the outside, they pulled it shut and, after one more look around the old boat, they wrapped their coats tightly about them and set out for "Buckingham Palace."

The discovery of Arden's portrait under such almost terrifying conditions left the little group frankly bewildered.

[118]

"How could he have drawn so well from memory?" Arden wondered.

"What will Arden say or do about it?" Sim reflected.

"Anyhow," Terry was deciding, "it's a perfectly swell picture."

Then, as if voicing the unspoken words of her companions, Arden said:

"Please don't let's say anything about—the picture—now."

"All right," replied her companions, and they certainly meant it would be "all right" to keep their newest secret.

"I can't understand it," Arden remarked as they plodded along. "Especially about Tania. He *was* so fond of her."

"*Was?* Oh, Arden!" Sim wailed at the slip Arden had made.

"Everything will be all right. I'm sure there is some simple explanation," Terry said soothingly.

"I hope so," Sim murmured, not quite so sure.

They could still hear Tania howling mournfully at being left alone, but Arden insisted they should not go back, for Tania was safe, she declared. Soon the dog's howls could be heard no longer, with the noise of the wind and the endless slashing of the breakers on the shore.

The tide had risen just as Terry said it would, and in some places the girls had to wade in water up to their knees as they trudged along. When at last they reached Terry's house they were indeed a woebegone little band, and there was no use denying it.

[119]

Mrs. Landry was shocked when she saw them and sent them to change into dry things at once. After which they gathered in the living room and told Terry's mother all about their disheartening adventure, not, however, mentioning the surprise portrait.

"And, Mother," Terry pleaded, "can't we go to town at once to see if he has been there?"

"Terry, dear, you always rush so," Mrs. Landry reminded her. "Don't you think the weather is too bad to go all that way now? Why not wait ___"

"We'll be all right," Terry interrupted. "I'm sure none of us could sleep a wink if we didn't at least do everything possible to find out what has happened to Dimitri."

"Well——" Mrs. Landry was weakening. "If you dress warmly and promise to be back before dark, I guess you may go. But drive carefully, and don't do anything foolish." The vague warning meant more than the words which conveyed it.

[120]

They were not long in getting ready after receiving that permission. In a surprisingly short time the little car was bouncing up the road with the three girls huddled together in it bound for the village.

"Where shall we go first?" asked Sim as they neared town.

"We can get some gas and sort of ask Reilly," Terry suggested. "He's always friendly and sees everything."

"Of course, that's what we'll do first," Arden agreed.

But when they had jokingly asked the Chief how his tenant was getting along, he replied crisply:

"I should think *you'd* know about that. I haven't

seen him in more'n a week. Takes more'n two cats t' make a coop of chickens," he added. Mr. Reilly's proverbs were sometimes queer. "Nope, ain't seen him."

"You haven't!" Terry droned.

More than a week! Disheartened, they tried to smile at the obliging Reilly, but the attempt was by no means a success.

He looked after them quizzically as they left.

In the little drug store where they bought postal cards and stamps they did not need nor even want, they asked the girl clerk if she had seen "the artist" lately.

[121]

She gave them a silly grin and shook her head.

"Not him. He only came in here once for some stamps, weeks ago, but not since. Queer duck. Friend of yours?"

"Sort of," Arden replied indifferently, and they left the store with their heads up but their spirits down.

"Well, that exhausts the village, except for the food store. We can buy some oranges and ask Mr. Gushweller," Terry suggested.

The combination grocery and butcher store was without customers when the girls entered, and the beaming owner, Mr. Gushweller, came forward rubbing his hands and remarking how glad he was to see them.

Arden looked expertly at the oranges, critically "weighing" them in her hand. How should they ask about Dimitri without exciting Mr. Gushweller's curiosity?

But Sim saved the day. "Say, Mr. Gushweller," she said brightly, "what kind of meat is good for a dog—that Russian wolfhound, you know? The one that artist owns? He asked if we'd pick up something for her."

"Wall, he gen'ally gits these." Gushweller indicated a prepared dog food in cans. "I thought it was about time he got a new supply. He ain't bought none for a couple weeks now."

[122]

"I'll take three cans," Sim replied automatically, while one half of her brain registered the disappointing fact that Dimitri hadn't been in that store either.

Loaded again with unwanted stuff, although Tania could use the dog food, they were a serious threesome as they drove homeward in the early evening. The storm continued violently to tear things up, and all were thinking the same thing. Dimitri hadn't been to town even to get food for Tania. Where was he in this awful storm?

[123]

CHAPTER XVI

That Dark Woman

"If he had taken his car, or even the boat, it wouldn't seem so—so ominous," Arden reasoned as they drove homeward. "But to find them both there, and Tania practically starving. Well——"

"That broken cupboard, too," Sim said. "I feel sure that's where he used to keep the snuffbox. Do you remember the day we came to tea? The sound of a small door and a key in the lock?"

"It certainly looked as though it had been forced open," Terry replied.

"I hate to tell Chief Reilly. I'm afraid he'll get things all mixed up. Let's wait a little longer, and we'll do whatever your mother advises," Arden said, and Terry agreed, silently nodding her head.

The storm was surely now at its height. In some parts of the road, where there was not much distance to the ocean, the waves had been blown in so that a curved white line of foam was left on the ground almost under the wheels of the car. The sand came in sheets, blowing and sticking on the wet windshield, making the driving difficult indeed.

Mrs. Landry did not hide her relief when they put the car in the garage and came tramping into the house.

[124]

"Did you find him?" she asked brightly, and then at once knew they had not, for they looked at her hopelessly and shook their heads.

"No one has seen him for days," Terry said briefly.

"He didn't even buy food for Tania," added Arden. "Do you suppose something terrible has happened to him? That someone knew he had that snuffbox and——"

"I don't believe so," Mrs. Landry soothed, talking slowly and softly, as one speaks to a frightened child. "I'm sure you will hear good news in the morning. Come, get your damp things off and see how much better you'll feel after you've had some of Ida's chicken pie."

Later, when they ate the pie and apparently enjoyed it, wise Mrs. Landry kept the conversational ball rolling as well as she could, but it was not easy. There was so much worry in their serious young faces that smiles were few and far between among the girls.

They retired early, tired from their long walk through the rain and the rough drive to the village and back. But healthy bodies make healthy minds, and next morning they were surprised, and a little ashamed, at having slept so well; in fact, at having overslept so well.

[125]

"We must go and feed Tania," Arden decided after breakfast. "We'll look more carefully this time for some clues and hope for the best."

Tania was overjoyed to see them and ate greedily of the food Sim gave her from one of the cans she had bought the day before.

"Was that chair like that yesterday?" Terry asked indicating an overturned rocker.

"I don't remember," Sim answered. "I was so

excited.”

“I don’t, either, but Tania might have done it,” Arden suggested.

“Then it doesn’t indicate a struggle or anything,” Terry remarked. “I guess it wasn’t important, anyway.”

“Tania will be safer here than anywhere else, and she hates the rain so,” Sim said in fixing little things for the lonely dog’s comfort.

They left the *Merry Jane* again, much the same as they had found her, and returned to “Buckingham Palace,” finally deciding to tell Chief Reilly if they did not hear from Dimitri by noon.

They were about to drive to town to deliver their doleful message when the sound of a car coming down the muddy road filled them with sudden hope.

[126]

Surely this was Dimitri coming back safe and sound! If only it could be—

“Oh, gosh!” Sim exclaimed. “I’m glad he’s back! I was so worried.”

“Me, too!” said Terry ungrammatically.

They waited at the back gate and watched the splashing approach of the car. Mud-stained as it was, they could still distinguish the color. A green roadster!

It came to a sudden stop with screeching of brakes, and the door, with grimy side curtains attached, was swung open.

Then they could see that the dark Olga was behind the wheel, hesitating before putting a black satin shoe on the muddy ground as she prepared to step out.

She smiled as she saw the three girls in a row looking at her in dismay.

“A reception committee. Yes?” she asked. “Good-morning! Here I am again, you see.”

“Good-morning,” Arden replied mechanically, trying to look past the woman into the car. Woefully there came to her the realization that it contained no one but Olga. There was no sign of Dimitri.

[127]

Suddenly, Arden feared that Sim or Terry might give away their discovery about Dimitri’s absence before she had a chance to question the woman and learn if Olga knew of his disappearance.

But Sim and Terry acted as if struck dumb. They had been so sure that their artist friend would be in the car. Surely, Arden thought, Olga could see surprise and dismay in their faces. Perhaps she did not notice, or perhaps she was only concerned with herself, for when she spoke again she asked if they could do her the very great favor of taking her over to the *Merry Jane*.

“Why, I guess—” began Arden and then decided on a bold question. “But why didn’t you take the road from the village? You must have come past it as you drove out.”

"A road from the village!" Olga repeated. "I thought there was no way except to go by boat from here."

"Oh, yes," Terry explained. "There is a way. This road you are on now branches off farther back and goes through the marsh, right to the houseboat. Of course, it is not much of a road, but it is wide enough for one car."

"Really?" The dark woman raised black, curved brows. "I did not mean to be such a great trouble."

[128]

"Oh, it's no trouble," Arden exclaimed quickly. "If the bay were not so rough, we would be glad to take you. But the storm——" It would not do to make Olga antagonistic. They could learn nothing then.

"I guess you will have to drive——" began Sim but a look from Arden stopped her from continuing.

"And if I meet Dimitri coming out in his handsome car, we will be like two goats on the bridge. Yes?" Olga smiled as she still sat in the auto, reluctant to put her dainty feet on the wet ground.

"But you won't meet him," Terry said quickly. "He's not there!" She waited to see what effect this statement would have on the mysterious woman.

"No? He often goes away, sketching. He is very strong. A sea such as this wild one would delight him. However, I will go over and wait for him." Olga decided and drew her slim legs back into the car as she prepared to drive away.

"But he won't come back; at least, we don't think he will. He's been gone for days without taking the car or his skiff, and the houseboat was not even locked," Arden stated and watched the woman closely for her reaction to that statement.

"What do you mean?" Olga asked shrilly and jumped quickly out of the car to stand squarely in front of Arden. She looked straight into Arden's eyes and repeated her question. "What do you mean? What are you trying to tell me?"

[129]

"Dimitri's gone," said Arden simply.

"Gone?" Olga asked. "Come, we must go over at once! There is something I must find out!"

And then the excitement began all over again.

[130]

CHAPTER XVII

Olga Makes Light of It

"To find out something," was what Olga had said, her dark eyes flashing. The girls, too, wanted to find things out. Did Olga know about the missing snuffbox, and did she also know, or suspect, where Dimitri might be?

They eagerly accepted the invitation to get into the car. Olga drove rapidly, scorning ruts and bumps. Once she spoke questioningly to Arden, who was in the front seat with her.

"My little friend, Melissa? Did she enjoy her ride?"

"Very much," replied Arden. "But she got into trouble over it. Her father——"

"Ah, yes, she told me of him. Have you seen her recently, then?"

"Not for quite a few days," Arden answered, and then she remembered, with a start, that no one had seen Melissa or George Clayton for—she could not recall how long. Three or four days, at least.

"The dog!" Olga exclaimed suddenly. "Is she still on the boat? She cannot bear me. I attempted to discipline her once, and ever since that I cannot go near her. She never forgets."

[131]

"She's still there, but I guess we can tie her up before you go in," Arden said, wondering how they were going to do it.

Then Olga drove without talking further. When they got to the end of the narrow road leading to the houseboat the three girls sprang out and, going on board, coaxed Tania to the stern of the craft, where they tied her securely. They then called down that it was safe for Olga to come aboard.

"Watch her carefully," Arden cautioned Terry and Sim, indicating Olga. "Notice just what she does."

Terry and Sim agreed silently as Olga appeared at the steps. Tania barked furiously at the sight of her and strained to get loose. Olga, casting the merest glance in the direction of the animal, at once went inside the houseboat. The three girls followed close behind her. She did not hesitate in the living room. But, walking briskly, pushed aside the curtains and stopped short as the broken cupboard caught her eye. The mysterious covered canvas might not have been there for all the notice she gave it.

"Who did that?" she asked, angrily turning to the girls. "Who? Tell me at once!"

[132]

"We found it that way," Arden answered. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" Olga repeated. "Did you not know, then, that Dimitri had here a gold box worth a fortune? Come! I see by your faces you did know. This is where he kept it. I told him it was foolish. After all, one can get around Tania with a piece of raw beef. Yes!"

She was quite beside herself with rage. Her dark eyes flashed, and she bit her lips impatiently. Then, apparently realizing how odd all this must seem to the girls and shrugging her shoulders, she attempted to make light of the incident. With another shrug of her expressive shoulders, she said:

"But of course he has removed his precious box with him. He can take care of himself, that one. Ha! Yes! There is no use wasting time here. I

must get back to New York—quickly!”

Olga fumbled in her bag and pulled out a gaudy compact. At the same time a paper fell but, though she did not notice it, none of the girls attempted to pick it up. The whole affair seemed to rob them of their natural intelligence. Olga’s personality was so overpowering.

“But,” Arden began, “why should he break open the cupboard? Surely he had a key.”

[133]

“I have known him to lose things more important than keys. Don’t worry your pretty heads over it, Dimitri is not harmed, I am sure of it.” Olga used her compact vigorously. All that she did was vigorous.

“And Tania,” Sim reminded her. “He left nothing for her to eat.”

“About that I know nothing. Oh, you dear, foolish children! What do you think has happened? Murder? Abduction? Come, I am going back!” Olga swept out of the small space. She had succeeded in making the girls feel very young and rather silly. They followed her almost against their wills, and she drove them back to the cottage, where she stopped and, smiling brightly, said:

“Please don’t distress yourselves. I tell you, Dimitri is very capable. You believe me—yes?”

“Yes, of course,” Arden faltered.

“Oh, and if you see my little friend Melissa, tell her I have been here, will you?”

The girls nodded dumbly, and Olga drove off up the muddy road, splashing the brown water widely out from beneath the wheels.

There was a temporary lull in the storm, a sort of breathing spell. The rain had ceased, and the wind was less. The surf, though, was heavier than ever, booming on and tearing at the beach.

[134]

Arden stood in a little pool of rain water watching the car fade from sight. She suddenly moved aside as the water soaked through her shoes and wet her feet.

“What next?” she asked of no one in particular. “She is the queerest person I ever saw.”

“Do you think she really was disturbed about Dimitri and just pretended she wasn’t?” Sim inquired.

“If you ask me,” Terry began, “she doesn’t care a snap about Dimitri. But she did seem mad about the box and the broken cupboard.”

“That’s just what I thought,” agreed Arden. “I think she was surprised to find it gone, and maybe I’m crazy, too, but she seemed to expect that, somehow.”

“Why should we tell Melissa we saw her?” Terry reflected. “Anyway, we haven’t seen Melissa for days, and that’s odd, too.”

“That’s just Olga’s manner: playing Lady Bountiful to the poor native child,” Sim sneered. “What does she know about Melissa, anyway?”

"What does she know about this whole business?" Arden said firmly. "I'm for telling Chief Reilly. Then, if anything should be wrong, our consciences would be clear. What do you say?"

"I think you're right, Arden!" Terry exclaimed. "There's more to this than we realize. Wait till I tell Mother where we're going."

Terry ran into the house and was out again almost at once.

Arden backed the car from the garage, Sim shut the doors after her, and the three were ready for the drive to the village.

"Let's go!" called Terry hopping into the moving car. "Hurry, Arden! It's beginning to rain again."

CHAPTER XVIII

Reilly on the Case

The rain was coming down in torrents by the time the village was reached, and, going at once to Reilly's garage, the girls found him seated in his narrow little office reading a newspaper.

He smiled jovially as she saw them, his little blue eyes almost hidden behind many wrinkles.

"Afternoon, ladies!" he exclaimed. "How's this for weather? A cat can look at a king."

But Arden had no time for polite preliminaries.

"Mr. Reilly," she began, "we have something very important to tell you."

"Have you, now? What's happened? Rain leakin' through into your dinin' room table? It never pours but the salt gets damp."

"Please, I'm serious," Arden said firmly, and taking a deep breath she announced:

"Dimitri Uzlov has disappeared!"

"Disappeared! What do you mean?"

"He's been gone from the houseboat for days, and nobody has heard from him. You said, yourself, you hadn't seen him lately. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember," agreed the chief. "But what makes you think he's disappeared?"

"His dog came over to our house, starving, with a piece of frayed rope on her collar," Terry burst out.

"The door of the houseboat was open, and the rain was pouring in," volunteered Sim.

"Both his car and rowboat are there, and there's a cupboard broken open on the houseboat," Arden added excitedly.

"But perhaps he's just gone for a day or two," suggested the chief, obviously not wanting to

start on a "case" in the riotous weather.

"Oh, you must believe us!" Arden exclaimed. "It takes more than a day or two to starve a big dog. And we inquired all around the village. No one has seen Mr. Uzlov."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" Reilly asked professionally. "How many people know he's gone?"

"Just us and my mother and that woman who came to see him," Terry answered.

"Oh, Terry!" Arden exclaimed. "And we don't even know her last name or her license number. We let her go away without asking."

"How stupid! That's just what we did, and I'm sure she knew more than she let on," Sim said in dismay.

[138]

"Mr. Reilly," Arden pleaded, "won't you come with us to the *Merry Jane*? We'll feel better if you take a look around, because we'd never forgive ourselves if anything was wrong."

"Why—" Reilly rubbed his chin thoughtfully—"yes, I'll come. Might as well go right now. Just in case——"

"Good! You follow us in your car, as we won't be coming back this way again," Arden decided as Chief Reilly slipped into his warm uniform coat whereon a large shiny badge was prominently displayed.

He followed them back along the road in his ancient flivver, his fat cheeks shaking as he bounced over the ruts and puddles.

He slung one plump leg over the door without opening it and slid, rather than climbed, out. The girls waited impatiently as he stood surveying the lonely stretch of Marshlands from all angles.

Terry fidgeted. "What does he think he's going to see, looking around like this? White pebbles as in the fairy tale?" she hissed.

"Shsh-h! he'll hear you," Arden cautioned.

Chief Reilly, having had his look around, mounted the wooden steps at the rear side of the houseboat and asked, in his most businesslike manner:

[139]

"Everything just as you found it last?"

"Everything; except for the closed window," Arden replied.

Tania, delighted at seeing her friends again, "woofed" happily, and apparently Chief Reilly was her friend, too, for she allowed him to rub her silky ears.

"We came over here the day Tania ran to us, begging for food. And we found the place deserted and this cupboard broken open," said Arden.

"Huhm-um," Reilly grunted, peering into the small compartment with its shattered door.

"These paint brushes," Sim said, showing him one, "were never left by Mr. Dimitri to harden up like this. They were scattered about when we

first came over.”

“That so?” the chief asked. “I wouldn’t know about that. I’m no painter.”

“There’s something else that’s very odd,” Arden stated. “Dimitri Uzlov had in his possession a very valuable gold box. Besides ourselves, we don’t know just how many people knew about it, but we think the woman Olga did. Anyway, it’s gone, too.”

Reilly raised his eyebrows. The case was beginning to be interesting. What he had imagined to be the silly idea of excitable “summer folks” seemed now to have something to it after all.

[140]

“Did this artist have many visitors?” he asked.

“Two that we know about,” replied Terry.

“The woman Olga, and a man who rowed over here in our boat a few nights ago. He came back toward morning,” said Sim.

“The woman came first and asked the way over here. Terry rowed her over. Dimitri and she seemed to be very angry about something. We rowed her back again, and she took Melissa Clayton for a ride in her car, a green sport roadster,” supplied Arden.

“Funny I never saw it go through town,” Reilly remarked at this point. “But what you don’t know can’t set the river on fire.” He grinned.

“It’s more than that,” Terry agreed. “That woman didn’t seem to want to be seen in town at all.”

“And something very queer about the whole thing,” Sim interrupted, “is where has Melissa been all this while? She usually hangs around our house.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t consider that,” Reilly suggested. “This bad weather probably accounts for it. She’s home.”

“Well, then, after that,” Arden went on with her story of events, “a man, dark, tall, and somewhat like Dimitri, drove up one night and he, too, asked the way to the *Merry Jane*. He wouldn’t let us row him over. He was very polite about it, and he took our boat. Toward morning I saw him drive away in his car that he had left parked at Terry’s house, and—and—” Arden faltered as she realized another surprising fact—“that’s the last time we heard from Dimitri!”

[141]

[142]

CHAPTER XIX

Tania Howls

This startling announcement held them all speechless. They had completely overlooked its significance. And yet it was so obvious. The dark stranger had evidently come over to the houseboat that night and— Surely he was responsible for Dimitri’s disappearance.

Terry wandered over to the combination bed and couch and sank down upon it. She looked in a bewildered fashion at the floor and almost immediately was galvanized into action. At her feet lay a white paper; something they had not noticed before. She snatched it up and spread it out on her knee. It was part of an envelope torn partly across and lengthwise. Written on it in ordinary blue ink was this:

*Ser
Ninth S
New Y*

"Look!" excitedly exclaimed Terry. "Here's part of an address!"

They all crowded close to see, and Chief Reilly, as befitted one in his station, held out his hand for the paper. Terry meekly gave it to him.

[143]

"You're right!" he exclaimed and turned the paper over. Then, as the surprised girls watched, he drew out from the inside of the envelope a second small piece of paper. "This seems to be some kind of a map," he announced, turning it around in an effort to decide which was the top.

"Let's see!" Arden asked. The chief gave it to her. "It is a map!" she agreed, "and it shows the road from the city and the branch one to the village. See, it has part of the word Oceanedge."

"Perhaps we can find the rest of it," Sim suggested. But a most careful search failed to reveal more of the paper.

"Olga dropped that!" Arden announced suddenly. "I remember seeing it fall from her bag, but I was too stupid to do anything about it."

"Oh, no, Arden," Terry said. "If you had noticed it and called it to her attention, she would have picked it up again. As it is now, we're reasonably sure she knew the way to the *Merry Jane* all the while, though she tried to make us believe she didn't."

"And to think we let her go without even finding out her name or who she was," Sim moaned.

"Now I'm sure there's something queer about Dimitri being away," Arden said convincingly. "Why should Olga pretend to be ignorant about the road? Why didn't she worry about Dimitri? How did she know about the snuffbox? She went straight to the cupboard as if to get it."

[144]

"You girls may have stumbled on something at that!" the chief exclaimed with a faint note of admiration in his voice. "Yes, indeed!"

They stood in the untidy living room wondering what might be the solution to all this mystery. Tania rubbed against Sim's slim legs. The girl gently pulled the silky ears, something forming in her mind.

"I've got an idea!" Sim cried out. "Perhaps Tania could trace Dimitri if she had something of his to sniff at. After all, she's a wolfhound, and the hound part of her name must mean that she can trace missing persons."

"We can try," Arden admitted. Somehow, despite

the chief's presence, the girls regarded the "case" as their own and did not dream of consulting him on matters such as this one.

Momentarily the discovery of the piece of letter and the map was forgotten in the excitement of the new suggestion. Sim found a battered old felt hat and held it before Tania's nose.

The dog sniffed at it disdainfully and then sat back on her haunches looking at Sim.

[145]

"Go find him!" Sim urged. "Find Dimitri!"

The tone of her voice may have done it, or else it was a game of dog and played before, for she sprang up again and dashed toward the door. Standing on her hind legs and pushing with her forepaws, she opened it, for it was not fully latched.

Tania galloped down to the water edge and ran back and forth excitedly, her nose to the ground. The cat-tails in the marsh bent before the strong wind, which whistled eerily through the tall sedge grass. As is usual with nor'easters, the rain had temporarily ceased again, and the afternoon sky seemed a little brighter. Tania turned to look questioningly at the girls as she raced back and forth along the little strip of ground. At last she stopped and, sitting down, facing the storm-swept bay, she howled mournfully.

"Tania!" Arden called. The dog came slowly to her, tail between her legs, a picture of despair.

"What does that mean?" Terry asked of Reilly. She did not dare to interpret the performance for herself. "Do you think he may have—drowned?"

"Naw," Rufus Reilly replied scornfully. "It probably don't mean a thing. That dog couldn't follow no scent in the wet weather. Just the same," he continued wisely, "this here is a mysterious case, all right, all right! I'm glad you called me in. It's the first time I've had any real work to do in years. Now, what in thunder did I do with that paper? I've got to study it a bit." He began to search in his numerous pockets.

[146]

"Here it is, Mr. Reilly," Arden said handing it to him. "You let me look at it."

"Oh, yes, so I did! Well, I guess there's not much we can do around here, is there?" he asked the girls. "Out of sight makes the mare go." Another, of his silly, joking proverbs.

They shook their heads silently. Arden took Tania back to the houseboat again and shut her inside. Food and water had been left for her. Then, after a quick look around, they all left.

"I'll work on the case," Rufus Reilly announced as he climbed into his car, "and let you know about it sometime tomorrow. Don't worry, though. It'll all come out in the wash." And chuckling at his poor joke he drove away in the early twilight.

[147]

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Landry Helps

"Great help *he* is," Sim remarked disdainfully as they watched the old car bump along.

"We don't know any more now than we did before," Terry said, agreeing with Sim.

"Yes, we do," Arden contradicted. "You're forgetting about that paper. While you two were watching Tania perform her little trick, I was memorizing the words on that torn piece."

"Good for you, Sherlock!" Sim exclaimed. "And what do we do next? Go home and work out the cryptogram?"

"Something like that," Arden answered. "I've got a plan. Let's get going, and we'll see how it works out. Terry, is it too late to go to town for just a few minutes? What I'm going to do won't take long."

"What are you going to do?" Terry questioned. "Tell us."

"I thought of going to the drug store and trying to trace the writer of this note by getting information of the New York telephone company," Arden told them.

[148]

"Good idea, Ard! Of course we have time for that. And, anyway, we'd better do it while you still remember the words," Terry said.

"Oh, don't worry, I won't forget them," Arden replied with the first show of relief they had felt in some time. "A Blake never forgets!"

They piled into the car and rode along the deserted road to the village. The drug store was fortunately empty except for a rather stupid-looking boy clerk.

Arden entered the phone booth, and her chums crowded around her. They waited impatiently for the really short interval it took to make the connection with the New York office. As the clear sharp voice of the girl sang out "Information," Arden explained the difficulty.

"We are trying to get the phone number of an address in New York," she said, "but we've torn the paper. I'll give you as much as I can. Do you think you can help us?"

"Sorry, madam," came the voice, "but I can't possibly trace the name."

Arden hung up and turned sorrowfully toward her friends.

"I might have known it," she said. "Of course we couldn't do anything that way. It was a desperate chance at best."

[149]

"Too bad, Arden," Terry soothed. "I still think it was a good idea. But let's get out of here; our young friend," she indicated the curious clerk, "is awfully interested in us."

"We'd better be starting for home, anyway," Arden suggested. "Your mother might worry."

So they left the little village, which was quite deserted now in the late afternoon, and wearily put the car away for the night in the garage of the little white house.

Mrs. Landry was interested to learn all that had happened, and urged them to keep up their spirits. Somewhat woefully, the girls smiled at her and agreed at least to try further.

After the evening meal, when they gathered in the living room, Arden and Sim decided to write letters home but thought it best not to mention the new "mystery."

Arden sat at the small wicker desk, pen and paper before her, and got as far as "Dearest Mother." But her mind was far away and after this auspicious beginning she looked up from the paper dreamily.

Poor Dimitri! Where could he be? And Olga—and the paper and the snuffbox. Then Arden, drawing a line through the beginning of her letter, wrote down the queer words from the envelope.

[150]

Ser
Ninth S
New Y

What could that possibly be? What man's name began with the letters S E R?

"Terry," Arden said suddenly, "have you a dictionary here? One that would have proper names in it?"

"I have one that I brought down with some books from Cedar Ridge. Will that help you?" Terry replied.

"Get it, will you, please," Arden continued. "I'm going to try and work out this puzzle and send a telegram to an address. If it isn't delivered, we'll know it's no good. I'd rather spend the last of my allowance that way than on candy."

"Swell plan, Arden!" Sim exclaimed. "Get the trusty dictionary, Terry, and let's start to work."

Terry dashed up the stairs and rummaged hurriedly in the pile of almost forgotten college books in her room and at length returned carrying the volume.

Arden flicked back the flimsy pages and ran her hand down the line.

There were biblical first names as well as Greek and Latin ones, and Arden was somewhat at sea as she murmured:

[151]

Serah
Seraphim
Sered
Seres
Sergia
Sergius
Seriah
Seron
Serug

"Do you like any of them, or does any one sound logical?" she asked her chums.

"Sergius!" exclaimed Sim. "That sounds Russian

to me."

"Sergia," Terry voted. "That's also Russian, but one may be a woman's name. How can we get around that? There's no way of finding out from this list. It's very impartial."

"We can get around it this way," Arden declared. "Just use Serg. Then we'll be safe if it's a man or woman. You know a boy's name could be Ted, and they call some girls Ted. I'm in favor of just Serg."

"It sounds good," admired Terry.

"I'm for it," added Sim. "But what about a last name?"

"There's going to be a rub," said Terry. "We took the easiest part first."

[152]

"It seems almost impossible, doesn't it?" sighed Arden.

"Yes, it does. It might be Smith or Brown or Jones," Sim remarked. "This is quite an undertaking, I'm afraid."

"Well, there's no harm in trying," Arden protested. "Working with Dimitri in mind, it's logical to suppose that, being Russian, he'd have Russian friends or relatives, isn't it?"

Sim and Terry agreed silently.

"I guess relatives, Arden," said Sim suddenly. "I think that man who came here looked like Dimitri."

"Maybe you're right, Sim. Shall we try Uzlov?" Arden looked to them for agreement.

"Yes!" exclaimed Terry. "Serg Uzlov! That's a good start."

"Of course, we may not gain anything by this, and besides, perhaps we should have told Rufus Reilly what we intend to do. Do you think so?" questioned Arden, chewing the little ring on the top of the fountain pen.

"Not at all!" Sim protested. "If Dimitri was a brother, or something, I think we'd do just this, and I think we're perfectly justified in doing it."

This outburst gave them new courage, and they puzzled for some time over the address. Then Terry finally called in her mother.

[153]

"What would be the Russian quarter in New York, Mother?" she asked, explaining what they were trying to do.

"Let me try to remember," said Mrs. Landry. "Perhaps if I looked again at the address as you have it, something might suggest itself to me."

They showed it to her, Arden writing it out from memory again.

"There seems to be no question but what this address is in New York," Mrs. Landry went on, after several seconds of obvious concentration. "Now, as to the street. From the way the address is written it must be Ninth Street. It cannot be Nineteenth Street for there was no part of a word before the Ninth, was there?"

"No." The girls were agreed on that point.

"And it cannot have been Twenty-ninth, or Thirty-ninth or any of the higher numbered streets in the pines. Because the word Ninth was too near the left side of the envelope. So I think it is safe to assume that Ninth Street was intended."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Arden. "Terry, your mother should be in entire charge of this mystery investigation."

"Oh, no, my dear. None of that for me, if you please," Mrs. Landry laughed.

[154]

"But you're helping us so!" murmured Sim.

"This may be no help at all, as it turns out. But I'll go on to the end as far as I can. We'll decide on Ninth Street. That, as you know, is at least partly in what is, or was, the Greenwich Village section of New York.

"I think it safe to say there are Russians there. You know there are artists and writers living there and all sorts of odd tearooms, some undoubtedly of Russian character."

"Oh, we are coming on!" cried Arden. "What next, Mrs. Landry?"

"Well, I should say, from looking at this, that no house number was ever put in front of the street. Whoever wrote this must have known that the letter would go to its destination without a house number on it. The writer must have sent other letters in the same way, trusting to the mail man knowing where to leave it."

"Some mail man!" commented Terry admiringly.

"But then Ninth Street may be a short one," said Mrs. Landry. "I can't just recollect about that, though I have been on it. At any rate, I think, in such a desperate case as this," and here she smiled slightly, "you would be justified in sending the telegram to the name you have selected, with just Ninth Street, New York, as its destination. Those telegraph messenger boys are clever. One may know just where to take it or he may inquire of some Russian in the Village. The Russians are clannish, like all foreigners, and this person may be well known."

[155]

"Oh, I'm sure it's going to succeed now!" declared Arden.

"Of course!" murmured her chums, Sim adding:

"You write the telegram out now, Ard."

Arden wrote and read:

"Serg Uzlov. Ninth Street, New York City. Can you give us any information concerning Dimitri Uzlov? Very important. Anxious to get in touch with him. Telegraph my expense."

"That's a lot more than ten words," remarked Sim.

"Who cares?" laughed Terry. "This may mean a lot. But you'll have to sign some name to it, won't you?"

"Could we use yours, Mrs. Landry?" asked Arden.

"Yes, I think so," Terry's mother answered after a moment of thought. "It will do no harm."

"Then we'll do it," decided Arden.

"I can hardly wait!" Sim cried excitedly. "Of course we couldn't go to town tonight?" she looked beseechingly at Mrs. Landry.

[156]

"Of course not, my dear young Watson," Terry's mother smiled as she replied. "You sleuths have done quite enough for one day. Besides, think how silly you'll feel if you find out nothing has happened at all."

"I suppose so," Terry reluctantly admitted. "But somehow, Mother, I think there's something in this."

"You may be right," her mother agreed. "Nevertheless, your commanding officer orders you all to bed."

Somewhat petulantly they kissed the jovial lady good-night and went upstairs, but not to sleep till some time later, when, unable to stay awake any longer, they at last succumbed to the call of Morpheus.

But sleeping though they were, it was a fitful rest. Filled with dreams of gold boxes, strange dark women, and telegrams. Once Arden cried out, "Tania! Tania!" and Sim gave her a sleepy nudge to wake her from her dream.

Arden sighed and rolled over. Morning was so long in coming. At length the smiling sun climbed up over the edge of the ocean and announced the beginning of a new day.

[157]

CHAPTER XXI

Melissa Has a Pin

As soon as they possibly could after breakfast the next day, the three girls rowed over to the houseboat and fed Tania. They let her romp for a while and reluctantly locked her up again. They feared the townspeople, ever on the watch for something to talk about, would find some choice gossip if they were seen in the village with the "Russian's" dog.

The storm was over, and the sun, almost a stranger, broke through the clouds, blinding in its brightness. The day promised to be hot, so dressed in cool "semi-back" dresses the girls left the houseboat and went home first to report to Mrs. Landry that there was no news.

Then they got the car out and went to the village to send the telegram, which they all hoped would bring good results.

"You'd better shut the door of the phone booth," Terry suggested to Arden as they entered the drug store. "You never can tell who'll be listening, and the whole town would be excited if

[158]

they heard the message.”

“Yes, I think that would be best,” Arden agreed.

Trying to appear nonchalant, as though this was an ordinary call, Arden sent off the message. She requested an immediate answer. To make doubly sure, she informed the operator who took the telegram that she must know as soon as possible if it was delivered and left the number of the drug-store phone.

The telegraph company had an arrangement with the drug store so that messages could be telephoned in and payment made to the clerk. When Arden had completed the dictation, at the request of the operator, she got the drug clerk into the booth, and he was informed as to the toll, which Arden paid him.

“It will take a while, even if it is delivered,” Arden told her friends. “So we might as well do the shopping and come back.”

“Oh, I do hope we get a reply,” Sim said earnestly. “I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about Dimitri.”

“For a person who couldn’t sleep, you gave a marvelous imitation,” Arden answered sarcastically. “Three or four times I could have sworn you were dead to the world.”

“Me-ouw—me-ouw,” Terry squeaked. “Don’t be catty! The time will go quicker if we keep busy.”

[159]

They did all the shopping they had to for Terry’s mother and walked once around the block to kill more time before returning to the drug store.

Arden could no longer be diplomatic. She marched up to the dull-looking soda boy and asked in clear tones: “Did a message come for me?”

“Haven’t had a call today,” replied the youth behind the counter. “Were you expect—”

The phone bell rang sharply. Arden almost ran to answer it, slamming the door shut behind her.

Terry and Sim could see her face, bright with anticipation for a few seconds, then with dismay saw her expression change. They couldn’t hear what she was saying, but in a short while she was out again and beckoned them to follow her outside.

“That was one of the managers of the telegraph company in New York,” Arden reported. “He’s in the office nearest Ninth Street. He said they couldn’t send a boy out to deliver a message without a street address—it would lose too much time. But if we are willing to pay extra for messenger service, he says he’ll have a boy sort of scout around and try to locate the party.”

“What did you tell him?” asked Terry.

“Told him to go ahead and we’d pay anything in reason. He said it probably would not be much more than a dollar.”

[160]

“We’ll chip in,” declared Terry.

“I thought you would; that’s why I authorized him to go on. So now we’ll have some more

waiting. They're going to try again."

"Oh, I hope we have some luck this time," Terry remarked. "But whatever shall we do with ourselves while we're waiting?"

"That's a problem," Arden said thoughtfully. "Let's get our hair washed and waved. Mine could stand it. It's full of salt water."

"Great!" Sim exclaimed. "Of course, we know the beauty parlor here is nothing to write home about, but it will serve."

"It will serve us, little one," Terry declared, and they walked three abreast down the sunny street.

The girl operators were glad to have some new customers, and city folks at that, so they asked innumerable questions. The three girls were guarded in their answers, afraid they would give away their secret.

A none too gentle girl rubbed Arden's scalp with stubby fingers, keeping up her barrage of questions the while. What was the latest coiffure in the city? Was the long bob going out? What kind of a permanent did she have? Wearily Arden answered, wishing the girl would keep quiet.

But at last it was over and they went back to haunt the drug store again.

[161]

No, the clerk told them, no message had yet come.

The girls sat down on the steps outside. This was not an unusual thing to do. In a small village one could sit for hours by the gas station, post office, or drug store without being thought queer.

In an agony of suspense, they waited fifteen minutes—twenty minutes. They reached a point where they were sitting silently, each busy with her own worrying and wondering thoughts.

An answer was almost too much to expect of the most kindly fate. But it was true there was no harm in trying. Dimitri was gone, and the snuffbox too. The situation, despite Chief Reilly's jovial acceptance of it, was taking on a serious character.

Sim was just about to ask if the state police should not be notified, when the phone in the store rang shrilly. They could hear it, for the booth door had been left open.

Arden jumped up. For a fleeting second she looked at her companions as though to plead with some unseen force that this call should bring results. Then she dashed inside with no thought of appearance. When she emerged from the booth this time her chums knew she had met with some success. Her face wreathed in smiles she burst out:

[162]

"We've got an answer!"

"Oh, what?"

"Tell us!"

"It was the telegraph manager again," Arden reported. "The boy finally located our man, and

we owe a dollar and a quarter. It took a little longer than was expected."

"Pooh! Only an extra quarter!" exclaimed Sim.

"But did they deliver the telegram?" asked Terry.

"Yes, of course. To Serge Uzlov, and he wired an answer."

"Oh!" Sim and Terry exclaimed in unison. "What did he say?"

"Leaving at once for Oceanedge," quoted Arden.

"How wonderful!" Terry almost shouted. "Then he was some relative of poor Dimitri?"

"It looks that way," admitted Arden. "Wait, we must pay that dollar and a quarter," she said quickly, for Sim and Terry evinced a desire to hasten away. They made up the money, though it rather taxed their purses after the beauty parlor treatment. But they didn't mind in the least.

"Now let's go and tell your mother, Terry," suggested Sim.

[163]

They started out of the drug store and almost bowled over Melissa Clayton, who was on the point of entering.

"Oh, Melissa, how are you?" Sim asked. "We haven't seen you for a long time."

"I'm all right," the girl replied noncommittally.

"Weren't sick, were you?" Arden asked.

"No, just a cold," Melissa replied.

"All better?" Terry inquired. They were anxious to be on their way, yet they could not pass by the poor child for whom they had so much sympathy.

"What a pretty pin," Arden remarked next, looking at a stick pin with a deep red stone which Melissa had thrust through the collar of an old middy blouse. "Where did you get it?"

Sim and Terry pressed closer; they could tell from Arden's tone that this was no idle question, and as they looked they started, for the pin, a man's, they had all seen Dimitri wearing the day of the little tea party.

[164]

CHAPTER XXII

The Policewoman

"I found it," Melissa replied without hesitating.

"How lucky! Where?" Arden continued.

"On the beach," Melissa went on. Then she pushed past the girls and entered the store.

Arden did not question her further, fearing to make the girl suspicious. But on the way home

the three discussed the remarkable coincidence.

"Now, where on earth could Melissa have found that pin?" Sim asked. "Of course, it belonged to Dimitri, and I don't for a minute believe she found it on the beach."

"Nor I," Arden agreed. "My guess is that, if she found it at all, she found it on the houseboat. And that means she was there before we were, because we went over it pretty thoroughly by ourselves, and the chief didn't miss anything when he came with us."

"I suppose we ought to ask if he found out anything, just to keep up appearances," Terry suggested. "What do you think, girls?"

"Oh, of course, it would never do to let him think we had forgotten about him. We can stop in now and ask how the case is coming," Arden replied. "But we don't need to mention the telegram."

[165]

The chief, when they pulled up by the garage, crawled out from under a car. With a comical show of secrecy he came toward them, glancing over his shoulder as he came.

"I ain't had a chance to do nothing yet," he said, wiping some grease off his hands. "My car broke down. But I'm a-studyin' it, and I'll let you know this afternoon. You heard anything?"

Arden hesitated before replying. After all, she had *heard* nothing. That they had an answer to their telegram was just a bit of luck, and she thought it just as well if the chief did not know of it.

"No," she answered. "We haven't heard a thing."

"Well, don't worry," Reilly said, smiling. "Remember, a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime."

"And you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," Sim flung back at him. He did so annoy her! Imagine "studyin' it." What good would that do, and what nonsense was that about a murderer?

"That's right!" chuckled Reilly. "You know, young ladies, the whole trouble with cases of this kind is haste. Haste is what gums things up. Go slowly, and you have much better results. You ain't told anyone in town, have you? These here people are powerful talkers."

[166]

"Not a soul, Mr. Reilly," Arden assured him.

"You keep on studying it and let us know when you learn something, will you?" suggested Sim.

"Deed I will, and I'll have some news soon, sure. In the meantime don't forget. Look before you leap," the chief said, smiling.

"Yes," Sim said as the car pulled away, "that's good advice, and 'he who hesitates is lost' is good, too."

Reilly looked after them with a puzzled expression on his face. Was that little snip making fun of him? Then he shrugged and crawled back under the car he was trying to fix.

"Sim, you cheerful idiot, were you trying to

make him mad?" Terry asked as they drove home.

"No, but he annoyed me so I couldn't help it. I don't believe he'll be a bit of good. I know more about mysteries than he does."

"But it wouldn't do to antagonize him. After all, he's the strong arm of the law down here," Arden reminded her.

"Not such a very strong arm, in my opinion," Sim answered, and she slipped deeper down in the car seat.

"Oh, well, don't let's argue," Terry soothed. "We've got too much to think about now."

Sim was instantly alert again. "I remember distinctly seeing that pin in Dimitri's tie the day he showed us the snuffbox. Melissa knows more than we think," she said.

"We don't know very much when you come right down to it," Arden reminded her. "If a real detective questioned us, there's very little we could tell him."

"How long will it take that Serge Uzlov to get down?" Sim asked of no one in particular. "I wish he'd take a plane."

"There's no place here at Marshlands for a plane to alight," Terry answered. "Unless he took a seaplane and landed on the bay. Think what excitement that would cause!"

"I suppose so," Sim admitted as they turned in the driveway. "We'll just have to wait. I won't have a fingernail left by evening. I chewed them nearly all off waiting for that phone call."

Terry whistled for her mother. At the sound of that shrill call, Mrs. Landry, try as she did to appear rather uninterested in the whole baffling case, came out of the house quickly and listened with great interest to the story of the message.

"And, Mother," Terry finished, "as we left the store we met Melissa coming in, and she was wearing a tie pin of Dimitri's. What do you think of that?"

"Did you say anything about it?" Mrs. Landry asked.

"We didn't let her know we recognized it, and she said she found it on the beach," Terry answered.

"Perhaps she did. Surely you don't think Melissa had anything to do with all this?" Mrs. Landry questioned.

"That's just it. We don't know *who* had anything to do with it," Terry moaned.

"Well," Sim stated firmly, "I'll feel better when that man from New York gets here. I'll bet he knows something."

The others had nothing to say to that, and they all went indoors for luncheon.

The meal was nearly finished when there was a knock at the front door. Bells in seashore cottages never seem to ring. They may at the

[167]

[168]

beginning of the season, but almost always, before it ends, there appears over the push button a little note stating: "Please knock."

Now, in answer to that invitation, a knock sounded.

[169]

"I'll go," said Ida, who had just brought in the dessert.

The three girls glanced eagerly at one another.

Was it Serge?

But in another moment they knew it was not, for they heard the murmuring of a woman's voice talking to the maid. Presently Ida came back, a frightened look on her face, to announce:

"It's a policewoman."

"A policewoman!" exclaimed Mrs. Landry. "Are you sure, Ida?"

"Oh, yes'm. I've seen 'em in New York. They all dress the same, and they have a queer look on their face, and they wear heavy shoes. It's a policewoman all right."

"But what does she want?" Terry asked.

"Melissa Clayton," said Ida.

"Oh!" murmured Arden. "If they arrest that poor child——"

"Perhaps we'd better have this policewoman in," suggested Mrs. Landry.

"Oh, yes!" said Sim. "We've got to find out about this. Perhaps she may know something about Dimitri."

[170]

CHAPTER XXIII

On the Water Trail

Mrs. Landry told Ida to invite the visitor to sit on the front porch while the dessert was being eaten.

"If I asked her into the front room she would probably hear what you girls talk about," said Terry's mother, "and you are sure to talk, I know."

"You can't blame us in these circumstances," said Sim.

"No, I can't." Mrs. Landry smiled understandingly. "But why should a policewoman come here for this child?"

"We're going to find out very soon," declared Arden.

The dessert was eaten in record time, and then, after a whispered conference, it was decided that Mrs. Landry should first interview the caller alone and, if necessary, call in the girls.

"Though, if she wants us to help her catch poor

Melissa, what shall we do?" whispered Terry.

"We won't tell her a thing," decided Sim. "Why should we make more trouble for the poor child?"

[171]

"Even if she took Dimitri's pin?" suggested Arden.

"We don't know that she took it—we don't even know, for sure, that it is his pin," said Terry while her mother went out on the porch. "We couldn't prove it in court."

"I suppose not," agreed Arden. "Though I, myself, believe it is his. Now, be careful," she warned. "Don't let on that we know anything about Melissa, or have just seen her, unless we have to."

The others agreed to this. They could hear the murmuring talk between Mrs. Landry and the caller. Presently Terry's mother came into the dining room, where the girls were still sitting, to say:

"It isn't anything to worry about. Good news, rather than bad."

"About Dimitri?" asked Arden eagerly.

"No. It's all Melissa. You had better hear this woman's story. She doesn't want to arrest the poor child, so you can talk freely to her. And she isn't a policewoman. She is from a private detective agency, though."

"It's almost as bad," said Terry. "Why is a detective agency interested in Melissa?"

"You had better hear the whole story," suggested Mrs. Landry. "Come, and I will introduce you."

The three girls trailed after her out to the porch. The woman was as Ida had described her. She looked determined and efficient but not unkind, nor like one who would, as Arden remarked later, "hound a poor girl to death."

[172]

"This is my daughter," said Mrs. Landry, presenting Terry, "and her two college chums who are spending the summer with her. Miss Blake and Miss Westover."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Emma Tash, and I'm from the Torrance Private Detective Agency in New York. I was sent down here by my chief to find out something about a girl named Melissa Clayton. As we always do in these cases, we make some inquiries of friends and neighbors before going directly to the parties themselves.

"I stopped in the village, and I found out that you people are friendly with this girl. Do you mind telling me something about her?"

"With the understanding," put in Mrs. Landry, "that there is no harm intended to Melissa."

"Oh, now," Emma Tash was quick to say, "I told you that at the start."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind repeating it for the benefit of my daughter and her friends," suggested Terry's mother.

"Not at all. I'll put my cards on the table, so to speak, and you can judge how much you want to tell me. This Melissa Clayton, according to the case as it comes to me, has an elderly aunt, her mother's sister, who is quite wealthy. This aunt, a widow named Mrs. Lulu Benlon, has for a long time wanted to befriend this girl, but Melissa's father refuses to let anything be done for her."

"Just like him!" murmured Arden.

"I heard something like that in the village," went on Emma Tash. "But we'll come to him later. Anyhow, the firm I am with has been hired to see if something can't be done now. It seems that several times, in years past, Mrs. Benlon tried to do something for Melissa but was prevented. After being turned down more than once, she gave up. Now Mrs. Benlon is ailing. She's afraid she is going to die soon, but before that she wants to make another effort to help Melissa."

"Couldn't she leave her money in a will?" asked Sim.

"Yes, that was talked of, but Mrs. Benlon is queer," said Emma Tash. "She wants to be sure Melissa will get the benefit of her help, and if she left her money there is no telling that Melissa would ever get it. Mrs. Benlon, it seems, wants the satisfaction of knowing, herself, that what she does will really benefit the girl."

"She's probably wise there," said Mrs. Landry.

"Yes, I guess so," the detective investigator admitted. "So that's why I'm here. Mrs. Benlon has offered to take Melissa out of what, from all accounts, is a poor sort of a home and give her a good one—even send her to school to be educated. But Mrs. Benlon doesn't want George Clayton to have anything of her bounty. It seems that he wasn't kind to his wife, who was Mrs. Benlon's younger sister.

"As I get the story, it was a sort of runaway match; marry in haste and repent all the rest of your life. Anyhow, Melissa's mother died soon after the girl's birth, and she had been brought up in a hand-to-mouth sort of way ever since, according to Mrs. Benlon. But if it can be brought about there is a happier time ahead for Melissa. Now that you know what I want, will you help me?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Arden, and her chums nodded in agreement.

"What do you want us to do?" asked Terry.

"Tell me all you can about this girl and her father and, if you can, suggest how I can best get in communication with them," said Emma Tash.

"That last part isn't going to be easy," said Terry. "George Clayton is a queer man; ugly too, I'm afraid."

"That bears out what I have heard," said the investigator. "But there must be some way. Perhaps you can help me. But first tell me all you can—that is, all you want me to know."

This last clause was a saving one for the girls. They felt, under it, that they need not mention

the pin nor any possible connection Melissa might have with the houseboat. Dimitri Uzlov need not be brought in, nor the fact that he was not to be found. The girls could still keep to themselves, as far as Emma Tash was concerned, the secret of the man missing at Marshlands.

With this in mind, Terry, Arden, and Sim, by turns, assisted with a word from Mrs. Landry now and then, told about Melissa Clayton and her father.

"They live in a sort of shack on the edge of the bay, not far from the marsh," said Terry. "You can get to it by a long winding road out of the village, but the best way is to go by boat."

"Then I'll go that way," said the woman detective determinedly.

"I don't believe you'll get very close to the Clayton shack if you approach openly by boat," said Terry. "George Clayton is a suspicious man, and if he's home he'll probably order you off his premises."

"He may not be home," said Emma Tash. "If he isn't, so much the better. I can talk to Melissa alone. She ought to be old enough to make up her mind to leave her poverty for a better home with her aunt."

[176]

"That's just it," said Arden. "I think Melissa is rather simple-minded, to state it gently. Do you think you would be justified in inducing that sort of a person to do something her father would oppose?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do that for anything," was the quick answer. "If I find her that kind of a girl I will report back to my office and we'll get legal advice. But Mrs. Benlon thinks she owes a duty to her niece, and she wants to carry it out as soon as she can."

"Here's an idea," said Sim suddenly. "What about going crabbing?"

"Going crabbing!" exclaimed Arden, not seeing the relevancy of the remark. "What in the world for?"

"We have to take the water trail to the Clayton shack," went on Sim. "Now, if we pretend to be crabbing we can gradually work our way toward it without exciting suspicion. Melissa may be outside or even out in a boat herself, crabbing or fishing. Her father may be out lifting his lobster pots. In that case Miss Tash can see the girl and talk with her. Melissa won't be afraid if she sees us."

"Say, that's a good idea!" declared Terry.

"But you know," said Arden, "we have to wait here for——"

[177]

She did not finish, though her chums knew whom she meant.

"Oh, I don't want to take you away," Emma Tash hastened to assure the girls. "I could go by myself."

"I think it would be better if some of the girls went with you," suggested Mrs. Landry.

"Melissa would feel much more confidence."

"I suppose she would, as I'm a stranger to her. But I hate to be a bother."

"No bother at all," said Terry. "One of us can go with you, and the rest of us can stay here to receive our expected visitor. He may not come after all," she added.

"Oh, I think he will," said Arden.

"Then you two stay here," suggested Terry quickly. "I will go in our boat with this lady. We'll do some crabbing. It will be the best way."

"And if our friend comes," said Sim, "we'll hold him until you get back, Terry."

"Yes, do that."

[178]

CHAPTER XXIV The Man Arrives

Emma Tash was a very efficient woman. No sooner had the crabbing plan of approaching the Clayton shack been decided upon than she lifted up a small black bag which she had set beside her chair.

"If we are going crabbing," she said with a smile, "I have my disguise in here."

"Disguise!" repeated the girls in a chorus.

Truly things were developing fast at Marshlands.

A detective woman!

A disguise!

Arden's eyes sparkled.

"It isn't much of a disguise," went on Emma Tash. "We women investigators don't go in much for that sort of thing. Some of our men do, though. But when I knew I had to come down to the seashore, naturally I thought of bathing, fishing, or crabbing.

"Now, I'm not very fond of ocean bathing, so I passed up that suit. I don't know how to fish, but I do know how to crab, and I used to do it when I was a girl. So I brought my crabbing disguise with me."

[179]

"What in the world is a crabbing disguise?" asked Terry, as their visitor laughed. "George Clayton doesn't wear one."

"It's just an old dress I don't care what happens to," said Emma Tash, "and an old-fashioned sunbonnet. With that on, I defy anyone who sees me in it to recognize me afterward if I dress as I am now."

"Oh, that sort of a disguise," laughed Terry. "Well, I guess that will be all right. And we had better start," she added. "Time is passing, and I want to be back here to help receive our visitor."

"I will be as quick as I can," Emma Tash said. "If I could go somewhere to change my dress—"

"I'll show you," offered Mrs. Landry. "Come with me, please."

While the visitor was upstairs, the girls, in breathless whispers, discussed her and her errand. They agreed that the plan they had adopted was the best one possible in the circumstances.

"Only," sighed Terry who, in a sense, was offering herself as a sacrifice, "I do hope Serge Uzlov doesn't arrive until I get back."

"We'll keep him for you," promised Arden.

Emma Tash certainly was a very different person in her crabbing disguise. She looked the part of a back-country native to perfection. She and Terry were soon off in the boat, provided with a net, a peach basket to hold the crabs, and some old pieces of meat, on strings, for bait.

[180]

Sim and Arden watched Terry row away in the direction of the Clayton shack.

"And now we'll just have to sit here and wait," sighed Arden as Terry and her passenger disappeared around a point.

"We could go in swimming," suggested Sim, ever mindful of her ambition to become an expert in aquatic sports.

"Then let's. It will make the time pass quicker. After all, I don't believe he can get here until late afternoon. There aren't many shore trains out of New York until near the commuting hour," said Arden.

So Sim and Arden put on their suits and went in for a dip. But it was rather too cool for real enjoyment in the water, and they soon came out and sunned themselves on the sand.

Meanwhile Terry, with her usual skill at the oars, was sending the boat along at good speed toward their objective.

"Mustn't row too fast now, though," she told Emma Tash when she was near the Clayton shack. "Crabbers usually just anchor, put the bait over the side, and wait for bites."

[181]

"I know," said the detective woman. "I've done it often enough. But crabbers often haul up the anchor and go from place to place looking for better luck. In that way we can gradually approach without any suspicions."

"I think so," Terry agreed.

She rowed on until they were within view of the place where Melissa lived. There was no sign of life about the shack or its outbuildings. Whether Melissa had returned home after meeting the girls in the drug store, Terry had no way of finding out.

"Perhaps we'd better stop here," suggested Emma Tash. "I can make an observation while you put some bait over the side."

"Observation?" questioned Terry.

"Yes. With these. We find them useful on cases."

Emma Tash produced from a pocket in her crabbing dress a binocular, and as Terry threw the little anchor over, Emma Tash focused the glass on the Clayton shack.

The boat had drifted the length of the anchor rope with the incoming tide, which is always best for crabbing, and Terry was putting over the first bit of bait when the detective woman lowered the binocular and said:

"Not a sign of life. I guess there's nobody home."

[182]

"Melissa would hardly have had time to get here since we saw her in the drug store," said Terry. "And very likely her father is out in his boat."

"Then we'll just have to wait and trust to luck," was the decision of Emma Tash. "I'd like to see the girl alone."

They began to crab in earnest now. For, after all, George Clayton might be lurking about his place and see them. For a time Terry really entered into the enjoyment of their occupation, for the crabs were biting well and she landed a number of big blue-clawed ones, while her companion did likewise.

Now and then they would net a "mammy," her apron bulging with a cluster of yellow eggs ready to be deposited in some clump of the lettuce-like seaweed. These "mammy" crabs were always thrown back to aid in the propagation of future generations.

"I think we had better move a little—a little closer," suggested the detective in a low voice after a half hour of good luck. "I want to take another look."

"Yes," Terry agreed. She pulled up the anchor, but this time the policewoman did the rowing, and she rowed well. Terry envied her skill.

Again they anchored, but this time they had picked a poor location and caught nothing. Inspection through the glass still revealed no sign of life about the place. It appeared silent and deserted.

[183]

"I think we can chance going a bit closer," said Emma Tash after another half hour. "If I don't see anything then, I believe I'll take a chance and land. I'll walk up to the place. Melissa may be asleep in there."

"I hardly think so," said Terry. "But you can try."

They hoisted the anchor again, moved nearer the place, and once more the glass was used.

"I can't see a sign of anybody," Emma Tash declared. "I'm going up there."

Once more Terry pulled up the mud-hook, and again the oars were used by the detective. But just as she was easing up, in preparation to letting the boat glide up the mucky beach, a man's voice called:

"Keep away from here! I don't let nobody land!"

George Clayton suddenly appeared in front of his shack, holding a long pole.

"Get away!" he cried. "This is a private beach! You can crab all you want to out there, but don't land. I've warned you!"

"Well, that's that," said Terry in a low voice. She held her head down. In spite of the fact that she was wearing a big straw hat, she feared the man might recognize her.

[184]

But Emma Tash did not give up so easily.

"Can't we land and get a drink of water?" she called.

"No! Keep off!"

"Very well."

There was nothing for it but to row away, and this they did.

"But I'm not giving up," said the detective when they were on their way back to "Buckingham Palace." Terry wondered if Serge were there. "I'll go back to New York and suggest a different method," Emma Tash said. "The girl's aunt is anxious to do something for the child, and her brute of a father shouldn't be allowed to stand in the way."

"Of course not," Terry agreed.

She rowed fast back to the little dock, and her first unasked question was answered, as Sim and Arden who came down to meet her, with Arden's remark:

"He hasn't arrived yet."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't miss him," Terry said.

Emma Tash changed back into her regular dress, put the crabbing disguise into her bag and, thanking them all for the help, started for the village, saying she would take a train back to New York.

"But I'm coming here again," she said. "And if you get a chance I wish you would let Melissa know that her aunt wants to help her."

[185]

"We will," Terry promised.

It was now late afternoon, and the girls, nervous with the tension, sat on the porch, waiting. Not for anything would they now go far away from the house. The "man from New York" might arrive any minute.

"Oh, dear," Sim wailed. "Isn't this suspense awful? If that man doesn't come soon, I'll——"

"It's almost five o'clock," Arden said, looking at her watch. "He ought to get here soon."

"You youngsters will be nervous wrecks," Mrs. Landry remarked as Terry paced restlessly up and down the front porch. "Can't you find something to do?"

"I can't sit still long enough to do anything," Terry replied.

"Listen!" Arden cautioned. "Isn't that a car?"

Instantly there was quiet. They all strained their ears to hear the sound of bumping wheels.

"Yes!" Terry exclaimed. "Come on!"

Flinging open the screen door of the porch she raced around to the back, where the yellow sand road stretched. Sim and Arden followed close behind her.

They stood like pointers, immobile, while the car approached. It reached the gate and stopped. The side door was opened, and a polished shoe was thrust out. Then the whole man appeared, and the girls gasped audibly. It was the dark young man who had rowed himself over to the houseboat when they last heard from Dimitri!

[186]

[187]

CHAPTER XXV

The Man in the Marsh

"Then it was you!" Arden burst out impulsively as she saw him.

"I beg your pardon?" the young man replied, somewhat puzzled. "I am Serge Uzlov. I received a telegram this morning which brought me down here. Did you—?"

"I sent it," Arden replied. "We guessed at your address and sent it because we thought you might know something about Dimitri."

"Know something—about my own brother? I'm afraid I don't understand." He looked from one to the other of the girls, his face showing wonderment and some fear.

"Of course, how could you?" Terry remarked. "Please come up on the porch, and we'll explain."

There, while he sipped a cool drink Sim got for him, Serge Uzlov heard the queer story of Dimitri's disappearance.

"So you see," Arden went on, "we got worried and took a chance on the telegram."

"It was a very lucky chance, as it turned out," Serge agreed. "I cannot imagine what could become of Dimitri. He's a lonely fellow, yes. But he always keeps in touch with me. I had a long talk with him when I was down before, and he seemed in good health and the best of spirits."

[188]

"He didn't say anything about going away, then?" Arden asked.

"Not a word. In fact, he told me how much he liked it down here," the young man went on. "Could we not go over to the boat? I am anxious to look around."

"Yes, we can go over at once," Arden replied. "We shall go by boat, it is quicker."

They all got into the faithful little rowboat, and the young man took the oars. He could row with quite some skill, being an athletic type. His tanned face showed he was no stranger to outdoor life. Arden looked searchingly at him. Just what did he know?

Sim and Terry were curious, too. They were suspicious of everyone now. The fact that this man claimed to be the brother of Dimitri proved nothing.

The boat moved quickly through the quiet evening water.

"We did tell the chief of police about your brother," Arden admitted, "but you have nothing to fear from him. He's studying the case, as he says, and the last time we saw him he was working on his old car."

[189]

The young man smiled. "I am sure Dimitri will be found all right," he said. "And I'm very grateful to you for sending for me. It was indeed fortunate that you found the paper. From your description of it, I think it must have been from my sister Olga. She has been here, she tells me, to see Dimitri."

"Olga! Your sister!" Sim exclaimed unbelievably.

"Yes," Serge Uzlov replied. "There are just the three of us, now. Olga, Dimitri, and I. We are a queer family, I suppose, each one living alone; each one having his own friends and always trying to make ends meet."

"I don't know just what we imagined about you and your sister," Arden said slyly, "but it never occurred to us, I'm sure, that you two were related."

"And you were too well mannered to ask," Serge suggested, smiling.

"Or perhaps we just didn't think about it," Sim said modestly.

The young man pulled vigorously, and the little rowboat plowed through the bay. To their right, as they approached it, lay the *Merry Jane*, looking as they had last seen it.

[190]

When they were close to the houseboat, Tania began to bark: sharp, staccato barks and deep growls in her throat.

"Tania must have heard us coming," Sim suggested.

"I think, Sim," Arden corrected her, "that Tania's barking at something else. She sounds pretty angry to me."

They listened again. Tania was snarling and barking furiously.

"Tania!" called Arden as they came alongside the houseboat. "Tania, we are your friends!"

As she called they all heard the sound of running footsteps on the part of the deck farthest away from them.

"There's somebody here!" Serge cried, and hurried to make fast the rowboat.

Leaving the girls still seated in the skiff, Serge leaped from it to the deck of the *Merry Jane* just in time to see a man jump over the side into the deep marsh grass.

Serge looked after him, but the intruder was

completely hidden by the tall growth.

"He got away!" Serge called to the girls. He was about to follow the runaway man when Arden stopped him.

[191]

"There's no use in following him, you could never catch him in that marsh," she said and Serge was forced to agree with her as he saw how dense were the tall cat-tails and sedge-grass in the swamp.

"What did he look like?" Terry asked.

"I couldn't see his face. He was just going over the side when I approached. But I saw black rubber boots."

"That might have been anyone," Arden said. "Half the natives in Oceanedge wear boots around the marsh."

"Let's go inside," suggested Sim, "and see what he was after."

"Yes," agreed Serge. "That's the only thing to do now."

He led the way and, not pausing for a moment in the outer room, parted the curtains and, as the girls could see, went straight to the shattered cupboard.

"It's gone!" Serge exclaimed. He turned to face the girls, his hands spread wide in a gesture of despair. "It's gone!"

[192]

CHAPTER XXVI

Melissa Again

Sim smiled a little bitterly. "If you mean the snuffbox," she said, "we know it's gone. It has been for some time."

"Then you know about it?" Serge asked.

"We knew Dimitri *had* it, if that's what you mean," Arden went on. "But we don't know where it is *now*."

"Of course," the young man breathed a sigh of relief, "Dimitri has it with him, wherever he is."

"He may have. We can't prove he hasn't," Terry said explaining. "But why should he have broken open his own cupboard?"

"You're right!" exclaimed Serge. "He would never have done that."

"I wonder what that man who jumped overboard was doing," Sim mused. "I don't see that he has touched anything in here."

After a look around, they all agreed that, whatever was his mysterious reason for coming, he apparently had left in a hurry. Several books that had been on the table now lay on the floor, but that was all in evidence.

[193]

"We're just as much in the dark as ever," Terry remarked sadly. "We'll have to start all over again."

"Tell us about Dimitri," Arden said to Serge. "You were, as far as we can tell, the last person who saw him a—" she started, she had almost said "alive." So she began again. "Was he all right when you saw him last? Did he say anything about going away?"

"We sat talking and eating all evening," Serge explained. "Russians are great eaters, you know. But Dimitri didn't mention going away, and I left him in the best of spirits. Then I rowed back, got into my car, and drove on to New York."

"That doesn't help at all," Sim wailed. "It only proves that Dimitri left very suddenly and probably against his will. He would have told you if he'd planned leaving, wouldn't he?" she asked the young man.

"I am sure he had no thought of going," Serge hastened to assure her. "He was too much interested in the portrait he was finishing."

"You mean the one of me?" Arden asked simply.

"Yes; you've seen it?"

[194]

"We looked—after Dimitri—" Arden said sadly. "Do you think he would mind?"

Serge shrugged. "Don't worry about it. We have something more important to think about."

"But the worst of it is," Sim complained, "that we're so helpless."

"We can do nothing here, at any rate," agreed Serge.

"You will come to dinner with us, won't you?" Terry asked. "Mother expects you. There is no place in town where you can get anything worth eating."

"You are sure it won't be too much trouble? I did not expect it, you know," Serge answered, smiling.

"Of course not," Terry insisted. "You have to get your car, anyway."

After another look around, the little party left the houseboat once more. Tania seemed used to these comings and goings, for she took no notice of them as they departed.

The water of the bay was as smooth as glass as they rowed away, the girls looking back wistfully as they left the houseboat behind.

Terry's mother had a delicious meal waiting, and after so much excitement and activity the girls felt very hungry.

[195]

The conversation naturally centered about the disappearance of Dimitri. They discussed it from all angles. It was during a lull in the talk that Terry gave a little scream.

"What's the matter?" Arden asked at once.

"Nothing," Terry answered. "I saw a face at the window, and it made me jump. But it's only Melissa again."

"See what she wants, Terry," Mrs. Landry told her daughter. "Perhaps the poor child is hungry."

Terry left the table and hurried outside. She could see Melissa running down the path in the late summer twilight. She was wearing black rubber hip boots and her old gray sweater, but surely, Terry thought to herself, it couldn't have been Melissa whom they had seen on the houseboat. Terry felt she must stop the girl, at any rate, to find out.

"Melissa! Melissa!" Terry called. "Wait, I have something for you."

Melissa stopped and faced Terry. "What?" she asked abruptly. "What've you got?"

"Something nice," Terry assured her, and then, because she could think of nothing else, she asked the frightened girl, "Do you like chocolate cake?"

[196]

"Sure do," Melissa replied shyly. "Heaps!"

"Come on back, then," Terry coaxed, and Melissa came towards her.

Terry took her into the bright little kitchen and gave her a large glass of milk and a big piece of chocolate cake. Melissa ate greedily, and Terry spoke gently to her to gain her confidence.

"That certainly is a lovely pin," Terry remarked. "Would you mind if I showed it to my mother? She's in the other room, but I'll bring it right back."

"I guess so," Melissa agreed reluctantly, and taking the stick pin from her collar she handed the ornament to Terry. Her rather pale blue eyes were questioning her benefactor, and she looked not at all sure that she liked the situation.

Terry took the pin and pushed in the swinging door that led to the dining room.

"Come, finish your dinner," Mrs. Landry said. "What happened to Melissa?"

"She's out in the kitchen," Terry replied and put a warning finger to her lips. "Don't let her hear you. I just wanted to show this to Mr. Uzlov." She held the pin out to Serge. "Isn't this your brother's?"

Serge took it and examined it closely.

"I gave it to Dimitri years ago," he said. "He always liked it. I don't believe he would have parted with it willingly."

[197]

"We didn't think so, either," Arden remarked, taking what small satisfaction there was in the fact.

"Go back to her, Terry," Mrs. Landry directed, "and talk to her a bit. See if she will tell you anything. But don't frighten her," she cautioned, and then to Serge she explained, "Melissa is like some woodland creature. She runs at the first hint of danger. Poor child! The girls have done all they can to help her, but she doesn't trust anyone."

Terry, taking the pin, they all having decided it

would excite Melissa if they kept it, returned to the kitchen.

Ida, the maid, was rattling pans and knives in the sink, but Melissa was gone.

"Where's Melissa?" Terry asked.

"She went," Ida answered briefly.

"Why? Did you say anything to frighten her?" Terry wanted to know.

"Never said a word," Ida insisted. "She et the cake and got up and walked out."

Terry clenched her fists. Melissa gone again, and just when they thought they would learn something. If the girl really wanted to hide, they could never find her. There was only one thing to do. Follow her at once before she got too far away.

"I'll be back in a minute," Terry flung over her shoulder, and still holding the pin clutched in one hand she slipped out the back door after the elusive Melissa Clayton.

[198]

[199]

CHAPTER XXVII

Terry's Tactics

Melissa was just about to push off in her old rowboat when Terry, without asking permission, hopped in and sat smiling at the startled girl.

"You're in a great hurry, Melissa," Terry said in an effort to be friendly. "You forgot your pin."

Without saying a word Melissa held out her hand. But Terry, holding up the piece of jewelry, teased Melissa.

"I'll give it to you when you tell me where you really got it," Terry said.

"I found it, just like I told you," Melissa insisted.

"Come, now, Melissa, that's hard to believe. But don't let me stop you from having your sail. I'd be glad to have someone row me for a change. I'm always giving other people a ride."

"Well, I ought to be gettin' home. Pa will wonder about me," Melissa said.

"Don't forget that piece of cake I just gave you. And you left before I got back to you. Why? Is anything worrying you?"

"No, I just thought I'd better go," Melissa murmured sulkily. "Thanks for the cake."

"That's all right, I'd give you something a lot better than that if you could help me," Terry said. Perhaps if Melissa thought she could be of some definite use she would tell where she really got the pin.

"What? What would you give me?" Melissa asked craftily.

[200]

"What would you like—jewelry?" Terry questioned with a quiet sort of emphasis on the last word.

"Jewelry?" Melissa's eyes lit up greedily. "I got some jewelry now that'd be better than any you could give me. No, you better not come along. I got to be goin' home."

"How could you have?" Terry asked, deliberately trying to antagonize the girl. "The only jewelry you ever got was that old bracelet Sim gave you weeks ago and that your father made you give back."

"It is not," Melissa insisted. "I've got—No, I won't tell you; you're just jealous."

"Come on, Melissa, be a sport. You tell me about the secret you know and I'll tell you something I know about you. Something fine. You'll love it. What do you say, is it a bargain?"

[201]

Terry waited. It would never do to rush things. If Melissa got stubborn it would be hopeless, and Terry was almost positive, now, that the queer girl was in possession of something.

Melissa looked at her uninvited guest in the boat distrustfully. There was no reason for not trusting her. The three girls had been very kind to her this summer and had tried to give her the bracelet. Still, she hesitated. Her father was also to be reckoned with. What would be his attitude? Oh, well, Melissa mentally shrugged.

"I did take the pin, but no one was there, and I knew the man wouldn't care," Melissa said, watching Terry closely.

"When, Melissa? When did you take it?" Terry asked, hoping that the girl could throw some light on Dimitri's disappearance.

"One day when the man was out with his dog, painting," Melissa replied. "I sneaked in just to have a look around. Some of the village people said he might be a spy, so I went over to see what a spy was. What is a spy, anyway?" Melissa asked, forgetting for the minute that she had just told Terry that the pin had not been found after all.

"Never mind that. Dimitri's not a spy. That's foolish. Tell me the secret you know." Terry was becoming impatient.

[202]

Melissa hedged. This girl was too wise. Melissa's father might punish her severely, send her away, even, where she'd have to dress up and wear shoes in hot weather and do other uncomfortable things.

"You won't tell my father?" Melissa begged Terry.

"Not if you don't want me to," Terry replied.

"Well," Melissa began, "over at my house I've got the prettiest box!"

Terry jumped. The snuffbox! But she mustn't seem too surprised.

"You have? Tell me about it. I won't tell your father," Terry said, smiling confidentially.

"I got it on the houseboat. It was in a little closet on the wall and I broke the door open to see it," Melissa confessed, now trusting Terry completely.

"But how did you know it was there?" asked Terry.

"The pretty lady told me about it. She gave me a dollar to bring it to her, but after I found it, I liked it so much I couldn't bear to give it up," Melissa explained.

"But don't you know, Melissa, that you shouldn't take things that belong to other people?" Terry said gently.

[203]

"This was only a yellow box, and the lady said it was hers, anyway."

"It wasn't, Melissa. It was Dimitri's, and the lady had no right to it. Where is it now?"

"I've got it safe," the girl said briefly.

"Melissa," began Terry in a tone that commanded attention, "that was a very wrong and dangerous thing to do, to take that box. I want you to come back with me, while I explain to my friends and the Russian man's brother just what happened. Then I want you to go over to your house with us and give back the box."

"Oh, no," pleaded Melissa. "I won't do it. My father would do something awful to me if I did."

"You've got to. If you don't," threatened Terry, "you'll probably be arrested, and then what will become of you?"

Melissa's eyes widened with fright. "Arrested?" she echoed dully.

Terry nodded her head.

"You better come back with me," she said quietly. Slowly Melissa began to turn the boat. She was cornered, and she knew it. Terry spoke quietly as they rowed back to the cottage, explaining to the worried girl that she and her friends would see that no harm came to her. So well did she plead that by the time they docked the boat, Melissa had grown confident, and even eager to do Terry's bidding.

[204]

[205]

CHAPTER XXVIII

Driven Away

A great deal of tact was necessary to keep Melissa in a helpful frame of mind. One careless word, and Terry knew Melissa would run. So, hoping her chums would understand, she walked back to the house, talking cheerfully to the girl as they went.

"Melissa is going to help us find the snuffbox," Terry announced to the astonished group that awaited them on the porch. "She knows where it is, and she's going to take us over to her house for it."

Frantic looks and powerful concentration seemed to do the trick, for Arden fell in with Terry's plan.

"That's fine, Melissa," Arden complimented her. "Let's start at once, before it gets too dark. Terry, you and Melissa go together, and the rest of us will follow in our boat."

"Give her back the pin, at least for a time," suggested Arden. "It will make her trust us more."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Terry. "I will."

"Yes, do," said Serge in a low voice.

Terry slipped the pin back to Melissa, and she and the girl started for the boats. [206]

"All right, Mother?" Terry asked. "Do you want to come too?"

"No," replied Mrs. Landry. "I might be of some use here. Come back as quickly as you can, and good luck to you."

They needed no urging, and with Melissa leading and the others following, they crossed the peaceful bay and landed close to the pitiful shack that Melissa called "home."

"It's in my room," the girl told them, proud in her simple way to be the center of so much excitement.

"You show us," Arden urged.

Melissa entered the solitary house, the door of which swung loosely on its hinges. The front room, furnished with an unpainted wooden table and three rickety chairs, was dreary and uninviting. The girl, clumping along in the boots which were much too large for her, entered a small room to one side. It was little bigger than a large closet with a white-painted bed and an old bureau topped by a cracked looking glass.

After much shaking and pulling, Melissa succeeded in opening the top drawer. She rummaged under some old clothes and thrust her hands far back in the bureau. [207]

Suddenly, with an unbelieving look on her face, she turned to the little group crowded in the narrow doorway.

"It's gone!" she exclaimed. "The box, the pretty yellow one that I put there myself, is gone!"

Was it a trick that Melissa had played on them? Or had Terry argued so successfully that the girl had actually come to believe she really did possess the box?

"Are you sure you had it?" Arden asked gently. "When did you see it last?"

"This morning I took it out to look at it," Melissa replied slowly.

"What did it look like?" Terry asked, not quite believing that Melissa ever had it now.

"It had a little bird on and the prettiest shiny stones all around the edge," Melissa answered woefully. "Oh, I did like it so much! It was so pretty!"

The girls fell silent. They had met another stone wall. They had neither Dimitri nor the snuffbox. They were as much in the dark as ever.

"But, Melissa," Sim began, "what could have happened to it?"

"I don't know," Melissa replied slowly.

They looked curiously at the bare little room. Poor child, it was not surprising that she loved bright shiny things so much. In a place such as this was, anyone would crave relief from its drabness.

[208]

Arden turned to go, and the others were about to follow when they were halted by the sound of heavy footsteps hastening up the wooden steps that led into the house.

The three girls drew together. Serge stepped forward as though to protect them.

"It's Pa," Melissa said, looking fearfully at them.

"What's going on in here?" an angry voice was heard before they saw the owner of it.

Melissa shrank back to the wall between the bed and bureau.

"What are you people doing here? Who let you in here?" It was George Clayton, wildly angry at this invasion of his property.

"We came by ourselves," Terry said, boldly anxious to keep her pledge with Melissa.

"You did! Well, I advise you to go by yourselves before I run you off!" Clayton bellowed, reaching for a shotgun on the wall.

"Now, see here, Clayton," Serge began, standing fearlessly before the angry man. "Be careful how you handle that gun. You don't want to do anything you might be sorry for later."

"I know what I'm doing," Melissa's father insisted. "You people get out of here! This is my property. You've got to get a warrant before you can come snooping around my place!"

[209]

"All right, we'll go," Serge said in a low voice. "But you watch your step. I've heard you're not very popular in these parts."

Clayton made an angry motion as though to strike Serge, but with an effort controlled himself and, spluttering and fuming, literally drove them from the shack.

They all piled into the little rowboat and made their way slowly back across the bay, disappointed and defeated, hardly knowing what to say—what to believe.

Serge decided to go at once back to New York.

"Dimitri might have gone to my place. I will get in touch with you tomorrow and let you know," he said and, not going into the house again, he thanked Mrs. Landry, who was anxiously waiting at the small dock and, climbing in his car, drove quickly out of sight.

For a little while there was silence among them. Even Sim, who often could find humor in matters where others could not, had nothing to say. Mrs.

Landry looked at the faces of the girls, and, guessing their thoughts, said:

"Never mind, my dears. It isn't your fault."

[210]

"But I did so hope something would come of this," said Terry. "After getting Melissa to admit she had the box, then not to find it!"

"Do you really think she had it?" asked Arden.

"That's hard to answer," Terry replied. "I don't see why she would want to deceive us. She described the cupboard, told how she slipped aboard the houseboat while Dimitri was out in the marsh, painting, and we all know she's crazy about such objects as that bright and beautiful snuffbox."

"And to think it may be gone forever," sighed Sim.

"We're not going to let it be lost forever!" suddenly declared Arden.

"What are you going to do about it?" challenged Terry.

"I'm going to see to it that a thorough search is made of that shack, in spite of George Clayton!" Arden's head went up bravely, and there was a determined look in her eyes.

"How?" questioned Terry.

"With the help of the police or that detective woman, Emma Tash!"

"I think it is time you got the authorities more actively interested, my dears," said Mrs. Landry, who had heard, with some alarm, the actions of the crabber in the matter of the shotgun. "That man must be curbed. He is standing in the way of good to his daughter. If we could get in touch with Emma Tash she might bring some man with her who would proceed in spite of Clayton and his gun. This father of Melissa's may be just 'bluffing,' as the boys say."

[211]

"Didn't Miss Tash leave you her address?" asked Arden.

"Yes," Mrs. Landry answered, "she did. But it may take a few days to get in communication with her and get her down here. Instead of her, I would suggest our local chief."

"Rufus Reilly?" asked Sim. "Oh, my goodness, he and his duck that can't fly on one leg!"

"Besides," added Terry, "he claims to have been working on the case, but all he does is to tinker with that old car."

"Still," decided Arden, "I think we should go to him again. It is up to him to do something. If we bring another officer here, he would first go to Mr. Reilly. I believe that is police law. So let's go see our proverb-splitting chief and tell him what happened today. We can say we feel sure the stolen snuffbox is in the shack, and he can get a search warrant if he needs to."

"I am coming around to your way of thinking, Arden," admitted Sim. "Perhaps, when the chief hears about Clayton's gun, it will stir him up to something like fighting rage, and we'll get some

[212]

action.”

“Well, then, let’s,” agreed Terry. “It’s too late now, but we’ll get the chief to go to the shack the first thing in the morning.”

However, when morning came, after an anxious night in which no news came of the missing artist, Mrs. Landry decided it might be well to wait for another day.

“Dimitri’s brother may learn something in New York,” she said, “and that may make it needless to go and beard this Clayton boor in his shack.”

“Yes, I suppose waiting another day will do no harm,” Arden agreed. “But I don’t believe Dimitri is in New York or has his box. He would not be where he is, a free agent, without sending some word to his brother Serge, at least, about himself. No, Dimitri is where he can’t get word to his friends.”

“And where do you think that place is?” asked Sim.

Arden shrugged her shoulders in a hopeless negative.

Time hanging heavy on their hands, the girls paid another visit to the houseboat but did not go on board. There was no sign of life about the *Merry Jane* save for Tania. She was shut up in what amounted to a kennel on the outside narrow deck, where the girls had put her on their last visit. There was plenty of food and water.

[213]

Poor Tania whined pitifully when she found that her friends were not coming to see her and departed without taking her with them.

“She misses Dimitri terribly,” said Arden.

“Yes,” agreed Sim.

The day passed and no word came from Serge. Later it developed that he was so frantically going from one to another of the friends of his brother in New York, a fruitless search, that he forgot all about his promise to communicate with the girls.

“Well, this settles it!” declared Arden as they were at breakfast the second day after the visit of Serge. The morning mail had come but brought no news. “I’m going to get the chief and visit Melissa and her father again.”

“Do you mean you’re going with him?” asked Terry.

“Yes. I think we should all go, I mean we three, don’t you, Mrs. Landry?”

“Well, if there’s danger—but then I hardly believe there will be if you have the chief with you. Yes, go, by all means.”

[214]

“This is going to be a real expedition!” declared Terry as she drove her chums over to the village, parked their car near the chief’s garage, and walked to where they found the officer still tinkering with his old auto.

“Good-morning, girls,” he greeted them, wiping a smudge of oil off his face. “You see I’m busy as

usual, time and tide in a long race, you know," and the gold tooth grinned at them cheerfully.

"Mr. Reilly, can you come with us at once?" asked Arden in businesslike tones. "There may be an arrest to make."

"An arrest?" The chief showed new interest.

"Yes. Over at the Clayton shack. It's quite a story."

The chief, when he heard it, could not but admit it was. There was a new air about him now. He seemed much more in earnest than at any time since Dimitri Uzlov had been missing at Marshlands.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, girls," the chief said. "Just as soon as I can wash up and pin my badge on. Then we'll get in my motorboat and ride over to see this Mr. Clayton."

"How would it be," suggested Terry, "if you took us back to our dock in your boat and then we picked up our rowboat? You could tow us in that to the Clayton shack."

[215]

"Yes, I could do that," the chief agreed. "It's a little ways from here to where my motorboat is docked, and my car isn't running yet, but a walk won't hurt none of us."

"We can all go to your dock in our car," Terry said.

"Sure enough. Didn't think of that. Well, we'll go see this Clayton. So he was going for his gun, was he? I'll see about that! Don't give up the ship and keep your powder dry. Be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail." He was as good as his word, soon coming out of his garage office with a clean face and a badge on his coat. It did not take long to drive to the dock where the chief kept his motorboat tied. The girls got in and were soon chugging on their way to "Buckingham Palace." Mrs. Landry was rather surprised to see them back so soon, but agreed, after an explanation had been made, that it would be wise to take two boats.

"You never can tell what may happen," she said.

"True enough, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow," chuckled the chief. "My boat isn't very good to look at, and we might get stalled. In which case a rowboat would be as handy as a pocket on the end of a dog's tail."

His craft, if not very presentable, had speed, and they went along rapidly. As they passed close to the *Merry Jane*, Tania either saw, heard, or scented them, for she began to bark in a friendly way.

[216]

"Oh, that poor dog!" exclaimed Arden. "Let's take her with us!"

"We could," agreed Sim.

"It might be a good thing," said Terry. "She's a sort of hound, you know."

"And you think maybe she can smell out where Melissa has hid the snuffbox!" chuckled the chief. "But a dog is always a good thing to have on a case like this. Two strings to your rubber

boot, you know. We'll get her."

Tania was frantic with joy to be among her friends again and curled up on the stern seat with Arden as the chief again started his boat across the bay.

They were not long in coming in sight of the Clayton shack. The chief wasted no time in preliminaries but steered at once for the ramshackle old dock where he made his craft fast. Then he assisted the girls to tie theirs, and they got out, Tania following them and sniffing with her pointed nose in the direction of the gloomy house.

"Perhaps we had better be a bit cautious," suggested Terry somewhat timidly. "This man may rush out at us."

[217]

"What puzzles me," said the chief, "is why he hasn't hailed us before this. Accordin' to what you told me, he ordered you off before, without you havin' a chance to set foot on his land."

"Yes, he did," said Terry. "It is rather strange no one appears."

The shack showed no sign of life in or about it.

"I'll give him a hail," suggested the chief. And he roared out: "Clayton, where are you? Here's company! Come out, but if you bring a gun it won't be healthy for you!"

There was no answer to this challenge.

Tania barked. Still all was silent about the place.

"I'm going in," the chief suddenly decided. "You girls wait for me here." He looked to make sure that his badge of office was conspicuous and pushed open the door. It was not locked.

The girls were a little nervous as the chief disappeared inside. But still there was no sound. The silence was almost terrifying. The chief came out in a few minutes to say:

"I can't seem to find anybody."

"I think you had better look again and go in every room," said Arden. Her voice was firm. "There must be someone."

"All right, I'll take another look," assented the chief. "No trouble to show goods and some pitchers go to the well too often."

[218]

Again he disappeared inside the place.

Again portentous silence held them all in its grip.

[219]

CHAPTER XXIX

The Barking of Tania

Chief Reilly came out of the poor little house, a veritable shack it was, shaking his head.

"I suppose," remarked Sim in an aside to Arden, "he is going to say 'it's a long road without a cat in the attic,' or something equally brilliant."

"He might," remarked Terry, "propose that the race is not always to the swift but there are none so blind as those who won't eat."

"Meaning what?" asked Arden.

"That we've drawn a blank," said Sim.

She was right. For the first impression, gathered on arrival at the home of the Claytons, that no one was there, was borne out as the chief emerged a second time from an inspection of the premises.

"Can't find anybody," he announced with a flourish of his big red hands.

"You mean there's nobody home?" asked Terry.

"That's about it," said Mr. Reilly. "Nobody home. You can't get anything out of an empty bag except dust, you know."

"And I suppose there was plenty of dust?" suggested Sim.

[220]

"Well, not so much as you'd think for," said the officer and garage owner. "Melissa must have humped herself, for the old shack was pretty clean. Case of pot calling the kettle black, you know."

"Poor kid! I guess she had her own troubles," remarked Arden. "I wonder where her father took her and why?"

"Maybe we'll know that when we find Dimitri," suggested Terry.

"If we ever do," voiced Sim.

"Oh, don't be Mrs. Gloom!" exclaimed Arden. "Of course we'll find him."

"And find out why he painted such a lovely picture of you," said Terry.

"Silly!" murmured Arden as she blushed beneath her tan. But it was obvious that she was as curious as were her chums about the mysterious portrait.

"Well, I guess we've found out all we can here, which is about less than nothing with a hole in the middle," said the chief, as he came back from a walk about the place. "None of the Claytons are here. Not that there's many in this branch of the family—jest Melissa and her dad. But they're gone."

Suddenly Arden had a thought. She expressed it to Sim and Terry while the chief was looking into a rain-water barrel, as if he might find the missing Dimitri there. Arden said:

[221]

"I think we ought to tell him about the policewoman."

"Emma Tash," murmured Sim.

"Yes," said Terry. "I think we had."

"Mr. Reilly," began Arden, after receiving this confirmation, "we have something to tell you."

"You ain't got that Russian stranger hid away with that there gold snuffbox, have you?" chuckled the chief. "Like a hen on a wet griddle, you know."

"Oh, he'll be the death of me," sighed Sim.

"It's about Melissa," said Arden, and then, much to the astonishment of the chief, the girls told him about the visit of the detective woman and the happier prospects for the unfortunate girl.

"I always knowed there was something more than met the eye in them Claytons," said the chief. "Hum! Melissa with a rich aunt that wants to send her to school and make her into a lady. Well, I hope she does. Melissa is a good girl in spite of being a bit queer. She's the champion swimmer around here."

"Maybe she might give me points," said Sim.

"Oh, yes, she's a natural swimmer," went on the chief, taking no notice of this aside. "And a good girl. Loves bright things—birds and flowers. More than once I've seen her sitting on a fence where somebody had a garden full of red poppies, looking at 'em to beat the band. Her old man, though—there's a case! All he cares about are crabs, lobsters, and fish."

[222]

"Did you ever hear," asked Arden, thinking to confirm what Emma Tash had said, "that Melissa's mother came of a good family?"

"It wouldn't have to be very good to beat the Clayton end of it," said Mr. Reilly. "Yes, Mrs. Clayton was a different breed. Give a dog a bad name and throw him a bone," he chuckled. "Yes, Melissa's mother made a bad match of it. I hope this here detective woman can do something for the poor kid."

"Maybe she has," said Terry suddenly.

"What do you mean?" asked Sim.

"Maybe Emma Tash has been here without us knowing it and has taken Melissa away," explained Terry. "That detective woman was smart. She may have come here, met George Clayton and Melissa, and have prevailed on him to let her take the girl. That would account for their being gone now."

For a moment they were inclined to accept this theory. Then Arden, as usual putting her finger on the critical point, said:

"It wouldn't account, though, for the barking of Tania."

[223]

For the first time they all realized that the dog was barking with an unusual note in the tone and that she kept it up almost continuously. Up to this moment they had been so engrossed with approaching the shack without inciting George Clayton to the point of desperate resistance that they had not paid much attention to Tania.

Now they noticed that the dog was running about the shack in a most excited manner, scarcely ceasing her growls and barks. And, now that their attention was fixed on her, they saw that she stopped at a certain cellar window and barked there with unusual vigor.

"The barking of Tania," murmured Sim. "No, the taking away of Melissa by the detective woman, with her father's consent, and his desertion of his home, would not account for the barking of Tania. Arden, I think we are going to make a discovery—a big discovery."

"What do you mean?" faltered Terry. "Do you think Dimitri—?" She could not finish. She dared not finish. But the others knew what she had in mind.

"Now you speak of it," said the chief, "that dog is making quite a row. Barking dogs, you know, catch no cats. But we'll see what's up."

"You think, don't you, Sim," said Arden, "that there is something in the cellar?"

"I can't help but think that, from the way Tania acts. Look at her now, barking into the window."

It was as Sim said. The dog was trying almost to thrust her pointed muzzle into the glass.

"Maybe Clayton and Melissa are hiding there," said Terry. "You didn't go down cellar, did you, Mr. Reilly?"

"No, I didn't. Didn't see any use. But if you think we'd better, why, I got a flashlight in my boat."

"I think we had better," said Arden.

"Then we will. Nothing like eating your cake and having your bread," the chief declared. "Wait a minute."

He tried to run down to his motorboat but made a bad job of that, for he only waddled. However, he soon came back with the flashlight. Meanwhile Tania had not ceased her barking. She no longer ran frantically about the shack. She remained at the one window and barked continuously.

"Now, girls," said the chief as he again started into the house, "there's no use of you running into any danger. I don't say there *is* danger but if it's *there* I ain't going to let you run your pretty necks into no noose. I'm paid for this work and I'll do it. Nobody can ever say Rufus Reilly let anybody else pull his pancakes out of the ice box. I'll go down in that cellar alone."

"But if Clayton is there," said Arden, "and starts to fight you—"

"I've got a gun," said the chief, showing an automatic. "I can fight as good as the next one if I have to, but I don't think I'll have to. If I do, well, you're outside here to go git help. You know what I mean." A gold-toothed smile.

"Yes," said Terry. "If we hear shooting, or any calls for help from the cellar, we'll take your motorboat and go get assistance. I can run a boat."

"That's the idea," said the chief. "You go right back to town and get Henry Doremus and Ike Tantker. They're deputy constables, and you can generally find 'em around my garage. If they ain't there, Ted Rollaby, my mechanic, will tell you what to do. Now I'm goin' in."

There was an outside slanting door leading down

[224]

[225]

into the cellar. The chief pulled this up, hooked it into place, and then, with his flashlight in one hand and his automatic in the other, started down the half-rotten wooden steps.

He had no sooner started down than Tania, deserting her barking post at the window, rushed past him and was into the dark musty cellar ahead of him.

[226]

"Oh," murmured Arden, "I'm glad the dog went down."

"So am I," said Sim. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to the funny old chief, even if he does drive me crazy with his proverbs."

"What do you think he'll find?" asked Terry.

Before either of her chums could hazard a guess they all heard, above the frantic barking of Tania, the chief's voice shouting:

"I've got him! I've found him! Here he is, tied up like a bag of potatoes in the cellar. I've found Mr. Uzlov!"

[227]

CHAPTER XXX

All Is Well

Gazing with fear-widened eyes at one another, the three girls waited for what might happen next.

The chief had found the man missing from Marshlands; but in what condition? The worst might have happened, for it was now obvious that Dimitri had been the prisoner of George Clayton ever since the mysterious disappearance from the *Merry Jane*.

"Oh," murmured Arden, "if he is——"

She could not finish.

"I—I feel sort of funny," said Terry.

"Girl, if you pass out on us now I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!" threatened Sim.

"Oh, I'm all right—I guess," Terry said. "But——"

She was interrupted by the voice of Chief Reilly coming, muffled, from the cellar.

"Guess maybe you girls had better come down here," he called. "I might need your testimony for evidence."

"Oh!" almost shouted Arden. "Is he——"

[228]

"Mr. Uzlov is all right. He's alive, though I can't say he's very well," went on the chief. "He's bound and gagged and all knocked out, but I can't see anything very wrong. There's so many ropes on him I'll need help in getting them off quick. But I want you to see him so you can testify against this rat of a Clayton. Nasty piece of business, if you ask me."

The girls could hear Tania now joyously whimpering. The dog no longer barked fiercely. It was evident she was with her beloved master whom she found to be alive, at least.

Thus reassured, the three descended the outside cellar steps. The chief held his torch for them to see, and by its light they noted that he had already started on the work of rescue. A cloth that had been bound around the Russian's mouth had been taken off. But he was still trussed up.

With a slash of his knife, while Arden held the light, the chief released the roped hands. And as Dimitri rubbed his numbed lips he said weakly:

"So you've come at last."

"Oh, if we had only guessed this before!" exclaimed Arden.

"Still, you are in good time. I am not harmed," said Dimitri. Then he could talk no longer, for Tania was frantically licking his face.

[229]

With the help of the girls, one of whom held the light while the chief and the others loosed the binding strands, Dimitri Uzlov was soon set free. He was a little weak in his legs, but after stamping about managed to regain the use of them and was able to leave the cellar.

He had been found in a sort of closet in one corner, small and dark, with only the cracks around the sealed window for ventilation.

"I seen that shut closet door as soon as I got down here," said the chief as they all went into the upper sunlight. "I'd 'a' knowed somebody was in that closet even if the dog hadn't rushed for it like—well, like a mouse goin' for cheese in a trap," he finished.

"It is good to be out again," said Dimitri as he paused at the top of the steps and took a long deep breath. "I have been in the dark too long."

"But what happened?"

"How did he get you?"

"Did he harm you?"

"Where is he now, and Melissa?"

The girls' questions came trippingly.

"I think it is best if I go back to my houseboat and there tell you the story," said the artist. "Perhaps there is even left some tea—and I should dearly love a cup of tea. This Clayton jailer gave me nothing but coffee. I am so sick of it!"

[230]

"There is tea left," said Arden.

"That is good. I suppose," and his voice faltered, "that my precious box is not left. They must have taken that."

"I'm afraid they did," said Arden.

"Well, it is fate! I am glad at least to be alive," and Dimitri shrugged his shoulders with resignation.

"You all better get in my boat and leave yours

here until later," said the chief when it was found that Dimitri, after a long drink of water, was able to walk with more ease. "We'll make better time that way. More haste the quicker you get over it."

Sim shook her fist at him behind his back.

They all piled into the motorboat, Tania never leaving her master's side, and in a short time they were at the *Merry Jane*. After it was seen that Dimitri, though obviously suffering from neglect, was not seriously harmed, it came to Arden's mind that she and her chums must make a confession.

They had looked at the forbidden picture. It was very likely that Dimitri's trained vision would detect that the cloth had been removed and put back. Of course, he might think Clayton had done it, but it was better to tell. So Arden said:

[231]

"We discovered your secret."

"My secret?" He appeared not to understand.

"That picture," she added. "We looked at it."

The whiteness of Dimitri's face, blanched by many days of confinement in a dark cellar, was changed to a deep red as he murmured:

"I hope you do not think me too presumptuous."

"It is lovely!" declared Sim.

"A beautiful picture," said Terry.

"And you—have you nothing to say in forgiveness?" He was looking straight at Arden.

"Oh, I think it is wonderful," she said. "There is no need of pardon. But it is too beautiful! I never —"

"It is not half good enough!" he interrupted. "It was only from memory. Perhaps you will do me the honor to sit for me that I may properly complete it."

"If Daddy and Mother consent," she said.

"As if they wouldn't!" said Sim.

They were at the houseboat now. It seemed silent and deserted, but the chief said:

"Might as well take precautions. Nobody ever yet died of a broken neck by drinking milk. I'll go aboard first."

[232]

"And if he utters another of his famous sayings I'll choke him with my handkerchief!" hissed Sim.

The silence of Tania as they approached close to the *Merry Jane* was fairly conclusive evidence that no strangers were aboard. They walked confidently up the little gangplank and, allowing Dimitri to take the lead, followed him into the living room.

He went through the curtains to the broken cupboard, and as they all stood grouped behind him they saw him, after a moment of hesitation, put his hand in and take out an object. Then they heard his delighted cry:

"Here it is! My box! And not harmed in the least. Wait!"

Quickly he pressed the spring, took out the key, and wound up the mechanism. Suddenly the jeweled bird began to sing. A fairy hymn of victory.

"But how did it get here?" asked Arden.

"The mystery is solved—but how?" questioned Terry.

"This has got my goat," admitted the chief. "There's no fool like a spring chicken," he added, showing his gold tooth in a wide grin.

"I think this may explain matters," remarked Dimitri as he again put his hand into the shattered cupboard and brought out several sheets of paper. He glanced over them and said: "It is a confession from this George Clayton—he who caught me and held me prisoner. It perhaps tells everything, my friends."

[233]

It did. George Clayton, crabber, lobsterman, and fisher, proved to be more of a scholar than anyone had ever suspected. He wrote a good hand, though some of the words were rather shaky.

"First of all," the written sheets revealed, *"I want to let the girls, who were kind to my Melissa, know that she is in good hands. Melissa had nothing to do with me catching Mr. Uzlov. After I got him she wanted me to let him go, but I wouldn't. Melissa is a good girl. I'm going to let her aunt have her and bring her up right. A woman named Emma Tash came to my place the other day, though I told her to get out, but she didn't."*

"Emma Tash just wouldn't do that a second time," said Terry, recalling the crabbing party.

"So I had a talk with her," Dimitri read on from the letter, *"and I decided it wasn't right to Melissa to keep her here with me. Not that I'm going to be here any more. I'm leaving. But before I left I told this Emma Tash she could take Melissa and bring her up the way her aunt wants her brought up. So that woman took her off."*

[234]

"Then the poor child will have something in life after all," murmured Arden. "I'm so glad!"

"She may even become a champion swimmer," suggested Sim.

"Oh, you and your swimming," laughed Terry. "Let's find out about the snuffbox."

"That's right here," said Mr. Uzlov. He read on:

"Melissa has always been different from other girls. Mrs. Landry and the three young ladies know that. One day Melissa came home to me with this gold box that I'm leaving back in your cupboard. She told me she had broken open your cupboard and taken it from your houseboat, Mr. Uzlov. Melissa always loved bright things. Well, I was struck all of a heap when I saw she had it. I didn't know what to do. In a way it was stealing, but not for Melissa. She didn't mean to steal it. She just couldn't help taking it once she saw it. I love my daughter. Nobody shall ever

say I don't. Anyhow, here's your gold box back and I'm going to clear out and Melissa has gone with that good detective woman. That's all. From George Clayton."

There was a little silence following the reading of the strange letter.

[235]

"But it isn't all," said Arden, looking at Dimitri. "How did he get you and hold you a prisoner?"

"I suppose that is my part to explain," said Dimitri. "Well, it shall not take me long. First we shall begin with Olga."

"Who is she?" burst out Sim impulsively.

"She is my talented but spendthrift sister," said Dimitri with a little embarrassed laugh. "She always claimed to have an interest, and right, in the snuffbox, which once belonged to the late lamented Czar, but that was not so. I mean she had no interest in it. That box was mine alone. That is what we often quarreled about. My brother Serge, with whom you say you got in touch, can bear me out in this. I sent for him when Olga became—well, rather troublesome," he said with a smile.

"So," he resumed, "one day I came back here, after having been out in the marsh sketching, to find my cupboard broken open and my box gone. I was thunderstruck. Of course I suspected my sister. But before I had time to do anything, this Clayton man came on board with the box. He said his daughter had taken my treasure, as she often did with bright things, not knowing their value, and he had come to restore it. He asked me not to have her arrested or to prosecute her as he would give me the box back.

"But there I made a mistake." Again Dimitri shrugged his expressive shoulders. "I was naturally resentful at being robbed, even by poor Melissa, who, I understand, is not wholly responsible. So I flared up and said the guilty must be punished; that the law must take its course. Yes, we Russians are too temperamental—I admit that. I said I would see that no real harm came to the girl but that she must be sent away and taught to do the right."

[236]

"He didn't like that, not for a cent, and it takes ten shillings to make a pound," interpolated Mr. Reilly.

"You are right," agreed Dimitri, evidently not bored by this cross quotation. "At once Mr. Clayton, what you call, flared up. Before I could avoid him, he had attacked me. He is a big man. He had me at a disadvantage, and before I could do anything he had put part of a fish net over my head, for all the world like the old Roman gladiators." He laughed a little, for he had brewed some tea in his samovar, and the sipping of it appeared to revive him more than anything else. "So he had me helpless."

"But Tania," interrupted Sim. "Where was she?"

[237]

"He must have suddenly planned his attack," resumed Dimitri, "for when he carried me away, half unconscious as I was, I dimly saw Tania tied and lying on the deck. He must, a little while before, have given her some drugged meat. He didn't take time to make friends with her and

entice her away.”

“But just what did Clayton do to you?” asked Terry.

“He threatened after the net was over me, to take me away and keep me away if I did not promise to let Melissa go unharmed. I would not promise. I felt it was for the girl’s own good that I be instrumental in sending her to some institution. I was stubborn. He grew very angry. I tried to hit him. He hit me. It all went black before my eyes, and when I awoke, I was bound and my mouth was tied, in the place where you found me.”

“Oh, how terrible,” said Arden.

“Such a brute!” declared Terry.

“You should have shouted for help,” argued Sim.

“I tried to, dear young lady, but one cannot shout with one’s mouth bundled up like a muff. So I remained a prisoner. At times the man came down to me and opened my mouth that I might eat, but he stood over me with a gun so I dared not shout. But his place is so isolated that it would have done no good if I had. Each time he said he would let me go if I would promise. But I would not promise. I assure you we Russians are very stubborn.” Even now he seemed proud of it, and the girls rather liked him for it.

[238]

“You couldn’t trick him out of it?” asked Mr. Reilly.

“Trick?” Dimitri questioned.

“I mean promise and then get out and later do as you pleased.”

“The Uzlovs never do that, sir! I beg of you! Yes!”

“Oh, well, all right. You can’t go two ways at the same time,” said the chief, grinning. “What else happened?”

“Nothing. I stayed in the cellar closet. Clayton maintained me bound and gagged as you saw. Once he came to me to say he had gone back to my boat to restore my beautiful box. But, as he was about to put it in the broken cupboard, he was surprised by you girls and my brother Serge coming on board. So Clayton leaped over the rail in great haste. I suppose you did not then see him or my box?”

“We heard a noise,” said Terry, “and saw a man jump off your boat, but we didn’t even guess who was leaving the *Merry Jane* in such a rush. And to think at that time the snuffbox was on the point of being given back. If we only had known!”

[239]

“Perhaps it is as well,” said Dimitri with rather a wan smile. “If the box had been put back then, and my sister Olga, she of the so spendthrift habits, had paid another visit, she might have then taken it. And if she knew this Clayton had it, without doubt she would have so raged at him that she would have secured it. So it is all well as it is. Also Mr. Clayton told me something else. It seems my beautiful but desperate sister tried to bribe poor Melissa, with auto rides and some money and trinkets, to get the box for her. But

that plot did not quite come off. It may have been Olga's talk, speaking of my box in the cupboard, that caused Melissa to take it for herself."

"And she got your tie pin, also," said Arden.

"Oh, yes, but I have that back." He showed it to them. "Mr. Clayton gave it to me. He said his daughter had picked it up off the floor in my paint room. It is very possible. Poor Melissa!"

"But how did Clayton and his daughter come to go away and leave you tied in the cellar?" asked the chief. "If it hadn't been for the way your dog barked, we might never have found you."

[240]

"Oh, yes. That I can explain. Good Tania!" He pulled her silky ears. "Only last night," Dimitri went on, "Mr. Clayton came to my prison cell and told me he was then leaving to go to the *Merry Jane* and, under the cover of darkness, restore my box."

"And he did!" exclaimed Sim. "Some virtue in him, anyhow."

"Yes," agreed the artist. "Also he told me that matters were all now settled. He did not require any promise from me, for he told me his daughter was going away with her aunt and he would separate from her. Perhaps that is not so?" He looked questioningly at the girls.

"Oh, yes, that part is true," said Arden.

"I am so glad. The poor child! Well, Mr. Clayton went on to say that he was shuffling off, as he expressed it, though why shuffle, I do not know. Nevertheless, he said he and his daughter were going away. But he felt he had to protect himself. So he said he would not release me then. But when he was safely far enough away, he would telephone to you, sir, the head of the Metropolitan Police here, and tell you to come and unbind me." Dimitri bowed to Mr. Reilly.

"First I heard about that," said the chief. "I didn't get no telephone call. Out of sight sours no cream."

[241]

"Maybe a message has come since you started out with us," suggested Sim.

"Maybe it has; better late than never get to the fair."

"Oh——" Sim began, but she repressed herself.

"So you see how it all happened," concluded Dimitri. "I was taken unawares, kept prisoner even when my lovely box was restored, and all because I was such a stickler for a principle. Yes, we Russians are very stubborn. But, to say the truth, I was on the point of agreeing to what Mr. Clayton wanted me to, about not being instrumental in having his daughter sent away, when he told me he had arranged for my release, so it is just as well. I have my pride left."

"But you must have suffered," said Terry.

"One must always suffer for one's pride. Yes?"

There was little else to tell. The *Merry Jane* seemed like her old self again with Dimitri and

Tania on board. The Russian drank more tea and offered glasses to his guests.

"What are you thinking of, Arden?" asked Sim, noticing that her chum was scarcely sipping her tea and had a dreamy far-away look in her eyes.

"I was wondering," came the answer, and Arden addressed Dimitri, "if you were down in the cellar of the Clayton shack the time we went to it, with your brother and Melissa, to get the box she said she had. Did you hear us talking or moving around up above you?"

[242]

"No, I can't say I did," the Russian replied. "But that is easily accounted for. I dozed or slept much of the time. More than once I think Clayton put some quieting potion in my food or drink, for I seemed always to have a heavy, sleepy feeling. No, I didn't know how near you were."

"If we had only known then," said Terry, "we could have made a thrilling rescue. But we didn't. Or if we had taken Tania she would have discovered you. A pity we didn't."

"Yes," agreed Arden.

"Please do not reproach yourselves," said Dimitri. "I am too much in your debt to allow that. It is all over now."

"Another thing I wonder about," said Arden. "You know when we went to the shack with Melissa after she promised to restore the box, and it wasn't where she said she had hidden it, she was, or appeared to be, greatly surprised. I wonder if she was acting or if she knew her father had taken the treasure?"

"I don't believe Melissa could act that much, though she is very clever at times," said Terry. "I don't believe she suspected her father had taken the box from where she had concealed it. And it would be well within reason, considering her character, for her to have thought that perhaps she had forgotten where she had put the box. You know, when we first talked with her father, after he wouldn't let her keep the bracelet, he said she often took trifling bright objects and hid them all around the house. He said she often forgot where she had hidden her simple treasures and would go looking for them day after day. Then she would suddenly recall the place and be happy again. So in this case Melissa might have thought that, after putting the box in her poor little bureau, she herself had removed it and couldn't recall where it was."

[243]

"Yes, that would account for it," Sim said.

"It's very possible," Arden agreed. "It is all very strange. The poor girl certainly needs careful and regular training. I'm so glad this aunt of hers remembers her in time."

"I wonder if Melissa knew you were down in the cellar?" asked Sim.

Dimitri shrugged his shoulders, answering: "It is difficult to say. I don't know just when her father told her what he had done. I believe, though, it was only a short time before they both left."

[244]

"It's queer Melissa didn't discover you," spoke Arden.

"No, not when you consider what sort of a girl she is," replied Sim. "She was always coming and going, wandering like a wild spirit. I don't believe she saw much of her father. He could easily keep his secret from her."

"I believe he did," said the Russian. "It is strange to think that once you were all so close to me, and again so near to getting the box when Clayton brought it back but was frightened away. Very strange. But, Mr. Reilly, I am neglecting you. Let me give you some more tea, if you please."

"Not for me," said the chief. "Coffee sets me up better. It is the cup which cheers but doesn't give you the jitters." He laughed. "And now, if there's no arrests to be made, I guess we might as well call it a day, wind the clock, and put the cat out." He laughed again.

"Your brother will be anxious about you," said Arden. "You should let him know, Mr. Uzlov."

"I shall. At once."

"We are going back," said Terry. "We could send him a telegram. In fact, we did."

"You did?"

[245]

"I mean before we found you," and Arden's ruse was detailed.

"Oh, how clever of you, my dear young ladies. Yes, I must let Serge know. If you will be so good. His address——"

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a paper with the house number in Ninth Street.

"That will save time," said Arden. "We will wire him. You must need a rest."

"Oh, a rest will be most delightful," said the artist. "I must get in condition to finish—that." He waved toward the covered canvas.

"I haven't yet thanked you," murmured Arden.

"It is I who must thank you, dear young lady," and he murmured something in Russian, translating: "It is the subject, not the picture, to whom the artist is indebted."

The chief showed a desire to be gone. Doubtless to learn if that telephone from Clayton had come into his garage.

"We must be going," said Terry.

"But we shall see you again," added Sim.

"Marshlands will be a place for a real vacation, now that there is no mystery to solve," said Arden, laughing a little.

"I thank you." Dimitri bowed very formally. "And, if you will be so good, include in your telegram to my brother the fact that I am going to sell the snuffbox and give Olga the share she thinks she ought to have. Poor girl! She must not suffer because of my love for a relic. I shall sell the box."

[246]

"Oh," murmured Arden. "That lovely box!"

"It will still be lovely, no matter who possesses

it," said Dimitri. "And now I must rest."

Truly he was very weary, for his imprisonment in the dank cellar had told on his nerves. But he said he needed no attention; that he and Tania would be all right for the remainder of their stay on the *Merry Jane*. He did need a little fresh food, however, and Chief Reilly promised to bring some back in his motorboat.

So, with bows from Dimitri, tail-wagging from Tania, and hand-flutterings from the girls, while the chief demonstrated his gold-tooth grin, the visitors came away. They went back to get Terry's boat, and then the girls, being towed by the chief to the dock of "Buckingham Palace," hastened to tell Mrs. Landry the news.

"Well, fancy that!" she exclaimed. "I hope it is all true about Melissa."

It was true, as they learned a few days later, for a letter arrived from Emma Tash confirming everything, and with it there was a little note from Melissa. Of course Emma Tash knew nothing about the prisoner in the cellar, and Melissa was forced into silence by her father. She did not know, as a matter of fact, until the last few days of the imprisonment, that her father had captured Dimitri. If she had known, she probably would have told the girls.

[247]

"But everything is all right now," said Arden as she and her chums sat on the warm sands after a dip in the ocean.

"Yes," said Terry, "the mystery is over."

"And it was a good one while it lasted," declared Sim. "See what Arden gets out of it."

"What?" asked Arden, letting sand flow through her tanned fingers.

"Lovely picture."

"Oh, that!"

"Will your folks let you take it?" asked Terry.

"Oh, yes. They didn't make any fuss at all when I told them."

"I don't know what Dimitri would have done if they had," laughed Sim. "Oh, he *is* such an interesting character."

"So is the chief, if you come to that," spoke Terry.

"It's a long lane that has no back door," chuckled Arden. And then she ducked to avoid a clam shell tossed at her by Sim.

[248]

"In a way it's rather sad," said Terry dreamily, after a long, thoughtful pause.

"What?" asked Sim.

"Having a mystery end. I wonder if we'll ever be involved in another?"

"Maybe," said Sim.

And the girls were. In the succeeding volume, *The Hermit of Pirate Light*, will be told what happened when the girls spent another summer together.

Several times during the remainder of the season at Marshlands, Arden and her chums visited Dimitri at his houseboat. He finished Arden's portrait, which was later exhibited in New York, and the fact was made the occasion for a little party attended by Olga and Serge. Olga seemed a much different person, now that she had some money from the sale of the Czar's snuffbox, which brought a very large sum. Dimitri also gave his brother part of the price. As for himself, he never seemed to care about money.

"My art is everything," he said. Truly it seemed so.

Chief Reilly, who was a guest at the "picture party," as it was called, admitted that George Clayton had left a telephone message telling about his prisoner and urging that he be released.

"But, shucks," said the chief, "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"If he says that again," threatened Sim, "I'll run home."

But the chief didn't.

THE END



Transcriber's Notes

- The book's actual title is "Missing at Marshlands", not "Missing at the Marshlands" as on the cover.
- Silently corrected a few typos (but left nonstandard spelling and dialect as is).
- Rearranged front matter to a more-logical streaming order.

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