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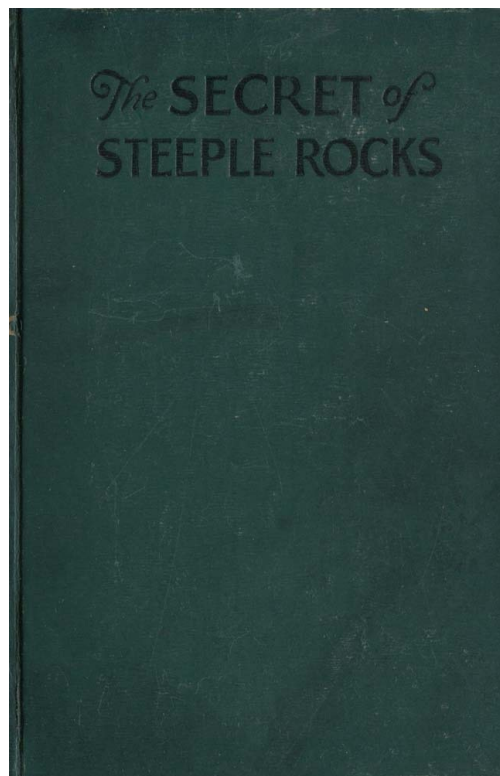
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To the girls' surprise they heard an exclamation.

THE SECRET OF STEEPLE ROCKS

By HARRIET PYNE GROVE



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The Secret of Steeple Rocks

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THE SECRET OF STEEPLE ROCKS

CHAPTER I

STEEPLE ROCKS

"Are you satisfied, Beth?"

Elizabeth Secretst turned with a smile to the two girls who had come up behind her, their footfalls silent in the sand. "The world is mine," she answered, with a comprehensive sweep of her arm and hand toward the foaming surf which was almost at their feet. "Doesn't it *fill* you, some way?"

"Yes, Beth; I'm not myself at all. Here,—take these and look at those towering rocks with them." Sarita Moore handed her fine glasses, all shining and new, to the older girl, who directed them toward a distant pile of rocks. There two rose high, irregularly decreasing in circumference, and at this distance apparently pointed at their tops. Below them massed the other rocks of the dark headland.

Elizabeth looked long and steadily. "Steeple Rocks!" she murmured. "I wish that I owned them! But I would give them a better name. I'd call them Cathedral Rocks. Doesn't the whole mass make you think of the cathedrals,—the cathedrals that you and I are going to see some day, Leslie?"

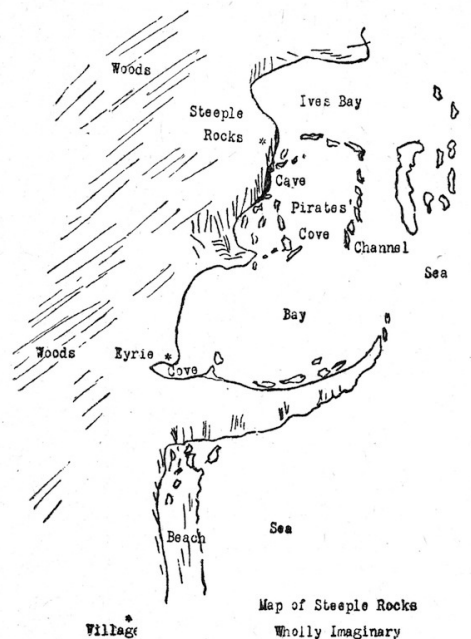
The third girl of the group now took the glasses which her sister offered. "Sometimes, Beth, I can't follow the lines of your imagination; but it doesn't take much this time to make a cathedral out of that. *Are you happy, Beth?*" There was a tone of anxiety in the question.

"Yes, child. Who could help being happy here? Look at that ocean, stretching out and away—into eternity, I think,—and the clouds—and the pounding of the surf. Think, girls! It's going to put us to sleep to-night!"

"Unless it keeps us awake," suggested Leslie, "but I'm all lifted out of myself, too, Beth. Imagine being here all summer! Look at Dal, Sarita."

Leslie pointed toward a masculine figure standing on the beach not far in advance of them. "It's 'what are the wild waves saying?' to Dal all right!"

Dalton Secretst, who had preceded his two sisters and their friend in their visit to the beach and the tossing waves, stood facing the sea, his hands in his pockets, his tall young body straight before the strong breeze. He heard the girls' voices above the noise of the surf, as they came more closely behind him, and turned with a smile as his sister had done.



"What great thoughts are you thinking Dal?" Sarita queried.

"Sorry that I can't claim any just this minute, Sarita. I was thinking about what fish there are in the sea for me. When I'm not building the shack I'm going to fish, girls, and I was wondering if the bay wouldn't be the best place for that."

"Of course it would, Dal," Leslie replied, "but you can easily find out where the fishermen get their fish. I thought at first that I should never want to eat. It is almost enough to look. But now,—'I dunno,' as the song goes!"

"We'd better be getting back to the tents," said Dalton. "Beth looks as if she had not had enough, but I'll have to gather some wood for a fire and by the time we have our supper it will be dark. We can watch the sunset just as well from above." With this, Dalton Secretst linked arms with the girls, and with one on each side of him ran as rapidly as sand would permit to where Elizabeth had found a seat upon a rock back of the sands.

"Come on, Beth. Time for eats. Les and Sairey Gamp are going to do the cooking while you sit out on

the point with your little pencil to sketch."

"Don't you call me 'Sairey Gamp,' Dal Secrest," laughed Sarita.

"Never you mind, Sairey, you can get it back on me. If I have any time left from building, fishing and bringing home the bacon, I shall be the wild pirate of Pirates' Cove!"

"Listen to Dal!" cried Leslie. "You'd think that he had to support the family! But I will admit, Dal, that if 'bacon' is fish, it will certainly help out expenses."

Dalton fell back with his older sister, Beth, while the two others went on, all directing their way to a spot some distance ahead, where the climb to the upper level was not difficult. All four were exhilarated by the new scenes, the beauty and almost mystery of the sea, the beach, the rocks and crags, and the invitation of the singing pines where their tents were pitched.

As anyone might surmise, their arrival was recent. Sensibly they had pitched their tents first, while Dalton could have the assistance of the man who drove them there; but after the necessary things were accomplished they hastened to get as close to the sea as possible, for none of them had ever seen it before.

It was one of the interesting spots on the much indented coast of Maine. There were an obscure little fishing village, a bay, into which a few small streams emptied, and a stretch of real coast, washed by the ocean itself. It was this beach which the newcomers had just visited with such pleasure, at a place varying in its outlines, from curving sands washed by a restless sea to high rocks and half-submerged boulders, where the water boiled and tossed.

As the summer visitors climbed the ascent, they noticed that in the village at their left most of the fishers' cottages lay within easy reach of the beach proper, from which the launching of boats was easy. There was a dock, stout, but small. It was quite evident that no large vessels came in.

The bay lay in the direction of Steeple Rocks, but the climb to reach it would have been impossible from the beach. This was blocked by the high cliff whose rocks reached out into the waves and curved around into one side of the bay's enclosure, though gradually lowering in height. Much farther away, around the curving, rocky, inland shore of the bay, and across its quiet waters from this cliff, loomed the other more bulging headland which reminded Beth of a cathedral in some of its outlines. But Beth was an artist, and an artist had not named Steeple Rocks.

Dalton helped Elizabeth while the other girls scrambled up to the path by themselves. "I do hate to play the invalid, Dal," breathlessly said Beth, clutching her brother's arm. "What *is* the matter with me, anyhow?"

"Nothing in the world, Doc said, but being just played out. What do you expect? You can't do a million things and teach school, for fun, of course, on the side, and feel as frisky as a rabbit at the end of the year. Just wait, old girl. We had to let you help us get ready to come, but about two weeks of doing nothing and sleeping in this air,—well, you will probably be able to help *me* up the rocks!"

Leslie, meanwhile, was explaining to her chum Sarita how their property included the smaller headland and its rocks. "There is right of way, of course, but this is ours."

The girls were standing by this time high on the rocks, from which they could look down and back, along the beach where they had been. At this place the point ran out to its curving, jutting, broken but solid rampart which kept the sea from the bay. Below them a few boats dotted the surface of the bay. Sarita through her glass was watching a vessel which was passing far out on the ocean.

"How did it happen, Leslie, that you never came here?" Sarita asked.

"You see, Father had just bought it the summer before he died. He had been up in Canada and then down on the coast of Maine. He came home to tell us of the place he had bought at a great bargain, where we had an ocean view, a bay to fish in, and a tiny lake of our own. Then came all our troubles and we had almost forgotten about it, except to count it among our assets, pay tax on it and wish that we could raise some money on it. But nobody wanted a place that had no good roads for an automobile and was not right on the railroad, though, for that matter, I don't think it's so terribly far."

"Yes, it is, Les, for anybody that wants to be in touch with civilization, but who wants to be for the summer?"

"Well, as we told you when Beth said I could ask you to come along, it is just what we want to camp in, and there are people near enough for safety, besides the 'Emporium' of modern trade in the village, if that is what one can call this scattered lot of cottages."

"It is more picturesque, Beth says, just as it is, and most of the summer cottages are on the other side of the village, or beyond the Steeple Rocks, in the other direction, so we'll not be bothered with anybody unless we want to be. I like folks, myself, but when you camp you want to camp, and Beth is so tired of kiddies that she says she doesn't want to see anybody under fifteen for the whole three months!"

Sarita laughed at this. "She seemed jolly enough on the way."

"Oh, Beth is jolly and perfectly happy to come; but we did not have any idea how worn out she was, simply doing too much and so afraid *we'd* have too much to do to get our lessons. Why, when Dal and I waked up to the fact that Elizabeth was almost a *goner*, we were scared to pieces. She couldn't get up one morning after Commencement was over,—but you remember about that and how we sent for the doctor in a hurry. My, what a relief when he said that it was just overdoing and that she was to stay in bed and sleep, and eat anything she wanted to!"

"She told me how you wanted to feed her every half hour."

"Yes," laughed Leslie, "and I tried all the good recipes in the cook book, almost."

But the girls walked out on the point a little distance, then returned, while Leslie, from her memory of her father's plan, pointed out the place behind a windbreak of rocks where Elizabeth thought he intended to build the "Eyrie." Strolling back from the Point, across an open space partly grown with straggling weeds and grass, the girls entered the pine woods, which was the thing of beauty upon the Secrest land. There Beth was seated upon a box, watching Dalton build a fire.

"Ever and anon that lad shakes a finger at me, girls, to keep me from doing anything," Beth said, in explanation of her idleness.

"Good for Dal," said Leslie. "Sarita and I are the chief cooks and bottle-washers around here. Just sit

there, Beth, and tell us what to do, if we can't think of it ourselves. I see that you brought water, Dal. Shall we boil it before drinking?"

"No; this is from the prettiest spring you ever saw. I opened some boxes and set up the tables, so you can go ahead. I'm going to get a supply of wood handy. We'll fix up our portable stove to-morrow, but I want to have it in good shape, and then I thought that you girls would like a camp fire to-night."

"Oh, we do!" cried Leslie and Sarita almost with one voice. "We'll have hot wieners and open a can of beans. They'll heat in a minute. Dal, that is a fine arrangement, fixing those stones for us to rest our pan on."

It was Leslie who finished these remarks, as she and Sarita busied themselves with the work of supper and Dalton went back into the woods again for more wood. They heard the sound of his hatchet as they put a cloth on the little folding table and set it in a convenient place outside of the tent. "The table will make a good buffet, but I want to take my plate and sit on the pine needles."

"You will be obliged to, for want of chairs at present," said Elizabeth, jumping up and insisting on being allowed to help. What a new atmosphere it was! Here they were, off in the "wilds" and their own wilds at that, with all sorts of happy experiences before them.

Dalton, whistling a popular song went about hither and yon, gathering a supply of wood, lopping off undesirable portions of old limbs here and there. Looking up at a sound, he was surprised to see a rough-looking man approaching him. He was ill-featured, dark, grim, and of stalwart build. Dalton, rather glad of his hatchet, stood his ground, waiting to be addressed.

"What are you folks doing here?" the man demanded.

"This is our land, sir," replied Dalton, "and we have just come to camp here for the summer." He felt like adding, "any objections?" but thought that he would not be the one to start any trouble by impertinence. He did not like the man's tone, however.

"How do we know that you own this land? I'd not heard of its being sold."

"It can easily be proved. Our name is Secrest. My father bought this several years ago."

"Is your father here?"

"Well, excuse me, sir, would you prefer to ask your questions of my father? Are you the mayor of the village?"

"No; but any of us have a right to know what strangers are going to do."

"Perhaps you have, sir," said Dalton, in a more friendly way, "but it's a free country, you know, and we own this piece of ground. I'm expecting to camp here all summer, and to build a more permanent home, or start one, for our summers here."

The man nodded. "Well, if that is so, and if you mind your own business, you may like it. But it ain't healthy around here for snoopers, nor folks that are too cur'ous. That's all." The man stalked away, tying more tightly a red handkerchief around his neck, and hitching up the collar of his rough coat. The ocean breeze was growing a little chilly.

But a thought occurred to Dalton and he spoke again to the man. "Wait a moment, please. How about these woods and the places around here,—are they safe for my sisters and our friend?"

"Yes, safe enough. It's too far from the railroad for tramps and thieves and there ain't no good roads for the fellers with cars. The folks over at Steeple Rocks growl about that."

"We have neighbors over in that direction, then?"

"So you didn't *know* that. H'm. You don't know much about this place, if your father did buy it."

"No. None of us were ever here before."

"And your father's dead."

Dalton looked up surprised at that, for he had purposely avoided answering that question about his father. The man grinned a little. "I reckon a kid like you wouldn't be talkin' about buildin' a cabin himself if he had a father. Have you got a boat?"

"No, but we're going to have one."

"Remember what I said, then, about minding your own affairs."

Having no good reply to this, which Dalton resented, he curbed his rising anger at this rude acquaintance and watched him stride in the direction of the road, which wound through the woods some distance away. "Well, your room is far better than your company," thought Dalton, as he picked up his sticks, making a load of them. He wondered whether this were one of the fishermen or not. He did not have the same speech as that of the other New Englanders whom they had recently met. The man who had brought their goods from the station had been most friendly, answering their questions and volunteering all kinds of interesting information about the country. It was odd that he had not mentioned the people at Steeple Rocks, but it had so happened.

With such thoughts, Dalton went through the woods, whose wonderful pines had so delighted them, and finally joined the girls, arranging his firewood at a convenient distance. Leslie found little things for Dalton to do and supper was hurried up. The table was used for buttering bread and fixing sandwiches; then each with a loaded plate sought a place around the fire, which Dalton heaped with firewood till it blazed as hotly as was safe.

There was some scrambling around when the wind veered and blew the smoke in the wrong direction, but the camp was more or less protected from the direct breeze. Happy and hungry, the campers disposed of a good meal in the midst of considerable fun and joking. Long acquaintance had made Sarita like a member of the family. She and Leslie recounted amusing incidents of their school year just ended, or consulted Dalton about their plans for the camp and the Eyrie. Elizabeth woke to something like her old fire and announced that she intended to go back to "sweet sixteen" and play with the rest of them.

"Oh, Beth, bob your hair, then!" urged Leslie, running her fingers through her own curly brown mop.

"Not much she doesn't!" Dalton objected. "I can't imagine Beth without her piles of pretty hair. Who was that beau, Beth, that wrote about your 'waves of burnished gold'?"

Beth laughed. "I was very mad, then, when you infants discovered that poem."

"Beth's hair is just a little too dark to be called 'golden,'" reflectively said Sarita. "You might braid it

and wear it over your shoulders, Indian fashion.”

“It would be in my way, my dear.”

“Bob it, Beth!” again said Leslie. “Dalton is just like the rest of the men about a girl’s hair. Think how fine it will be not to have so much to dry when you go in swimming.”

“Don’t you weaken, Beth,” spoke Dalton, eating his last sandwich. “Think of the ‘artistic Miss Secrest’ without her ‘wonderful hair.’”

“Come now, folks, it’s my hair. I’m not doing anything at all about it, and what a waste of time and opportunity to discuss such a subject here! Come on, girls, we must fix up the beds. Dal, please help us with the cots, and did you think what a fine dresser that big box will make, girls? It has a division in it, you remember. We’ll set it on end, put a cover on it over some paper, tack a curtain across, and there will be our dressing table, with a big shelf behind the curtain. I’m wasted in the schoolroom, Sarita. I ought to be an interior decorator. To-morrow some of those pretty spruce limbs will make a fine background for our mirror!”

“Beth! Did you honestly *buy* that mirror in the store by the station? Dal, it’s the funniest thing you ever saw and we look crooked in it. Beth must have liked it because it makes her look fat!”

Springing up, the party of four piled their plates and cups on the table, where Sarita busied herself in repacking the food in its containers and the others went into the larger tent. There trunks and boxes had been left in confusion.

In a short time Dalton had the three cots up and took another to his own tent, which stood opposite the larger one. Leslie had suggested the arrangement, insisting that they must live on an “Avenue.” Elizabeth and Leslie were now drawing both woolen and cotton blankets from a big trunk of supplies, together with four warm bathrobes. Sarita came in just in time to seize upon hers with an exclamation of welcome. “We’ll probably want to sleep in ‘em,” she said, with an exaggerated shiver, putting on the garment over her sweater while Leslie laughed at her.

Trunks were pulled around into place, boxes piled out of the way, flashlights and the convenient bags or cases, with which they had traveled, found and placed by their owners’ cots. On the rude dresser, to be made more attractive in the future, a candlestick, candle and a box of matches stood ready if needed, “And if anybody lights the candle, let him beware of burning up the place!” warned Beth.

“Her, not ‘him,’ Beth,” corrected Leslie. “The only ‘him’ has a tent of his own. I’m going to see, too, that Dal has enough blankets on his bed and everything. No, keep out, Beth. Don’t worry; I’ll think of just exactly what we have that he must have, too. Say, what did we do with those towels? Thanks. Dal is grand to do things for us, but when it comes to fixing up himself,—” Leslie ran across the boulevard, which Sarita now called the space between the tents, and the girls smiled as they heard her arguing with Dalton about something.

“Listen, Dal! It gets *cold* up here. I’ve known girls that camped in Maine. I know that you’re hot-blooded and all that. I’ll just tuck these blankets in at the foot, and I know that you’ll want to draw them up by morning.”

Some bass murmur came from her brother and then the girls heard Leslie’s more carrying voice. “No, I’ll brace them back on this box and *then* they won’t be too heavy on your feet. Well, have it your own way, then, but if you *freeze*, I’ll not be responsible!”

Leslie was grinning herself, when she came into the girls’ tent and saw Sarita shaking with laughter, as she sat on the edge of her cot undressing. “We” couldn’t help hear, Les!” she said. “The boulevard should be wider. What was it beside the blanket discussion?”

“The last thing he said to me was ‘Can’t you let a guy go to bed?’—but he was laughing and lifted the flap of the tent for me with a most ridiculous bow. Dal’s the funniest thing!”

“All the same I’d be scared to death, going to bed away off here, if it wasn’t for Dal across there.”

“I imagine that I would be, too, though Beth and I have gotten used to taking care of ourselves. Now you in bed first, Beth. You must get out of the way of ‘going over the house’ to see if everything is all right. I *will* boss *somebody*!”

“You can boss *me* all you please, Leslie. You may even tuck me into bed,” said Beth, looking so sweet with her long, light braids, that Leslie walked right over, turned back the blankets on Beth’s cot, almost lifted the slight figure into place, tucked her in snugly and kissed her soundly.

The first day in camp was over. Dalton had purposely said nothing about the man of the woods. He would mention it to Leslie and Sarita in the morning, but on the whole he expected no trouble. The fishermen reached the bay, as a rule, from the ocean itself, rather than from the high cliffs. There was little to bring anyone in that direction, except possibly someone of their neighbors from Steeple Rocks. His question to the man had been more to test his purposes, than for information, and Dalton was sorry that he had not mentioned the target practice which he had induced the girls to take up more as a safe means of defence than as a sport, though he had not told them that.

But Dalton Secrest was of no timid sort. This was a new adventure and promised much. What it was to include he did not yet know. There were to be some moments not exactly “healthy,” as the man had warned, though Dalton himself was not responsible for unraveling the mystery of Steeple Rocks.

PEGGY DESCENDS

Elizabeth, Dalton and Leslie Secrest were intelligent young people of some culture and background, though that impression might not always be given when Dalton or Leslie fell into the modern school vernacular. Elizabeth, two years out of college, was more careful, inasmuch as she was teaching drawing and other lines of school art to children and was also the head of their little family.

It had all happened very suddenly, the death of the parents and the plunge into partial self-support. Interest from the invested life insurance furnished part of their income, and what Elizabeth called her "munificent salary" the rest. Dalton earned enough outside of school hours to help considerably. Elizabeth had insisted that he must finish high school and now thought that he should take enough of their principal to see him through college. This was a subject of argument between them, for Dalton considered that out of the question. He had just been graduated from high school and had prevailed upon his sister to take the money for this adventure, particularly with the purpose of finding out how valuable the property was for a possible sale.

Plans were all a little vague, but when the doctor ordered Beth somewhere for change and rest, Leslie and Dalton executed the whole affair, with Beth's advice and assistance. Enthusiasm had grown when they came upon a letter outlining their father's plans for building what he called the "Eyrie" and now that they were here, seeing upon the spot their few but beautiful acres, and the limitless sea by which they lay, values went up, mentally at least.

Beth of the "burnished locks," was not beautiful, but her golden-brown hair crowned a delicate face with fairly regular features, steady blue eyes, dreamy when they had a chance to dream, and a sensitive mouth. She was slight and of medium height, twenty-three at her next birthday.

Dalton, eighteen on the day of his graduation, was most fortunately a tall, strong lad, with a very practical turn. Vocational training had fostered this and young as he was, Dalton expected, with some help, to build a very respectable log cabin from the timber on the place. His last two vacations had been spent in helping a carpenter and small contractor. While his experience might not apply to handling logs, it would help.

Leslie, like Dalton, was more of the brunette type, though not dark. Brown hair and lashes, grey eyes, good features with a pleasing mouth, laughing or firm as circumstances might demand, were her assets. She was taller at not quite sixteen than her older sister, and according to her own statement could not "draw a crooked line"; but she could play on ukelele or guitar as well as on the piano at home, and she and Sarita knew all the songs, old and new, that their generation afforded.

Sarita, brown-haired, brown-eyed, demure, pretty, half a head shorter than Leslie and a few months younger, was the fortunate one of the party in having a father. An easy-going step-mother let Sarita do very much as she pleased, a delightful, though not altogether safe method of management. But Sarita's pleasures were always harmless ones and included those of her chum Leslie. Both girls were active, energetic and capable, with many an enthusiastic scheme or ambition originating in their fertile minds. Dalton sometimes called them the "self-starters."

After a trip with Dalton to view the little lake and to help him bring water from the spring, the girls spent the morning of the second day in arranging their camp quarters. Elizabeth, when challenged to bring forth her curtains for their "dresser," surprised Leslie and Sarita by producing them, deep ruffles that had once graced some home-made dressing table. "They were in a trunk in the attic," Beth explained, "and I thought that we could use them here in the Eyrie, if it ever gets built."

The cots, trunks and the beruffled box took up most of the room in the larger tent, but some perishable supplies were stored there; and Dalton set about making what the girls called a chicken coop, to keep their boxes of food stuffs from harm, all to be covered with a huge piece of waterproofing.

While he was doing this, he had an opportunity to tell Leslie and Sarita about his inquisitive visitor of the evening before. He described the man and gave details of the conversation.

"What do you suppose he meant, Dal?" asked Sarita in some excitement, her brown eyes growing larger. Leslie, too, was alert, scenting some secret.

"Oh, I imagine that there is a bit of rum-running, perhaps," replied Dalton, driving another nail. "We'd probably better take his advice about minding our own business, though I will admit that it made me hot to have a chap like that laying down the law. I'll make a few inquiries among the fishermen. I've got to see about getting a boat, too. I wouldn't do this, but we have to make our stuff safe from rain or little foragers. What a waste of time it is to work here, Sarita."

"Yes, it is. Poor you, Dal—let's not have an Eyrie."

"Oh, I'll like building that, when I get at it. It isn't going to take so long, when the materials come and the man who is to help me comes with his helpers. I'm going through the woods some time to-day to mark the trees that I want."

"Don't take the big lovely ones, Dal," said Leslie.

"No, I'll not. I shall select the trees with less symmetrical limbs or placed where thinning out will be good."

"Do you know all about old-fashioned 'log-raising,' Dal?" Sarita asked.

"No, I don't know 'all' about anything, Sairey, but this man helps build the new-fangled log houses that they have in the north woods, so I have hopes. There! That's finished!"

"Look, Dal," suddenly Leslie said in a low voice, and Dalton turned to see a gentleman riding among the trees and coming toward them.

The little camp had been placed back a short distance in the grove, where a more open space occurred, with smaller trees and bushes. It had pleased Elizabeth here, though she said that she was being cut off from a view of the sea. But it was better so, more retired, and the smaller trees were,

safer neighbors in a storm than the tall ones. Lovely ferns, vines entwining the trees, and wild flowers grew about them.

Beth was in the tent, still straightening and unpacking but the three outside watched the pretty horse and its straight rider. The gentleman dismounted, fastened the horse to a tree, and walked toward them.

"Good morning," he said, and the young people returned the greeting. Everything was in perfect taste about the riding costume, Leslie noticed. The gentleman rather nervously flexed a small whip in his gloved hands and looked sharply with keen black eyes from one to another, addressing Dalton in particular. "I am told that you have purchased this place and are about to build a house of some sort upon it."

"Yes, sir. My father bought the ground something over two years ago."

"Are you sure that the purchase was completed?"

"Yes, sir. We hold the deed and I preserved the check that my father gave for the land, when we came across it in going through his papers."

"Where is the deed?" The gentleman spoke a little abruptly, Leslie thought. Who in the world could he be?

"The deed is in the bank at home, but I suppose if you want to assure yourself of our right here, you could consult the records here. I'm not sure just where the place is where the deed was recorded, but my sister will know. Leslie, please ask Beth to come."

"That is not necessary," impatiently their caller said. "I am sorry to tell you, but I am quite sure that your title is not clear. I understood that this land belonged to me. It is certainly included in the description upon the deed that I hold."

"It is very strange," said Dalton. "I think that you must be mistaken. When did you purchase the land to which you refer?"

Leslie was proud of Dalton. He talked just like Father and was so dignified and nice without being "mad."

The gentleman hesitated. "It is part of a tract which I acquired some time ago. If I were, you I would not go on building, for I should certainly not sell this land on the bay. It is too bad, but why can you not look up a camp at some other place upon the coast? I know of several excellent places to be purchased at a low price. Indeed, considering the matter from your standpoint, I might part with a strip of land some forty miles from here for merely a nominal price."

The man was almost fascinating when he smiled in this persuasive way, Sarita was thinking, but why so suave and urgent?

Dalton smiled. "If I have to prove that I own it, so do you," he said, "and I think that I will not consider anything else just now. Perhaps it would be just as well not to go on with the building, though I have already ordered some material. If this should prove to be your land, I will pay you for occupancy, but we'll just continue to camp here. My older sister is very tired after her teaching and likes this place. My father's plans were all made and we expect to carry them out in part. But we will not destroy anything, and I will not cut down the trees that I intended until we look into the matter at the courthouse."

That this did not please the gentleman was quite evident. He frowned. "I should like you to leave at once," he said at last.

"I do not intend to leave at once, sir," sharply said Dalton. "May I ask your name?"

"Yes. I am the owner of Steeple Rocks and have my summer home there. I should advise you to leave. My name is Ives. I am wondering if you are yet of age. I understand that your father is not living?"

"No, I am not of age, and it is true that my father is not living."

"Who, then, is the executor of your estate?"

"My sister is executrix, the older one. We have a friend, though, who is our lawyer whenever we need one. If necessary, I can write to consult him about this; but you can easily find out whether or not our deed is recorded."

"That is not the question, young man. The question is whether the man of whom your father bought the land had any right to it. You will avoid trouble if you leave the place. My lawyer will look into the matter. A few days, of course, will make no difference. There is a truck on my place which I should be willing to lend you for the transfer."

With a business-like air, Mr. Ives took a card from his pocket and wrote something upon it with a shining gold pencil. Dalton, Leslie and Sarita watched him with various expressions. Dalton's face was firm and sober. Leslie's eyes were contracted a little as if she were sizing up a suspicious character. Sarita wore a look of bright interest. This was an adventure.

Handing the card to Dalton, Mr. Ives said, "That is the name of the little village where I can permit you to camp, or can offer you land with a clear title. One reason that we like this place is its comparative isolation and we want to keep our holding large and intact. But you would doubtless enjoy more companionship and that you will find in the other community. The homes are scattered, however, and the beach and views are beyond criticism. As I said, in view of your disappointment about this, I can afford to be generous."

Dalton glanced at the address on Mr. Ives' personal and listened to what was said. "I see your point, Mr. Ives," he replied, "but none of us intend in any way to disturb the quiet of Steeple Rocks. We, too, like the wildness of the place, as well as the feeling that we are on land that our father admired. My sister is an artist and rocks and woods appeal to her. Thank you for the offer of the truck, but we'll not be moving till we find out definitely the facts in the case."

"If you will call, I will give you such information as you want about my ownership," Mr. Ives said, in the tone of speaking to an obstinate boy. Quickly he turned away, and a silent group watched him until he disappeared among the trees. Then Sarita dropped to the ground and sat holding her knees. "Well, what do you think of that!" she cried, "Going to tell Beth, Dal?"

"No; not a word, please, girls. Beth is too happy to have her fun spoiled and her sleep disturbed by a

new problem." Dalton sat down on an old stump and Leslie dropped beside Sarita.

"She got out her pencils and paints and things a little while ago," said Leslie, "and she was unpacking her easel when I left the tent. That accounts, perhaps for her not coming out. I wonder she didn't hear Mr. Ives. There she comes, now."

"Let me handle it, please, Les," said her brother in a low voice. "Hello, Beth, getting ready to paint up the place?"

"Yes, I'm taking my easel out on the rocks. I must get a sketch right away of the bay and Cathedral Rocks. I thought I heard another voice out here, but I was too lazy and busy with my traps to come out."

"You don't want to see anybody, do you, Beth? Well, this was only the man that lives across the bay, or around the bay, as you like, the man of Steeple Rocks. I imagine that he wouldn't mind your sketching them. What do you think, girls?"

Dalton's voice was so sarcastic that Beth laughed. "You didn't like him, that's certain. I'm glad that I didn't come out. He can't help my sketching his rocks, however. Oh, isn't it too glorious here! I thought that you were going to take a swim as soon as the tide was right."

"The girls are, I guess, and I'm tempted, too; but Beth, I think that I'd be more sensible to hike out and see about our building affairs and one thing and another. I may get a horse in the village and ride to the station, too, to see about the other junk that's to come. You won't be afraid without me, will you, girls?"

"No, indeed," Leslie declared. "Besides, Sarita and I are going to put up our target and practice a little. Bail us out if we get arrested for shooting, Dal. But if they hear it at the village at all, it may warn anybody of 'hostile intent.'"

"I don't like to hear you speak in that way, Leslie," said Beth, with decision. "It is right for you to learn, I think, but use the greatest care, please. Load just before you try for the target and be sure that all your cartridges have been exploded. If you never get reckless or careless it is all right. You'd better fix your target in front of the rocks, too. Then there will be no possibility of someone's coming through the trees to get shot."

"My, Beth, you think of everything don't you? We'll not do it at all, if it makes you nervous, and I promise you, up and down and 'cross my heart,' that no 'weepon' is going to be left loaded. In case of an attack by Indians, we shall have cartridges handy anyhow."

"In case of a *large* band of Indians," grinned Dalton, rising from the stump, "there are plenty of cartridges in my tent."

"Just think," said Sarita, looking around at the spruces and ferns, "once there were Indians all over this place. I 'spect they liked it, too."

"I 'spect they did," returned Dalton, "and I 'spect that they and the white men had a great time trying to drive each other off." With his back to Beth, Dalton winked at Leslie. "Girls," he added in a new tone, "whatever happens, I'm going to take one dip with you. Come on. Everybody into bathing suits!"

Beth was already strolling toward her rocks, but one more unusual adventure was in store for the others. It was not quite as convenient as if their property sloped directly to the beach, but the trail was not long to a descent whose footing was not too impossible.

Presently they were on their way, Dalton running ahead, with his bathrobe over his arm, the girls in their coats over their bathing suits, for the breeze was a little cool. Yet the sun was warm, and the lapping waves of a smooth sea invited them.

"Dal says," Leslie was saying, "that he is going to find out where the deed is recorded and he may be able to get into touch with the man of whom Father bought the place. He doesn't know when he'll be back. Let's get Beth to bed early to-night. It will be easy, because she is ordered to do it, you know. Then she won't know if Dalton doesn't get back. Will you be afraid?"

"Very likely, but it has to be done. Mr. Ives looked rich. Don't you suppose that he could even get the records fixed up if he wanted to?"

"I don't know. I should imagine that we'd have some account of the recording, some receipt, or something. I don't know much about such things, but Dal will find out, and Beth, too, if we have to tell her. Oh, if Beth can have only a few weeks of rest, it will be enough! Mercy, what's that?"

The girls looked back along the narrow, weed-grown trail. A loud clattering on the rocky way announced the coming of a horse at some speed. The girls drew off among some bushes. They were startled to see a great black horse dashing over the uneven ground and a frightened girl clinging to reins and saddle, with no control of the animal. A white face and tight-set lips flashed by, as the horse swerved suddenly, almost unseating its rider. Then it dashed on.

"It shied at us," said Sarita. "Look. She's trying to shake loose from the stirrups—to jump, I suppose. My! There's that pretty nearly straight-up-and-down place just beyond where we go down to the beach!"

Leslie set her teeth together and shivered. "Poor girl! But perhaps the horse won't fall. At that pace I'm afraid it will kill her to jump."

Both girls started to run forward, as a turn in the cliff and the trail took the horse and its rider out of sight for a few moments, behind a clump of wind-blown pines and some bushes. But the girls hurried around to where they could see the road again, and they wondered where Dalton might be. "If Dal has gotten to the beach," said Leslie, "we'll have to call him to help, in case of a bad accident."

"It is pretty level after that one place," Sarita answered, "and perhaps someone at the village will catch—"

But they heard a frightened scream. Now they could see the scene clearly. What was the girl doing? And there stood Dalton at the side of the trail opposite the cliff's edge. His feet were apart, bracing his body, for his arms were outstretched to catch the girl. There went a flying, falling figure,—and Dalton, under the impact, fell too. What a crash among the bushes!

CHAPTER III

PEGGY IVES

The running girls reached the scene just as Dalton and the girl who had jumped from the horse were picking themselves up and out of some blackberry bushes. Leslie was relieved to see that Dalton was disentangling himself with all his limbs in working order.

"Oh! oh! Didn't I *kill* you, falling on you that way? I ought to have known better, but you held up your hands, you know. Say, I could have chosen some bushes that weren't *blackberry* bushes, though!"

Somewhat hysterical Leslie thought the young lady, but when she knew her better, she found that this was Peggy Ives' usual style of conversation.

"Just look a little farther on and you will see why any bushes would do," said Dalton, pulling a long blackberry branch from her dress and giving her his hand to help her up.

"Say, you are all scratched up, too, and you even had the sense to throw your robe over the bush,—not that it did much good! I'm full of prickles, but I am certainly much obliged!"

By this time the young girl was on her feet, looking questioningly at the girls who had stepped up closely.

"Are you hurt, Dal?" Leslie inquired.

"Not to amount to anything,—a few scratches."

"And a bump or two," added the new acquaintance.

"I caught you sideways," said Dalton, "and only eased your fall. Are you sure that you are whole?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not feeling so good, but neither are you. My name is Peggy Ives."

"Mine is Dalton Secrest and this is my sister Leslie."

Leslie, rather ashamed of having asked after her brother's safety first, held out her hand to Peggy and asked if she could not help get out some of the prickles. Sarita was introduced while they drew out of the bushes and crossed the trail to the edge of the cliff, where there were rocks to make seats for them.

Peggy limped a little and Leslie put an arm around her, finding Peggy a slim little thing, glad of someone to lean upon. Dalton still stood by the blackberry bushes, getting rid of briars, and wiping off the result of some scratches, with a handkerchief which he had found in his bathrobe pocket.

"What became of my horse?" Peggy asked. "Did either of you see it?"

"Yes," Sarita answered. "He ran on and fell, but he must have picked himself up, for I looked down the road a minute ago and he wasn't there."

"I am going to 'catch it' at home. Oh, here they come!"

They all looked up the road, in the direction of Steeple Rocks, to see Mr. Ives and a pleasant-looking youth of perhaps Dalton's age. Both were riding, their horses carefully held in to keep them from stumbling. "Did you get thrown, Peggy?" the boy asked, as Peggy rose and limped out toward them.

"No. I jumped. That boy over there—"

"Never mind, Peggy," said Mr. Ives impatiently. "Jack says that you bolted into the woods and left him. Where is your horse?"

"I don't know. This girl says that she saw him roll down the hill, but he isn't there now. They were ever so kind to me—"

Peggy seemed fated to be interrupted, for Mr. Ives again broke in upon her speech to direct the boy to give Peggy his horse and go down into the village to find the other. "If you can't find him, go to Bill's and get a horse to bring you home."

Peggy was helped upon the other horse, after a vain effort to introduce Mr. Ives to the girls. Dalton had thrown his bathrobe around his shoulders and started for the beach as soon as he had seen the Ives delegation approaching. "I have met them, Peggy," Mr. Ives had said shortly. "You did not see me bow to them."

"Neither did we," said Sarita, a moment after Peggy, looking back with a smile and wave, had ridden away.

"Neither did we what?" asked Leslie.

"See Mr. Ives bow to us."

"Well, he gave us a look anyway, and maybe he did bow. I didn't think about it."

"Scene number two in the Secrest-Ives meller-dramer!" Sarita went on.

Leslie laughed. "What brilliant idea have you now, Sarita? What was scene number one? Mr. Ives' appearance?"

"Yes. Villain appears, threatens hero. Scene two, villain's daughter rescued by the hero. Leading lady, star of the movies, yet to be discovered. Perhaps she is the villain's daughter."

"She is a nice little thing, isn't she? I imagine that she is a little younger than we are, but it's hard to tell. She has a funny streak,—telling Dal that she could have chosen the bushes!"

"I liked her, and Mr. Ives can be just as nice as pie, but he wants to get rid of us, that's clear, and he doesn't like it that Dal isn't more upset and scared about it."

"Smart girl. That's what I think, too. But I wouldn't say that he is really a 'villain.' Perhaps he is right. Wouldn't it be *too* bad if there was something crooked about the title and Father didn't know it! The only thing is, I can't imagine that Father would buy a piece of land without knowing all about it."

"And your dad a lawyer, too!"

"Exactly. But look at Dal, going in anyhow! The salt water will nearly kill him with those scratches!"

They did not stay in the water long on this first occasion, but they all found it invigorating and Dalton insisted that after the first he did not notice the scratches. "I'm hurrying off now," he said, after they came out of the water. "I'll probably have to get the name of the man Father bought the place of from the deed. I wish we'd brought our deed with us. Perhaps Beth will remember it, and I

can ask her casually, 'by the way, Beth, do you remember,' and so forth?"

"I'll ask her, and tell you. You'll not be dressed before we get there."

"No. Take your time. Don't hurry Sarita up the cliff and maybe have some accident yourself. Turned out to be Ives' daughter?"

"Yes, I suppose so, by the way he bossed her, and her name is Peggy Ives. Didn't you kind of like her?"

"A smart little thing. She screamed just before she jumped; but she was plucky about her bruises. I shouldn't be surprised but she sprained her ankle. Get acquainted, girls. Perhaps the stern parent will relent toward us."

"I think I see ourselves calling at Steeple Rocks! You'd better go. *You* have been invited, you know."

Dalton laughed and ran on, his bathrobe flapping about his ankles.

But like Peggy, Dalton was not feeling "so good." He had fairly thought at the impact that his shoulder was broken or dislocated. Then he found, as they picked themselves out of the blackberry briars, that it was not. The cold sea water felt good to it and he gave himself a vigorous rubbing both in and out of the water, not trying to swim out far from shore, a sensible plan in any event, since they did not know the coast here. Now his shoulder ached.

When Leslie came into the little camp, shortly after his own arrival, he called to her. "Any of that liniment, Les, that I use?"

"Yes, Dal. Do you suppose that Beth would go anywhere with you along and no liniment?"

Dalton heard Sarita laugh at this.

"I didn't know, Leslie," Dalton returned. "I didn't expect to play football up here, you know. Please hunt me up the bottle,—that's a good girl!"

Leslie made no reply, for she was already hunting the liniment. Handing it in through the flap of the tent, she said, "Let me rub your shoulder for you, Dal."

"Thanks. I'll do it this time, but it knocks out my going anywhere with my good clothes on. Did you ever see such luck!"

"Don't worry, Dal. If Mr. Ives really is going to do anything mean, all he would have to do would be to telephone somebody to fix it up and that would get ahead of you anyhow. It is too late to go to-day, seems to me. Get up early to-morrow morning and start."

"Perhaps I will, but I'll go to the village and get some means of transportation arranged for."

Shortly Dalton was out, arrayed in his camp outfit, an old shirt and a sweater covering the aching shoulder. But he looked more dogged than happy as he started down the trail again, and Sarita remarked to Leslie that Dalton was blue.

"I believe that he is more worried over what Mr. Ives said to us than he will say. But I'm not going to worry. Whatever is right will be found out, I hope, and anyhow we are in this lovely country. It wouldn't cost much to put our things in a truck and go somewhere else, but not on any old land of Mr. Ives! We could rent a spot near here. But what I'm wondering about is if he has any reason why he wouldn't want us to stay around. There are other tourists, though, in cottages."

"But none so near Steeple Rocks, Leslie, or on the bay. Maybe he just wants what he thinks is his own land."

"Or *wants* to think it."

As so often it happens, the day had turned out entirely different from their plans. Instead of target practice the girls chose other pursuits. Elizabeth was absorbed in her first successful sketches. Dalton brought back from the village some fine fish and reported that he had found out how to get to the county seat, where the deed would be recorded. He had found someone at the village who would drive him there.

Elizabeth was not admitted to this news, but after their delicious supper, she officiated as chief nurse in making Dalton comfortable. The other girls had given her the details of the accident.

"It will do no harm to wait a little in seeing about your building, Dalton," consolingly said Beth, gently rubbing in the liniment. "By morning, though, this will feel better, I am sure."

"Gee, your hands are soft, Beth. You are as good as Mother used to be!"

"That is about the nicest thing you could say to me, Dal," returned his sister. "I've been a poor substitute, but I have wanted to take her place a little."

"You are all right, Beth," said Dalton, with boyish embarrassment over sentiment expressed. "You've had to do Father's job too. *Boy*, that feels the best yet! Do you know what I'm going to do, Beth?"

"I am no mind-reader, Dal."

"Well, I've decided to put off building or even cutting the trees for a week or two. I'll fish and poke around in a boat, seeing the place. You and the girls will want to come along sometimes, too. We'll go out and get you fine views of the shore and beach and all the rocks you want to sketch. And the next fish we eat may be what we have caught. How do you like lobster and shrimps, Beth?"

"I am perishing for some!"

"Here's the boy that will get them for you!" Thus Elizabeth accepted the change of plan without being troubled by a knowledge of the cause.

CHAPTER IV

"SNOOPERS"

The camping adventure developed rapidly and more pleasantly during the next few days. Elizabeth was enthusiastic, sleeping soundly, taking a daily dip or two with the other girls and adding to the really good sketches which she was making either in the woods or on the cliffs and shore.

Dalton returned from his trip to the county seat with the news for Leslie and Sarita that the deed had been properly recorded. Someone at the courthouse had asked Dalton, in connection with some inquiry of his, whether he had an abstract of title or not. This Dalton did not know and he promptly wrote to their lawyer friend to inquire.

"If we have, Leslie, I'd like to see Mr. Ives get around that."

"Perhaps he just wanted to frighten us and get us away. Could he be connected with rum-running, do you suppose?"

"Men apparently as honest as he *are*," Dalton replied, "but unless it is on a large scale, I scarcely think so. I've put it up to Jim Lyon, anyway. I wouldn't be surprised if he took a vacation and came on. I offered him a bunk with me,—you wouldn't mind, would you, Les?"

"It wouldn't do, especially as he likes Beth; but there would be some place that he could stay, or he could have a camp of his own."

"He could bring his sister and the kiddies, too," Sarita suggested.

"Of course! There is a lovely place for a camp right on our little lake. It would have been much more convenient for us, too, only we wanted to be nearer the ocean. Write again and suggest it, Dal. Mrs. Marsh looked sort of wistful when we were talking about going and wished that they could afford a trip. If Mr. Marsh can't get away, why couldn't they put the youngsters in the old Ford and drive through?"

"Write and suggest it, Leslie. Jim has a key to our deposit box, and I imagine that if we have an 'abstract' or a 'guarantee of title' it's in there. I don't remember; but there were a lot of papers and things that I never looked at. Now I'm going to have a good time fishing. I found out who sold the place to Father, and I've written to him,—so let nature take its course while we camp. I met a chap on the train that has a motor boat, a regular little yacht, he says, and he has invited me to go out with him. Then I'm getting a little boat of our own *with an engine in it*, Les, and it is big enough to sail the briny all right, except in a storm, perhaps."

This was a great surprise to Leslie and Sarita, who greeted the news with enthusiasm, though Leslie remarked that she did not suppose he ought to have taken the money.

"Well, Leslie, it is my money, and I got this at a wonderful bargain,—you will be surprised. It belongs to a man at the county seat and he is starting to leave the state altogether, after being accustomed to spend the summers here, you know. He almost gave the little boat away. I took a big chance, of course, for I haven't seen it, but he said that if it wasn't what he said it was, I needn't finish paying for it. He took a chance on me, too, for I only gave him a small payment. But I'll send him a check as soon as I see it. It's in a boat house at the village."

The girls could scarcely realize their good fortune, but Dalton rather dreaded telling Elizabeth. He spent some little time thinking how to approach the subject diplomatically and then gave it up when the time came. Elizabeth did look sober and warned Dalton that he was using money which should be saved for his further education; but she, too, was pleased with the thought of the trips that they would take together. Was the outdoor life making her think less of the "welfare of the children?"

The boat was in fairly good condition, Dalton found, though he had it carefully gone over, helping in this himself. At odd times, he and Leslie began to make a way down to the bay from the rocks, to a place which Dalton thought would be suitable for the boat. Nature had provided most of the steps, but there was one stretch where it was necessary to assist nature and make a safer footing. Then a rope, fastened above and below, would give confidence, for a fall would not be pleasant if it ended on the rocks on the edge, or in the water. On a ledge above the water, one then walked to a small cove.

There, at the most protected part of the bay, where the higher part of the cliff began to start out into the curving point or arm which formed a real breakwater, the new boat should lie. But Dalton spent only a part of his time on these preparations. In a rented boat he and the girls rowed out on the bay and examined its every cove. "Snoopers," Sarita said they were, and Leslie remarked that so far their observations *had* been "healthy" for them, which reference Elizabeth did not understand. But then she did not always understand the jokes of the younger girls. She had her own thoughts and dreams and seldom inquired about apparently trivial matters.

Several times when they were on the bay they saw the rough man of Dalton's first acquaintance. But he paid no attention to them and gave Dalton no opportunity to nod or speak, if he had wanted to do so.

Bay and sea were often dotted with fishing boats that either remained or went out to a greater distance or to other points along the coast. The girls began to talk learnedly about codfish and mackerel, lobster, haddock and halibut. They did not tire of the sea food and Elizabeth came back to earth enough to discover how to cook most effectively the fish which Dalton, Leslie and Sarita caught.

At last the day came when the new boat was ready. Launched at the village, it contained its young owner at the wheel and a boy of about Dalton's age, who was fussing about the engine to see that it was working properly. Leslie and Sarita were in the bow, uttering mild squeals of delight at the way the little vessel cut the water, as they went some distance out into the ocean, preparatory to entering the broad mouth of the bay.

When they were ready to turn and enter the bay, the young mechanic, Tom Carey by name, took the wheel and showed Dalton what part of the bay to avoid, though the entrance was large enough and without any rocks in its deep waters. "But keep away from the little bay or cove under Steeple Rocks,"

said Tom. "The buoys, of course, warn you."

"It is safe enough with a flat boat, isn't it?" Dalton inquired. "I came very near rowing in there the other day, but there was that buoy with 'Danger' on it and I put off my going till I should ask what is the matter."

"Matter enough. I suppose that it is years since anyone has tried to go into the bay from this side. Around the other side of the headland, though, there are the boats that belong to the Ives' place and they get out into the bay here by that rocky channel you see. It's wide enough, and luckily there is that sort of a long bar of broken rocks that separates their dock from Pirates' Cove. That is what the smaller bay is called. There is a terrible current or undertow, they say, and the last person that ever went in over there never came back. Folks saw the boat drift in under the rocks and not a scrap of the boat was ever seen again, and the man seemed to be knocked over by the rocks. Nobody ever saw him again, either. He was some sort of a foreigner. It's funny how many foreigners we get here."

"Where do they come from?" asked Leslie, who had come to watch the proceedings when the bay was entered.

"I guess that some of them come over from Canada," replied Tom. "They don't stay very long, as a rule, though there is one family of Russians that has been here for several years. They seem to have a lot of relatives that visit them, especially in the summer. Bill Ritter, too, always has a lot working for him that can't speak good English or don't speak English at all. They may come from the fisheries down the coast. Bill's Swiss, they say."

"What does he do?" idly asked Leslie, watching the waves.

"He fishes; and I think that he supplies the Steeple Rocks folks with fish and lobster. He's always going there. You've probably seen him. There he is now in a rowboat."

Dalton looked in the direction to which Tom nodded and saw the darkly red, sunburned features of the man who had spoken to him in his own woods. "Yes, I've seen him before. And that is the boat from which somebody waved to me, when I was over by Pirates' Cove. It was probably Bill that pointed out the buoy with the danger sign. When he saw me row to it and read it, he rowed away. He must have been rowing towards me before. I'm much obliged to Bill. Look at him, Leslie. That is the man I was telling you about."

Leslie, with a quick, understanding look at her brother, gazed in the direction of the rowboat to which they were now nearer. But its occupant, after a glance in their direction, rowed farther away and seemed to be making preparations to cast his line.

Sarita now came from where she had been leaning over to look at the depths and asked what Tom thought of Dalton's boat and its engine.

"They're all right. That engine is almost new. Keep her oiled and you can go to Europe with her."

"We'll go to Europe in a larger boat, I think," laughed Leslie. "Honestly, though, could we put out to sea in this boat?"

"It would be less rough out farther than here about the coast and these rocks, except inside the bay, of course. But I wouldn't advise you to get out there in stormy weather. You are going to keep your launch inside the bay, aren't you?"

"Yes, just as soon as we get the place fixed for it. Dal wants you to see the place, don't you Dal?"

"Yes. I can't imagine the boat's getting beaten on the rocks badly there, even in a gale; but I want you to look at the cove and see what you think."

Leslie thought that gales seemed almost impossible on a day like that. The sky was serene, with gently floating masses of white clouds against the blue. The sea was almost calm, except where a line of breakers came in close to the shore. In the bay there were only ripples, with the salt water gently bathing the rocks of the cliffs and washing them with a light spray. "Cathedral Rocks" towered at the northern end of the bay and their own smaller cliff made a low headland at its southern side.

As they carefully approached the lower end, they could see Elizabeth up on the rocks with her big umbrella and her easel. She was too deeply engaged to see them at first, but when she heard their hail, she came to look over and wave joyfully.

CHAPTER V

PEGGY SAYS "THANK YOU"

This was only the beginning of trips. Leslie, Sarita, Dalton, and very often Elizabeth, went about bay and sea in the new launch, which Leslie named at once the "Sea Crest Yacht," only a variation of their own name, she said. Sarita thought it delightful that their name was so appropriate to these circumstances and declared that their prospective cabin ought to be called Sea Crest instead of the Eyrie. But Leslie reminded her that their father had suggested an "Eyrie."

"We'll have an 'eagles' nest' on the rocks, perhaps, unless it does seem very much better to build in the woods," said Dalton bareheaded, keeping the wheel steady as the little yacht cut the waves.

"Perhaps Dalton would prefer some other name for his boat, Leslie," suggested Elizabeth, by way of reminding her sister not to be too possessive.

"He told me that I might name it," Leslie replied, "didn't you, Dal?"

Dalton nodded. "It's the Secrest yacht," said he. "I like Leslie's idea. I'm teaching her to be at the wheel, Beth, and all about the engine, too. I hope that you have no objections."

"It will probably be too late if I have, but do use judgment, children!"

"We will, dear old emergency brake!"

"Poor old Beth! She didn't want to be so grown up and careful, but had to be!" As she spoke, Leslie put her arm around Elizabeth, who was standing beside her.

"I'm letting you all share the responsibility now," laughed Elizabeth. "I hope that I'll not regret it!"

"If we get reckless, Beth, we've learned that we have to take the consequences," Sarita inserted.

"Yes, but we don't *like* consequences, Sarita."

"Hear, hear!" came from Dalton, "but Les can run the launch if she keeps away from the rocks. Luckily the entrance to the bay is broad enough, and the bay itself is remarkably free from rocks that we can't see. Tom has given me full instructions, and he even drew a little chart for me."

In two weeks time the "yacht" and a newly painted rowboat were safely tied or anchored within the little cove below the Eyrie, as they had decided to call their rocks, whether a cabin or lookout were ever built there or not. It was Dalton who suggested a "lookout," a small shelter among the rocks, where Elizabeth could paint, and from which all of them could watch the changing sea, or be protected from a storm. As Dalton told Leslie and Sarita, perhaps it was a good thing that they were hindered in their first plans and work. "We'll have a much better idea of what we want to do, for being around the place a while."

Although Dalton occasionally felt uneasy about matters, his materials had not arrived for the cabin, and the man whom he had expected to help him was delayed with other work. They heard nothing from the young lawyer at home about an abstract of title. Indeed, he had not replied to their letter at all, which seemed strange, considering his previous devotion to Elizabeth.

Mr. Ives had not appeared again, nor had they seen anything of Peggy. She, very likely, was more hurt with her fall than she had been willing to admit. Dalton wrote another letter to the lawyer and after learning that one of Bill's sons had charge of the little village post office, he hired a horse and rode himself to the town at the railroad station, to see it safely on its way. Just why he should be so suspicious of Mr. Ives, he did not quite know, but it was instinctive.

Fishing trips in the rowboat were successful. They were managing to have good meals at slight expense. It was the other part of their undertaking that took the money, Dalton's boat and the prospective building. But they had no regrets. There would be enough to do it and Dalton told Beth that with her attaining fame from some picture of Steeple Rocks, and his learning to fish and handle a boat, they would be "fixed for life." It was a great adventure and the lure of Pirates' Cove brought much speculation to Leslie and Sarita.

"What would it be called Pirates' Cove for," asked Leslie, "if no pirates ever went there? It isn't any worse with rocks than lots of other places around here where we go, and I think that the story of a whirlpool or current is all nonsense!"

"That's all right, Les," said Dalton, who was standing by her on the Sea Crest at the time when she made this remark. "Watch your wheel, Sis. There. Turn it that way just a little now. Good girl. But all the same, you keep out of Pirates' Cove, Leslie. So far as the name is concerned, there are plenty of Pirates' Coves on this coast. I've no doubt. It's a good name for any rather mysterious place."

"Yes, it is," said Sarita, who was waiting her turn at the wheel, "but that is it. When we *have* a Pirates' Cove right at our door, so to speak, why not get some good of it?"

Dalton laughed at this and said that they would row around into the Ives' territory "one of these days. We can see all the rocks closer there."

"Not I," firmly said Leslie, not knowing that she would be the first one to go. "It might remind Mr. Ives of our existence, if he should see us. Let's let well enough alone, folks. When we hear that we have an abstract of title and everything, you can go over to Steeple Rocks, Dal, and tell him so."

"I'll begin to cut down a few trees, then," said Dalton, with a grin. "That will bring *him* over fast enough."

But their freedom from Mr. Ives was due to another cause, as they found out at once; for when they came back from this trip, they found Peggy Ives at the camp, in animated conversation with Beth. Beth was showing Peggy their camp and she was admiring the convenience of their "bungalow tent," when Leslie and Sarita appeared in the door.

"Oh, here is our circus lady," cried Sarita before she thought. She and Leslie had so dubbed Peggy, but they had not intended to announce it.

Peggy's eyes smiled at Sarita, however, as she turned from an examination of the ruffled dressing table. "Is *that* what you call me! I *was* quite a performer, wasn't I? I just came over to tell you how much obliged I am that your brother made me jump before I got to that awful place further on. I came

to say 'thank you' to him, and then I want you all to come over to Steeple Rocks to have dinner with us."

"Thank you, Miss Peggy," Elizabeth said at once. "I scarcely think that we can do that. You see, we have chiefly camping clothes, and we are not ready for dinner at a home like yours."

"Oh, we don't always dress for dinner. Mother lets me come in to the table in my sport things. She wants to see you. Father had to go away on business the very next day after I fell, and we haven't seen a thing of him since. I would have been over before, but I did give my ankle a terrible wrench and then I was sick a little, too. Mother said it was 'shock,' but my nerves are all right!"

"I'd think that the scare you had would do something to them," Sarita remarked.

"It is ever so good of you to ask us over," Leslie added, glad that Elizabeth had started the "regrets," "but Beth is right about our clothes, Peggy. *You'd* better visit *us* here. We'll have a beach party and chowder. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Yes, it would. I'd like to; but still, we want to have you come to Steeple Rocks, too. Where are the clothes you traveled in? You will like my mother. She is nicer than my father, and I am *very sure* that she will be disappointed if you can not come. She told me to bring you to-day if you would, and if you had something else that you were doing to-day, you could come to-morrow. Then she didn't know whether you had a car, or horses, or anything, if you thought it too far to walk. It's terribly rough for a car, of course."

They were outside, now, sitting upon the various seats that Dalton had provided, from stones, or logs found in the woods.

"No, we haven't any car or any horses, but it is not too far for us to walk," gently said Elizabeth. "I still think, though, that, as Leslie says, it would be better for you to visit us here. Stay to supper with us. Dal is fishing now. Sometimes he gets a big fellow that we can scarcely eat up."

"I wouldn't dare stay this time, thank you. Mother would think that I'd had another accident. Besides, the boy that you saw the other day is with me. He stopped back in the woods on the way over from the road. I'd *love* to stay, though." Peggy looked as if she were almost ready to yield, in spite of better judgment.

"We'll hurry up the meal," Leslie suggested. "There comes Dal now. Go and ask your friend to come too. It doesn't take any time to cook fish on our portable stove, and it will be such fun to have you."

"I'd love to see how you do it! Well, I'll go and call Jack and see what he says."

Dalton reached the tent just as the "circus lady" was disappearing into the woods. "How now, Malvolio?" he inquired facetiously. "More communications from the Ives?"

"Peggy came to say 'thank you,' Dal," Beth replied. "She is a dear little girl,—though for that matter, I imagine that she is only a year or so younger than Leslie and Sarita."

"She just told me that she is fourteen," said Leslie, who had walked a little distance with Peggy. "She did it in such a funny way, saying that perhaps we thought her too young to 'play with us,' but she *would* like to know us. Imagine, Dal." Leslie looked at her brother with a funny smile that Elizabeth, naturally did not understand.

"Why is that strange?" she asked. "I know that Dal does not like Mr. Ives, from something he said; but why shouldn't he like Peggy?"

"There isn't any reason at all," Dalton answered. "She did give me a lame shoulder and a few bruises and scratches on our first acquaintance, to be sure, but that was nothing."

"This sounds as if your meeting Peggy were in a fight. Dal," Sarita said, "but hurry up with that fish. Leslie and I will help you clean it, while Beth gets the things ready to cook it."

Thus it happened that neither Leslie nor Sarita could offer a fishy hand to Jack Morgan, who came hurrying into camp with Peggy, his blue eyes smiling and his frank face interested, as they could clearly see. He acknowledged the introductions with the manner of a boy used to meeting people, and laughed when Leslie and Sarita displayed their hands, cleaning fish with Dalton over some paper which could be gathered up and burned later.

"I hated to be hurried away that day when Peggy scared the Ives family nearly to death, but her father and I did not know but she might be seriously hurt after all; and after being shaken up by the ride home, she was glad enough to be taken care of in a hurry, weren't you, Peggy?"

"M'm-h'm," nodded Peggy, watching operations with the fish. "If Dad hadn't been so cross over nothing, I wouldn't have minded so much."

"He was worried, Peggy," said Jack. Leslie thought it good of him to make excuses for his handsome but irritable host.

At once they all liked Jack Morgan. He turned out to be a cousin of Peggy's, whom Mrs. Ives had invited for the summer at Steeple Rocks. Peggy privately informed Leslie that Jack was worth a dozen of their other guests, most of them friends of her father's, she said. But almost everyone was grown up, she said, and Peggy had no chums of her own. Sarita and Leslie forthwith invited her to make chums of them, and they were not a little touched at the eagerness with which Peggy accepted the offer.

The little hurriedly-prepared supper broke any remaining ice. When Jack finally rode off with Peggy, both insisted that there must be a beach party at Steeple Rocks very soon, to which all the camping party would come. Beth thought that it would be very pleasant and accepted for the family, which was just as well; but she did not notice that while the rest commented on the kindness of the invitation, none of them committed themselves about coming.

"We did that very well, Dal," Sarita remarked afterwards. "They know that we'd love to come, but if Mr. Ives appears and says anything, they may remember that Beth was the only one who said anything definite about accepting, and even she said 'if we can.' I am pretty sure that they are all regular summer folks with money and clothes and style."

"It does not sound very well to hear Peggy criticise her father," Dalton suggested, to the girls' surprise. They had seen Peggy go up purposely but shyly to Dalton after supper, to say her "thank you," they supposed, and they had noticed Dalton's friendly response.

"I thought of it, too," said Leslie, "and I am sure that Beth did; but at that, Peggy Ives may have

reason to dread her father, even though she should not speak so before strangers. I don't trust him."

Yet it was Leslie, on the very next day, when she was at the beach, alone, who accepted an invitation to enter the Ives' launch. She was the first one of the Secret party to land at Steeple Rocks.

CHAPTER VI

A "CLOSE-UP" VIEW

Dalton had gone to the town on the railroad, where he had arranged to have his mail sent for a while, writing to the lawyer again and telling him to direct important letters to the general delivery there for the present. Sarita had a headache and was lying down for the afternoon, looked in upon occasionally by Elizabeth, who was at her usual occupation of sketching or painting. Beth ascribed Sarita's headache to some cheap candy which the girls had bought at the village and was hoping that a little soreness about Sarita's throat would not amount to anything.

Leslie, who had been in the ocean earlier in the day with Elizabeth, was a bit of bright color on the beach in a red frock and sweater to match. She was easily seen from the launch, where figures waved at her and pointed toward the dock, a small one at the end of the town nearest the Secrest headland, as Peggy had begun to call it.

They were beckoning her to come, Leslie saw; and making a pile of her shells, for gathering them was her latest occupation, she ran toward the little dock. There, before she arrived the pretty launch was bobbing up and down inside the breakwater.

"Come on for a cruise, Leslie!" called Peggy. "It's grand this afternoon. We'll bring you back in time for anything."

Jack was out on the rough boards to help Leslie inside of the launch. It was really not necessary to accept or refuse, only to climb in.

A large, dark woman looked critically at Leslie and Leslie found no sympathy in her eyes when, after she was seated, she met her glance. "Madame Kravetz, this is Leslie Secrest. Madame teaches me, Leslie. Where is Sarita?"

"She has a headache and Beth is hoping that it doesn't mean tonsillitis. Sarita wore a thin dress and forgot her sweater when we went out last night, but Beth is dosing her and perhaps it will not amount to anything." Leslie was wondering a little about Peggy's governess. She did not look French, and her name was certainly not French. She might be one of those Swiss who are part French and part German. Leslie did not like her expression.

Jack was running the launch. Out to sea they started; then, after a time, they made for the bay, which was better for launches than the sea, which was growing rough. For a while they cruised around among the fishing boats and a few pretty sail-boats until Peggy directed Jack to head for Steeple Rocks.

"Take Leslie through the channel, Jack, and show her our little harbor in our own bay."

Madam Kravetz started to say something, but closed her thin lips rather tightly instead. Leslie thought that she had been about to make an objection, but she was having too good a time to think much about their chaperon.

The channel was interesting. Jack was careful between rocks at the entrance, but the distance widened as they proceeded. At their right a narrow islet with high rocks kept the force of the ocean from the channel and other rocks made a breakwater for the Ives' harbor, "Ives Bay."

"People are often afraid when we take them through the channel for the first time," said Peggy, "especially if they have heard the stories about Pirates' Cove. But we tell them that the channel is deep and safe even for a boat of fair size, if they veer away a little from the rocks on the Cove side."

Peggy nodded toward the rocks at their left over which tossing waters left their spray. "Dad showed Jack where to go and where not to go," she added. "I just *love* Steeple Rocks, Leslie, and I wish that you would come here a lot."

Leslie saw that Madame Kravetz looked annoyed. She almost turned her back upon the girls and looked out over the boat's edge with a frown. "These are Beth's 'Cathedral Rocks,'" Leslie replied to Peggy. "She loves them, more than any of us. Beth is an artist, you know. But we all love to look at them and I like any rock on the coast. They beat sand for beauty any day, though I will say that for bathing, you may give me a sandy beach."

Little waves lapped the shore near the dock where Jack skilfully brought their boat. Leslie felt thrilled, as she confided to Sarita later, to see a pretty sailboat tied there, together with other boats of various sorts. Dear me, they could have everything they wanted, she supposed.

In response to Leslie's exclamation over the number of boats, Peggy said that her father had a large yacht, too, that had to be docked in the other bay. "We wondered if that larger dock were not yours," said Leslie. "I think that you are a very lucky girl, Peggy, to have so much fun."

"But after all, Leslie, it's *people* that make fun and good times, not *things*, or even places, though I like to cruise." Peggy frowned and looked thoughtful, while Leslie wondered again. But now Jack was offering to help the ladies out of the boat "What are you going to do now?" asked Madame Kravetz.

"Oh, I want to show Leslie all over Steeple Rocks. Jack and I have been intending to explore them more ourselves, but we haven't had time, with all the company we have had."

"No,—and you haven't time now," coldly said Peggy's governess. "Your mother will expect to meet your friend, since you have brought her here; and then it will be necessary to see her home before long, if her sister does not worry about what has become of her."

"Oh, you always think up such horrid things, Madame K," rather pettishly Peggy said. "All right, though, for I want Mother to see Leslie."

It was quite a climb to reach the top of the headland and then, indeed, they were only at the beginning of the higher mass known as Steeple Rocks. But good steps had been made, with a strong railing, that made the ascent easy to the young people. Madame Kravetz, also, climbed easily.

When they reached the top of the steps, they walked from the upper platform to a rocky expanse which was evidently the rear of the Steeple Rocks garden, for presently they came among little trees, planted with decorative intent, and Leslie found herself within a formal garden. Flowers were

blossoming and Leslie would have liked to linger, had not Peggy hurried her on to show her the house, an immense affair, of how many rooms Leslie could only guess. There were gables and eaves and corners and masses of stone. There were chimneys and bay windows and balconies. From the rear they went around to the front, past a porte-cochere, where a big car was standing.

The entrance was particularly beautiful, Leslie thought, with wide steps and pillars. Great flags of stone made the porch floor. Light wicker chairs stood about and a long wicker couch was piled with pretty cushions in gay colors. "And they don't want *us* to have even a log cabin!" Leslie thought, in a moment of resentment.

But no one could be resentful with Peggy, who was the most hospitable creature imaginable. Jack, too, felt the responsibility of making Leslie have a good time. Peggy took Leslie to her own pretty room first, where both girls made themselves a little more presentable. Leslie was glad that her dress and sweater were respectable, since she was to meet Mrs. Ives. Gathering shells on the beach had not improved the appearance of her hands, which were now washed with Peggy's pet soap, fragrant and soothing. Then they joined Jack on the porch again, to find him at a little table behind tall glasses of delicious lemonade and a dish of cakes. This was almost better than camping! But never mind. The Secretsts, too, would have a house one of these days!

Through the trees they could see a tennis court where active figures were playing and other people were about. White, red, blue, orange, all sorts of colors, had a share in the sport costumes. "It's doubles," said Peggy. "There, it's over. Now they will be coming in, I think."

In a few minutes small groups, perhaps a dozen people in all, sauntered toward the house, Mrs. Ives hurrying on before the rest. "That's Mother in the white," said Peggy, going to the steps to stop her.

"Oh, Mother, stop a minute, won't you? Leslie's here."

Mrs. Ives halted and turned toward Leslie and Jack. "Yes, Peggy, if Jack will order some lemonade and cakes for us all. That is what I was hurrying for. So this is Leslie?" She cordially extended a hand to Leslie, who rose and stepped forward to greet her, rather surprised to find her so young, in appearance, at least, with her bobbed hair and youthful dress. Referring to their kindness to Peggy, Mrs. Ives renewed her invitation.

But Leslie saw that her hostess was not speaking very seriously. "Thank you, Mrs. Ives," she said. "We were glad to be invited, but there have been things to hinder us (indeed there had), and then, we are scarcely prepared to mingle with your guests. We came to camp, you know."

"That will make no difference," cordially said Mrs. Ives, "but perhaps you will best enjoy the beach party that Peggy is planning. Peggy, you arrange it and have what you want. Excuse me, Miss Leslie, I must go on."

Although Leslie felt that Mrs. Ives pleasant cordiality was not assumed, she saw that her mind was wandering toward her older guests during the time of their brief conversation. One of the ladies was waiting for her and both went into the large room which Leslie had noticed as she passed in the hall. Sounds of music presently reached them.

"Now that's over," coolly Peggy remarked, "and we've gotten rid of Madame. Jack, I want to take Leslie to my room and talk with her a little bit. Will you be ready to take her back in the launch when we come down?"

"I surely will, but you'd better make it snappy if you don't want to have Miss Beth worrying over what has become of her wandering sister."

Leslie looked at her watch. There was time for a little visit only. She followed Peggy back into the attractive room with its comfortable, summer fittings.

So near the sea, the house was suitably screened from the strong winds by the pile of headland rocks with their two towers. Peggy, however, considered this a decided drawback, since there was no good view of the sea from any of the windows. "But Dad said that I would be glad sometimes not to be blown away or think that I was going to sail off with the house! He wanted it close up against the rocks, and you can see for yourself that part of the house fairly joins them. Dad has his office there and his own little library. He's a shivery sort of man, anyhow, used to Florida in the winters, you know."

"How would I know, sweet Peggy?"

"Probably you wouldn't," laughed Peggy. "That is what my own father used to call me, 'sweet Peggy,' after the old song."

"Oh, then, Mr. Ives is really not your father," said the surprised Leslie. But that accounted for some of Peggy's rather disrespectful speeches.

"No, and I ought to be ashamed of myself for not liking him better. I can have anything I want and he doesn't care. O Leslie, I wish that you would let me talk to you about things sometimes! You are all so happy, and we aren't, very, here. I don't know just what is the matter, either!"

"Why, of course you may talk to me, Peggy! It seems to me that you might be happy enough, a nice, pretty girl with everything to make you happy. Why, child, we've had real trouble,—well, I suppose that you have been through that, too, losing your father."

"Yes, though I was pretty small, then. Haven't you very much to live on, either?"

Peggy was quite frank in her question, but Leslie, to whom having money or not having it was only an agreeable or disagreeable incident, did not mind. "Not so very much, Peggy," she answered, "but enough to get along and more than some people. Then we are always expecting to do and be something wonderful, you see!" Leslie was laughing a little, but Peggy understood.

"Perhaps that's it," Peggy said. "Nobody here wants to do anything but have a good time. If I had been allowed to have one of my girl friends here this summer, I suppose I would have been satisfied. But when Mother invited Jack, even, Dad made a terrible to-do about it and almost said that he should not come; but he had already been invited. Dad said that he did not want any 'curious boys' around. Leslie, there is something funny going on and I wish I could find out what it is. I'm pretty sure that Mother doesn't know either, and she worries. She has been worried ever since that old foreigner came to be a sort of secretary or something to Dad. He manages his business, Dad says sometimes. He's a Count. Madame Kravetz belongs to the nobility, too."

"From what country?" asked Leslie, interested.

"Russia, I think, though she claims to be French. Old Count Herschfeld is supposed to be Austrian. You'll see him sometime. He has fishy eyes and is very straight and tall and pale, and has a slit for a mouth, and walks like a soldier. Probably he was some sort of a general in the war."

"If I were you, Peggy, I wouldn't worry over anything that you can't help. You will be able to enjoy this wonderful place. It must be great to be in Florida for the winters, too."

"I suppose it is. I never thought about it. Mother married Dad when I was about six years old. He was nicer then than he is now. We travel so much that I have a teacher with me all the time. But I heard Mother talking to Dad about *not* putting me in school, so I suppose that boarding school will be the next thing for me."

"Do you like your governess?"

"I do *not*. To myself I call her 'Crabby.' Kravetz, Kravy, Crabby, you see. Sometime I will forget before company!"

"Better not," smiled Leslie. "But if they let you, suppose you stay around with us a good deal this summer. You and Sarita and I will be a sort of—'triumvirate,' you know. Dal will be terribly busy pretty soon, building our log cabin, and we'll have to run our launch half the time without him, and fish in the small boat, too. He is taking most of his fun now, he says, though, of course, he will like to build the house, too. He is crazy about the woods and about making things and having a house of our own. We sold our house when Elizabeth got a place to teach in a bigger town only a few miles away."

"I wish Elizabeth taught me," said Peggy. "I could learn more if I liked the teacher and was sure that what she said was true."

Leslie was quite impressed by that statement. She had not liked the face of the governess either.

"I'm going to be real good and see if they will not let me off from lessons, though Mother said that Madame Kravy needed the money and the place. But she could stay just the same. Dad said the other day that he needed some one 'to help him in his office.'"

Leslie wondered what his business could be that he carried it on in this remote spot. But he might be some big executive who had to keep in touch with affairs and write "letters and things."

Busily they talked. Peggy thanked Leslie for asking her to be a member of a "triumvirate" and said that if Sarita did not mind she surely would belong. "Jack is sort of lost, too, without anybody of his own age. Perhaps Dalton would not mind if he hung around when he was building."

"Well, Peggy, I think that I ought to tell you something, if you promise not to say a word to Elizabeth about it. You see Beth was all used up when school was out, and if she can only have a little while to be happy and get strong again, why then it won't make so much difference what happens, and I suppose that she will have to know about this. Now it *might* interfere with the 'triumvirate.'"

"Tell, me. I'll not say a word. I can't imagine what it is."

"I'm sure you never could. You see, Peggy, your father may not *want* you to come to see us, or have us out here, or anything. Was he there when your mother sent word for us to come?"

"No."

"I thought so." Then Leslie gave the details of their first meeting with Mr. Ives, summing up the case quite clearly. "So, you see, if Mr. Ives wants to get us off the land, and we stand up for what we think are our rights, it may not be so very pleasant all around. We'd always like you, Peggy, but it might be embarrassing for you to have much to do with us."

"It would be a great deal more pleasant than not to have anything to do with you. Little Peggy will try diplomacy. I'll find out what Dad is up to; but if I don't, and the position in the triumvirate is still open, I'll fill it, you can be sure."

"Well, then, Peggy, don't do anything you oughtn't for our sakes."

"How about little Peggy's sake, Leslie?"

"Same thing. But if your mother lets you, you will certainly be welcome *on* the Sea Crest and in the Eyrie pretty soon."

"When shall we have the first meeting of the 'triumvirate'?"

"Say to-morrow."

"To-morrow it is."

The faintly ticking little wrist watches announced to the girls who glanced at them that they must bring the visit to a close. They ran downstairs and Leslie strolled out, while Peggy hunted up her cousin. In a few minutes the three were going down the steps to the Ives' launch, which carried them past the foaming rocks and into the bay toward Leslie's homing spot, the little rude dock at the base of the Secret headland. Pirates' Cove looked just as interesting and deadly as ever, as they passed it. The Sea Crest bobbed up and down gently in recognition of the other boat, and Jack gallantly handed Leslie to a safe foothold and saw her up the more difficult steps, before he took the wheel from Peggy and waved a goodbye. The little launch chugged away. Leslie stopped at the top to lean upon a rock and watch the boat and her new friends. What a queer household there was at Steeple Rocks. Mr. Ives was not Peggy's father. She was glad of that. She was sure that others there beside Madame Kravetz were foreign. The lady who waited for Mrs. Ives and joined her had spoken to her in French, probably because Mrs. Ives knew French; for she heard the guest "jabber" something else to another lady that followed them.

There was something queer going on, Peggy had said. Of course. It was that, perhaps, that made Mr. Ives try to send them all away. Leslie's thoughts were busy with impressions received at Steeple Rocks.

CHAPTER VII

RIGHTS ASSURED

On Leslie's arrival in camp, she found only Beth there. Something savory was steaming on the portable stove, which stood out under the trees, protected from any breeze too strong both by the natural screen and one manufactured from canvas.

"Soup to-night, Leslie," said Beth. "Sarita thought that she could enjoy it. Step into the tent and see what you think of that water color. I finished it. Tell me that the sky looks like the one we see here!"

"Oh, it does, Beth," called Leslie in a moment from the tent. Then she came out to help. "It is lovely, Beth, the prettiest thing you have done yet. Where is Sarita?"

"Back in the woods with her glass. The last I saw of her she was trailing a warbler and trying to find its nest. I think that she called it a redstart. She is ever so much better, though rather weak after that headache. Her throat is a little raw, but she will escape any further trouble, I think. I hope that Dal will get back in time for supper. I was almost worried about you, gone so long."

"Peggy and Jack picked me up from the beach and I had a trip to Steeple Rocks. There doesn't seem to be anything to do, Beth,—do you care if I go to hunt Sarita?"

"Not at all."

Back into the fragrant woods Leslie strolled and met Sarita coming with Dalton by the little trail, now quite a path of their making, that led through the woods from the road.

The two were laughing and talking as they came and Dalton waved triumphantly a letter as he saw Leslie. "Letter from Jim Lyon, Leslie. We have the abstract of title safely reposing in our deposit box, where Jim says it had better stay. We are to refer Mr. Ives to him. This land never *did* belong to Mr. Ives. He sent me a little list of names of the owners. So Mr. Ives is—mistaken! In other words, it's all a bluff, for some unknown reason, to get rid of us, or grab the land, or something."

"Then we can go right on and have our shack! How grand! Sarita, if your head wasn't shaky, we'd have a war-dance right here where they used to have 'em!"

"What's the matter with Sarita?" Dalton inquired. "She does look a little peaked."

"Oh, I'm all right now, Dal. Beth was sure that I was going to be sick, but it was only a sick headache, I think. Beth's been doctoring me all day. My throat is a little raw and that's all. Let's hurry up to tell Beth the good news."

"You have forgotten that she does not know the bad news."

"Sure enough. Why not tell her now?"

"No,—I—think not," hesitatingly said Dalton. "I've another letter for her from Jim,—I told him that she did not know what Mr. Ives said and that we are trying to keep her from worry. I transacted some business about the building, and that will be enough news for Beth about my trip. If Beth and Peggy don't know, it will make relations less strained, I think."

"I told Peggy to-day, Dal. I almost had to. Do you mind?"

"You have as much right as I have, Leslie, to manage affairs with Peggy. Tell me about it."

"I will. I'll tell nearly everything at supper, then we'll have a private confab later. What do you think? I was at the very stronghold of the enemy,—Steeple Rocks!"

Leslie enjoyed the surprise of Dalton and Sarita, but she continued to speak of Beth. "We'd better let her have a little longer time to rest. This doesn't spoil *our* fun at all, but she might worry and not sleep."

Dalton wore a wide grin. "Your freedom from care shows your confidence in your natural protector," said he, tapping his chest.

Leslie laughed with Sarita, but told her brother that he was more nearly right than he thought. "Under these circumstances I'd certainly hate to be here without you!"

"Thanks for the tribute, Les; I'm almost overcome, but I think that I can manage to get into camp without assistance."

But Dalton pretended to stagger a little, while both laughing girls ran to his support just as they emerged from the deeper wood into the clearing. Elizabeth, watching the soup, looked up, startled to see Dalton apparently in need of help, but it was evident in a moment that it was only what she termed "some silly joke" as she summoned them to supper.

"Now Beth, don't look at me in that tone of voice," jovially urged Dalton. "See this letter that I have for you? Don't halt supper, though, while you read it. I'm half starved."

"I think that I can manage to wait until after supper," dryly returned Elizabeth, but she flushed when she saw the letter.

"Nice old Beth," crooned Leslie. "I'm doing all the clearing up after supper, and you shall have a free day to-morrow, too, shan't she, Sarita?"

"I *think* so! Poor Beth would just get into some inspiring mood for her latest masterpiece, when she would happen to think that I ought to have some medicine, or a drink, or something."

"Nonsense! I had a lovely, quiet day."

But Beth was tired and after reading her letter she went to bed, while Leslie cleared away the evidences of the meal and washed the dishes with Sarita's help. Dalton then built a fire out on the rocks which overlooked bay and sea and there they toasted marshmallows and talked, Sarita wrapped like a mummy, as she declared, to keep her from too strong a breeze. They put her in a sheltered spot, but they sat for a long time about the cheerful blaze, talking over the events of the day and other things.

Dalton gave the details of his trip to town more fully than he had done before Beth at supper. By the firelight the girls read again the letter from Mr. Lyon to Dalton. "Here's what he says, Sarita," said Leslie, leaning where the light would fall upon the page.

"I'm glad that you suggested our coming to Maine, Dalton. It may be possible, though we do not

want to drive with a big camping outfit. Can such things be purchased near you? I believe that you ordered yours sent on. I may as well take my vacation there." Here Leslie pursed up her mouth and gave Sarita a comical glance.

"You may imagine how the children shouted when I read them your message. Marsh can not come, but Mary looked as if the mere suggestion of Maine breezes were refreshing. We are having very hot weather. I will wait to hear again from you before making definite plans."

"He will also wait to hear what Beth thinks, I imagine," said Sarita.

"We can let them use the bungalow tent if we get some building done by the time they want to come," Dalton suggested. "Now that we've had the brilliant idea of an Eyrie first, here on the rocks, that ought to be finished *pronto*, and its one big room will do for you girls if our company comes before the shack in the woods gets finished. That will take longer. But I've ordered lumber for the Eyrie and it's going to back right up against the rocks. We are going to have a frame inside, then use the rocks around here for the outside, a real stone house, you see, girls, and I shall have it built with a little window looking over the rocks and out to sea, our real 'lookout.' You girls can help gather the smaller stones if you want to, and Beth may have, some artistic ideas.

"A man is coming to help me. I've ordered a wheelbarrow and a lot of things. Just wait till the truck comes to-morrow!"

"Shall you begin to cut down the trees that you have marked, Dal, now that you know our title is all right?"

"I am not sure. Cutting down trees will mean that someone from Steeple Rocks will be right over. I think that it might be better to get the Eyrie right up, with a lock on the door."

"Aha! Our castle, Sarita!" cried Leslie. "You are right, Dal. Now let me tell you all about Peggy. She wants to be with us as much as possible, Sarita. It was too pathetic. Imagine not being happy with all the advantages that she has! But she told me that Mr. Ives is not her real father."

Leslie paused to let this statement take effect. "Good!" Sarita exclaimed, and Dalton, too, nodded his approval.

"Then, her governess, too, is Some queer foreigner and an old Count Somebody, that is in some business or other with Mr. Ives, is there and her mother has worried ever since he appeared on the scene somewhere in Florida,—"

"I admire your definite way of telling the facts," Dalton remarked.

"I want you to get only the main fact, Dal, the 'atmosphere' of Steeple Rocks. From what Peggy says it is clear that she is uneasy and that there is some mystery there. If we take Peggy into our society, Sarita, we are very likely to find out what it is, and anyhow the kiddie needs us, I think. She may be as old as we are in some ways, and again she is just a little girl. But she is true blue, I believe, nothing deceitful about her."

"You can take her around on our launch, Les," Dalton suggested. "I'll be too busy for a while to take out the boats, and you can run the launch as well as I can now."

"I'll do it. We'll cruise around and fish sometimes. By the way, Jack Morgan may come over to 'help you with the building,' he said, when he deposited me on our rocks; and Peggy announced that both of them would be over to-morrow."

Dalton's grin was again in evidence. "We'll see who wins out, the folks that want to get rid of us, or those that want us to stay," and to emphasize his remark, he threw another stick on the fire.

By the flickering light they strolled around to look at the place where the Eyrie was to be built. As in the case of the Steeple Rocks home, it could be built against the protecting rocks, in a natural "corner," where the rocks of the headland might form almost two walls. But Dalton explained that it would be better to have a good frame inside, and both girls said that as Dal always knew what he was about they would leave it to him to show them by doing it.

It was quite late when Dalton left them, but Sarita and Leslie lingered. "Be in pretty soon, Dal," said Leslie. They turned into a favorite corner of the rocks, where they, could perch upon one and see over a ledge. "Why, look, Sarita," continued Leslie. "There is a big ship. See all the lights!"

"It is either moving very, very slowly out there," said Sarita, "or standing still. Look! There's a signal of some sort."

Climbing around the rocks, careful of slipping in the dark, Leslie and Sarita found a post from which they could see the entire bay and its surrounding waters. Neither had said so, but each was wondering whether there might not be some answering lights from the village or from Steeple Rocks.

It was from the village, however, that a motor boat put out. They could hear the chugging sound of its engine and watched its light. It was eerie there, with the sound of the breakers, the faint noise of the little engine as it went farther away, the great dark headlands and woods, the misty air from the ocean. Sarita drew close to Leslie and took her hand. "It is all so big that it scares me," she whispered.

"I love it," Leslie whispered back, "but I imagine that it's just as well for nobody to see us here."

"Let's go back," hastily said Sarita.

"If you want to, but who could see us in this dark?" Leslie looked up at the sky glittering with stars. "If it were moonlight it would be different. But perhaps we'd better not talk. Somebody might be snooping around to see if any of us were up."

Sarita, not quite herself yet, sat down on the rocks at hand, but Leslie stood with deepest interest, watching the moving light. "Now they are there," she whispered to Sarita; "Come on, child, I'm going to see you to bed and then come back with my flashlight to see where that motorboat comes back to,—don't you admire my English?"

"I'll wait with you, Leslie."

"No, not after the day you have had. I ought to have been more thoughtful. Come on, honey-child, if only to save me from Beth's reproofs."

Leslie never knew how wise a move she had made, for when she and Sarita had been in the tent for a little while, moving carefully, with only an occasional flash of the flashlight, in order not to disturb Beth, a watcher among the rocks moved slowly away toward the village. Their fire on the rocks had been noted.

It was just as well, too, that Leslie waited for some little time after Sarita was in her cot before leaving the tent again. She knew that it would be some time, very likely, before the launch would return, especially if, as she thought, they were engaged in rum-running. In consequence, she, too, undressed, slipping on her warm bathrobe and her rubber-soled tennis shoes for her little venture. She grew sleepy as she sat for a little while on the edge of her cot, wrapped in a blanket. Then, when she found herself nodding, she roused with a start! Oh, she must have gone to sleep and it would be too late!

But she looked at her watch and found that only twenty minutes had passed since she and Sarita had come in.

It was a little spooky, Leslie thought, to go out to the rocks alone. She had half a notion to call Dalton, but when she tiptoed to his tent she heard his even breathing and had not the heart to waken him. Coming from the darkness of the tent, it did not seem so black under the starlight. She kept to the path and occasional flashes from her light showed her the ground before her. Their fire was out.

When she reached the spot where she and Sarita had stood, she was surprised to see the launch half way toward the bay. It had not taken them long to load, she thought. And a second surprise, though not so much of one, either, was to see the launch speeding in the direction of Steeple Rocks, not by way of the bay and the channel, but from the ocean, doubtless to the Ives' bay.

Something, then, was to be taken from the ship to Mr. Ives. Perhaps it wasn't liquor. Perhaps Mr. Ives was a jewel smuggler. Perhaps he wasn't! Leslie laughed to herself at another idea. Mr. Ives was away. It might be that he himself was on board the vessel and was delivered here instead of being taken further down to the port. That was probably it. Still—

CHAPTER VIII

THE EYRIE

True to the arrangement, Dalton's man arrived the next morning with two trucks instead of one and another man to assist. They were real New Englanders, with speech quaint to these young people. The head man told the girls that the shack would be up by night. They thought that he was joking, but if it had not been for a few hindrances it might have been accomplished. It was necessary, however, to fasten it very securely to the rocks, for lack of much foundation, though Sarita declared that it fulfilled every requirement of a house founded upon the rock.

It was surprising how much two men with Dalton's trained assistance could accomplish in one day, and they left for home well satisfied with what had been done. As some more lumber was needed the men drove the trucks back to town, but they promised to come early and expected to stay the next night and, indeed, until the Eyrie was completed.

Neither Jack nor Peggy put in an appearance, but the girls scarcely thought about it, in the excitement of the growing building. Leslie had told Sarita and Dalton about her having seen the launch move toward Steeple Rocks, and both girls related what had happened before to Dalton. He said little, but seemed to agree with them in regard to the possibilities.

That night it was the girls who retired before Dalton. He was fussing around, as Leslie expressed it, seeing that tools were under cover and everything about their materials in order, when they left him and went into their tent.

Remembering what warnings had been given him, Dalton felt a little uneasy, now that they were actually launched in building, though in so small a way. He hoped that no one had discovered the undertaking so far.

Finally he went to bed and slept till some time past midnight when he woke with an uneasy feeling. The surf was booming beyond the camp and the rocks. He heard an owl hooting in the woods. Then he thought he heard sounds as if someone or something was moving through the thickets or brushing by the bushes along the path. It would be hard to make one's way through this grove without some noise.

Again he heard the cracking of a stick. Reaching for his gun, Dalton sprang out of his cot and peered through the flap of his tent. A dark figure was stealthily entering the camp, making its way toward the pile of lumber. It was carrying something. This was placed against the lumber and a match was lit.

Dalton waited no longer. He stepped out from his tent, directed his gun toward the stars, away from the tents, and fired. Crack! The shot reverberated among the rocks and the intruder lost no time in getting out of range and sight. Dalton smiled grimly as he ran in apparent pursuit, but really to see that the dropped match had gone out. He darted behind the lumber, then, not knowing but the shot might be returned. The sounds of someone crashing through the woods came to him and he came to the conclusion that he had successfully frightened away his enemy. Most likely he would not want to be identified, Dalton thought. There was not much danger that there would be any battle now.

"Oh, Dal! What is the matter? What—are you hurt?"

Here was Leslie, coming from the door of his tent, where she had evidently gone first to find him.

"Here, Sis,—get back to bed *instantly!* No, nobody is shot. I'm sorry that I had to wake you all up, but somebody was trying to set fire to our lumber and I had to scare him away. Did you hear him smashing through the woods?"

"Yes, and I thought that he had shot you. I was glad to see your cot empty, then I was afraid that you were shot out in the woods!"

"Go back and tell the girls what happened. We'll not be bothered again to-night; besides, I'll stay awake till daylight. You sleep on and wake me up when the men come, if I oversleep."

"All right. I don't think that Beth even woke up. Her nerves certainly have gotten cured. Sarita is awake, though. I told her I'd find out. Want my flashlight, Dal?"

"No, thank you, Les. I have my own if I need it."

"Well, don't stay where you might get hurt, then."

"No. I'm going back to the tent again, but I'll have to sneak around a little from time to time. Don't worry if you hear me."

Fortunately for Dalton, Leslie wakened early and roused her brother when the workmen arrived. Such progress was made that in a few days the entire Eyrie was complete, "lookout," stone wall and all. There was plenty of material for the wall. Boulders near at hand were pried and rolled into position and smaller stones were lifted to place above, all secured by mortar, like a brick wall. The roof, with the little window that looked toward the sea and above the rocks, took some little time, for it must be made weather-proof. But so small a shelter was soon finished. Elizabeth promised herself much fun in their finishing the inside to their liking. It was to be their watch tower as well as "The Artist's Retreat," Leslie declared.

"I'll give you a day or two more of my valuable time," said Dalton, "to put up shelves and make the step that we need at the door, then I'm going to begin on the trees. The men have another job and that is why they were willing to work overtime every day and finish this. If I decide to stay here all winter by myself, I'll have this plastered. But this boarding up will do this summer.

"The other man that I engaged for the log house can come pretty soon. My plans are fine unless something interferes. I think that I will report to Mr. Ives the matter of the man who tried to set fire to our lumber. I can't think that he would want that to happen. A fire here would spread to his own woods. Trust a man to look after his own interests, even if he is willing that something should happen to us. I don't think that he was concerned in it. It is hard to understand, unless Bill or someone works on his own in smuggling."

"You are sure that it is smuggling, Dal?"

"What else could it be?"

Then at last came Peggy and Jack, the very day after the Eyrie was completed, coming in the Ives' launch and docking where they had left Leslie. Up by the rocky steps they climbed, not seeing Sarita and Leslie, who were peering at them over the rocks.

"Welcome to our Eyrie!" cried Leslie as they reached the top.

"Oh, hello, girls," Peggy returned. "You almost scared me. I didn't know that you were so close. We just had to come as soon as we could to see what you have been doing. Have you built your Eyrie, then, or started it?"

"Just come on a little way and then turn around to your right. Couldn't you see the little lookout window from the bay?"

"Didn't notice it. Oh, how cute! And you are making the step of stones, too, with concrete."

Peggy ran around to where Dalton was on his knees, pointing up the step in front of the Eyrie door. He was so absorbed in his work that he did not look up for a moment. Then he lifted his face and saw Peggy.

"Yes; this is home-made concrete. Let's hope that it will last. Where have you been, Peggy? Leslie told us that we might expect you over some time ago. You have missed all the excitement of our first home-building."

"I know it. It's been so stupid, except for our playing tennis and cruising around a little. Jack is perishing for someone old enough for him to have real fun with. The rest of our guests are too old and I guess that they are all leaving anyhow. We couldn't come, you know. Well, yes, we *could*, but Dad was home, and I didn't want to risk having an order not to come over at all. So I told Jack that we'd just wait and say nothing till Dad left. Mother said that he was going away again, and we made no remarks at all.

"But now Dad is gone and we can have that beach party. Leslie told you, I suppose, that she told me about Dad's claiming to own your land."

Dalton was rather surprised at the way in which Peggy put it, but he answered her seriously. "Yes, Leslie told us about the visit she had with you. I hope that we shall not have any trouble with Mr. Ives. We have had word that we have an abstract of title, so we shall not leave, of course. But I scarcely think that it would be the thing for us to go to Steeple Rocks when he might not want us there. It is very kind for your mother to invite us, but you must remember that she does not know anything about it all. Can't you continue to come here instead? You girls can have all kinds of fun together."

"But we like you, too. Didn't you rescue, me from a—stony grave? I want *you* to see Steeple Rocks."

"And I confess that there is no place I should rather see." Dalton was on his feet now, replacing the boards by which they could enter the Eyrie door without setting foot upon the wide step, just completed.

Jack, Sarita and Leslie came up now, for an introduction between Jack and Dalton, and to peep within the one large room of the Eyrie. It was still quite primitive, with a sliding bar on the inside of the door to make it secure at night, and a hasp, staple and padlock on the outside, but the boards had been neatly fitted together, perpendicularly, and the rafters were not unpleasant to the eye. Already the girls had decorated them with spruce, and a bouquet of wild flowers stood upon the long shelf which Dalton had put up.

"We can't have any fireplace here," said Leslie, "but we shall in our bigger house."

"Who knows?" Dalton inquired. "We may enlarge this place sometime and make what Father expected it to be."

"Sure enough, who knows?" quoted Peggy. "I believe that Dalton will do anything he wants to do!"

Dalton gave Peggy a big brotherly smile. "Thanks," he said. "I'm going to try, but things do not always turn out as you expect, Peggy."

"I should say they don't!"

THE FIRST TREE FALLS

"Dal, are you sure that we ought to do this?"

Elizabeth Secrest eyed her brother seriously.

"Yes, Beth. I know that you are thinking about the money, and I don't blame you. You have had a hard enough time to earn our income, and if I slash around and spend all our principal, you'll be thinking 'What's the use?' But Beth, there is a method in my madness, and if we get a livable house up, next summer you can bring some of the girls, charge them a reasonable price for room, and board, too, or let them cook for themselves. Then I ought to make a little money out of the launch. There's a little colony only a few miles away, if we don't get enough people here to pay."

"It is a pity to spoil our woods with people," said Beth.

"But we'll make the camp ourselves," urged Dalton, "and have only nice folks. How would a girls' camp strike you, and I might have a few boys somewhere?"

"No, thanks. I get enough of that in school time."

"Poor Beth! But suppose we manage it so you do not have to teach during the year. If I got some one to play chaperon and run the affairs, would you be hostess and perhaps teach a class of girls in sketching or something in your line?"

"Dal, I'd hate it. Wait till Leslie grows up a little further to try all that. You wouldn't like it yourself."

"I'd like anything that took you out of the school room. But I have another plan for that. All right, Beth; but just the same, we'll go ahead now. There are possibilities here. I promise you to spend as little as possible and to do as much of the work myself as I can."

"I don't want you to kill yourself and not to have any of the fun, fishing and all." Beth had a sympathetic voice that always carried more meaning than her words themselves.

"I have already had a great time with that, and I shall again, later. But you know how I like this sort of thing. I'd like to be a big contractor some day. The first tree comes down to-morrow morning!"

Dalton had another reason for working steadily at their camp. The experience with the man who had tried to set fire to their lumber had made quite an impression. Dalton had talked it over with Leslie, who thought that it might be the Eyrie which could be especially objectionable, since it had the view of the bay and any operations there.

"You don't suppose, Dal, that they could think us spying?"

"They might think that we would report them if we saw anything unusual; but if they think that we are here on purpose it will reassure them when we build a larger and more permanent home,—unless all this comes from Mr. Ives, and he is really determined to get us away, for some reason."

"We girls are going to try to find out."

"Don't use Peggy unless she wants to be in it, whether her father is concerned or not."

"What do you think of me, Dal Secrest! Peggy shall know everything that we know, if she lends herself to our investigating. She was thunderstruck when she found out about our having an abstract of title, and Mr. Ives' name not even mentioned."

Dalton nodded. "Peggy is an unusually nice girl, but she is considerably younger and hasn't much judgment. Don't let her get into trouble at home, if you can help it. As for me, I'm going to be right on the job most of the time, and while we are putting up the log house, I'll keep a man to sleep right here in camp. I would sleep in the Eyrie now, to watch it, if it were not for being farther away from you girls."

"How about our sleeping there, then? With the padlock off, they will know that someone is inside, and there will be enough air with that one window open on the side of the ocean."

"Someone might climb up on the roof," laughed Dalton.

"Yes, but I'd like to see them climb out and into the window. There's a sheer drop of I don't know how many feet. And one thing, I don't see how they could set fire to the Eyrie."

Dalton did not tell Leslie of what he had been afraid, namely that Eyrie and rocks might be blown up with dynamite. But he finally consented to have the girls move over to the Eyrie, which suited Beth; nor did she know how many times Dalton wakened at first and came over to see if Eyrie and girls were safe.

But Dalton Secrest was not easily moved from any purpose that he was convinced to be a wise one. The first tree fell by his ax at the appointed time. All the girls, Peggy included, were on hand to watch operations, and Jack arrived, from an errand to the village, just in time. "There!" said Dalton, leaning on his ax, "that's done!"

The girls, warned away before the tree fell, came around to look at it. "Doesn't it seem a pity to cut any tree down!" Leslie exclaimed.

"Yes, it does," Dalton acknowledged, "but you need not be afraid. I appreciate this woods perhaps more than you do, Leslie. But you notice that the trees are all growing too thickly here. I shall cut two more out." To illustrate, Dalton gave a sharp blow with the ax to one of the trees which he had marked.

"Have you another ax, Dalton?" Jack inquired. "What is the matter with my taking a hand in this?"

"Only the fact that your host, Mr. Ives, does not want us to build here," frankly Dalton replied.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Jack, not much impressed with the news. He took the ax from Dalton's hand and applied it to the base of the tree with some skill. Peggy jumped up and down like some little child and clapped her hands.

Dalton rubbed his hands and stood back to rest a little. Leslie watched Jack with some admiration. They were just beginning to get acquainted with Jack, who was not as talkative as Peggy, but manly and capable. Leslie had an idea that he was not from as wealthy a home as Steeple Rocks, though he seemed to have clothes for all occasions. She was glad that he was related to Peggy and not to Mr.

Ives. It would be hard to like anybody that really belonged to Mr. Ives, she thought, though she was conscious that she might not be quite fair to the suave gentleman, so unpleasant had been their relations.

"Go on, Jack; that was good," Peggy was saying. "It will be such fun to watch a real log house go up. Didn't the pioneers always help each other?"

"I fancy not when a man was building on land belonging to someone else!"

All of the young people were startled at this new voice which came from behind them, as they faced the tree and Jack. They turned to see a tall, straight man of possibly sixty years, looking coldly upon the scene.

"Count Herschfeld!" exclaimed Jack.

Peggy shrugged her shoulders. "I rather think there isn't anything of the sort here," said she.

Dalton tossed aside the ax, which Jack had half unconsciously handed him, and stepped forward. "And who may you be?" he asked quietly, setting his lips firmly as he stopped speaking.

"Introduce us, Peggy," sneeringly said the older man.

Peggy threw back her head and stepped from beside Sarita toward Dalton. "This is Count Herschfeld, Dalton. Count Herschfeld, this is my friend, Dalton Secrest, who is building on his *own land*! Miss Elizabeth, Count Herschfeld,—Miss Leslie and Miss Sarita—" Peggy began to be embarrassed with the number of introductions. She was not very old, and Elizabeth put an arm around her, as she stepped forward in great surprise.

"Are you visiting at Steeple Rocks, Count Herschfeld?" Elizabeth inquired, starting to put out her hand, then remembering that his first remark had not been friendly. What could it mean? She glanced at the faces around her. Jack, frowning, was leaning against the tree. Sarita and Leslie had drawn together and were looking at the Count with anything but friendly expressions. It seemed as if they were not as surprised as she.

"You could scarcely call it visiting, Miss Secrest. I conduct Mr. Ives' business affairs very largely."

"I see. Can we do anything for you this morning?"

"Most certainly; you can order your brother to refrain from cutting any more of Mr. Ives' trees, and I am sorry to inform you, as Mr. Ives informed you some time ago, that we should like to have you withdraw from these woods."

"But they *belong* to us, Count Herschfeld. There must be some grave mistake on your part. My father purchased this land, which is duly recorded and we hold deed and abstract of title in the usual way. My father was a lawyer, sir, and it is not very likely that he would accept a doubtful title." Beth's voice sounded very courteous and sweet, but she was as dignified as she was in the school room.

"Good old Beth," whispered Leslie to Sarita. "She knew all about it all the time. We could have saved ourselves all that trouble if we had told her!"

"But you did it to save *her* the worry. It's a joke on us, all the same!"

What would the Count say next, Leslie thought. He could not have expected them to be so sure of their rights.

With a sneering smile on his face, Count Herschfeld stood there, bracing himself now with his walking stick. "I have no doubt that you think yourselves within your rights," began he, but Dalton stepped up to him with a card on which he had been scribbling while Beth talked.

"Here is the address of our lawyer, Count Herschfeld," said Dalton. "You may wish to telegraph him. I want to have no trouble over this, but neither do I propose to be hindered. I have looked up the records purposely before beginning to build. We are not harming any one, Count Herschfeld, and we want to be let alone. I hope that we shall not be obliged to seek any protection from the law!" Dalton spoke strongly and meaningfully.

Count Herschfeld lifted his eyebrows at that, but the sneer on his face remained. "I will report what you say to Mr. Ives," he replied, "also the felling of the trees."

"Mean old thing!" Peggy cried, as the Count disappeared through the trees. "Probably he'll tell about our being here and Jack's helping! He couldn't have heard the chopping clear from Steeple Rocks, could he?"

"No, Peggy," said Dalton. "Beth, we'll have to tell you what happened before. It's a good joke on us. We have spent lots of time and trouble finding out, and here you knew all about the abstract of title and everything."

"It was my business to know, Dal. Why didn't you tell me?" Elizabeth was quite amazed that she had not been informed at first.

"Mr. Ives came right over, and you were so worn out that we didn't have the heart to give you anything to worry about. That was all. Write to Jim, Beth, and hurry up his coming!"

"I'd scarcely like to do that, Dal,"—but Elizabeth was smiling. "Suppose we just go right on, as you have been doing, Dal. We have the right of it. I am surprised that a man of Mr. Ives' wealth and position should do this. Do you know, Peggy, why he thinks he owns this land?"

"I don't think that he thinks he owns it," replied Peggy, her cheeks red with excitement. "He wants you to go away, and I don't think that he is very smart about it, either. He might know that you would know what you are about."

"Why should he want us to go away, Peggy?" queried the still amazed Elizabeth. "What harm could we do here? Does he want all this woods and country about the bay to himself?"

"Something like that," Peggy agreed. "He was fussing at Mother, for 'bringing so many guests' to the place, and he said that he came here to get 'away from civilization.' Seems to me, though, that he makes a great many trips back into it!"

"Perhaps he is obliged to," kindly said Beth. "What is his business, Peggy?"

"I don't know. He doesn't drink, if that is what you are thinking. He has wines for those foreigners, friends of his, and the 'Counts' that are always coming, but he never takes any to amount to anything."

"Oh, Peggy, I never thought of such a thing. Please consider that question unasked!" Beth had not given possible smuggling any thought.

"I don't care, Miss Beth. I'm worried myself about all this."

"Cheer up, Peggy," said Jack. "Your dad and these folks will let their lawyers fix it all up, and meanwhile we'll have all the fun we want."

"Unless Dad takes a notion to keep us at home!"

"Here goes for the other tree," said Jack, picking up the ax again.

Leaving the two boys engaged in their task, the rest strolled from the woods to the rocks, where Beth disappeared into the Eyrie, which she was fitting up to her taste. The other girls went down to the launch, the Sea Crest, in which they were soon speeding out upon the bay.

"Every morning," said Peggy, "Jack will bring me over, either through the woods or in our launch. I'm going to say a little something to Mother, so she will avoid the subject with Dad, and perhaps she will help us to come. She sometimes does when Dad is unreasonable."

Leslie did not quite know whether she approved of this or not. Any form of deceit was abhorrent to Leslie and she liked Peggy too much to want her concerned in it. The situation at Steeple Rocks did not seem very admirable, to tell the truth.

CHAPTER X

THE SECRET

No more was heard from the Count. Dalton and Jack spent a busy week, working together and becoming very well acquainted. They were of almost the same age with many ideas in common. Jack was intending to enter a university in the autumn and tried to persuade Dalton to enter with him, but Dalton told him that he was the man of the family and while it had been a matter of course to expect a college education while his father lived, it might not be best now. He had that matter to decide. If he went, he would work his way almost entirely.

The girls had savory lunches for the boys, but they were often out on interesting affairs of their own about which they said little either to Beth, Dalton or Jack. The Sea Crest and the little row boat dubbed the "Swallow" were in frequent use. For the most part the girls wore their bathing suits, with raincoats or heavy coats over them, according to the weather. They swam near the beach, they made trips to the village; they climbed over the rocks, and under Peggy's leadership they became acquainted with the literal ups and downs of the rocky paths around Steeple Rocks. They talked of secrets and mysteries before the boys, inviting their questions, but Dalton and Jack claimed that if they had anything to tell they would tell it.

"Oh, you'll be sorry!" cried Peggy to Dalton, whom she liked very much, it seemed, "when we find out why is Pirates' Cove or uncover a pirate hoard, or something!"

"If you find it on our side, Miss, it belongs to us!"

"Finders keepers, Dal," laughed Peggy.

Of the girls Leslie was Peggy's favorite, but Sarita had no reason to be jealous, since Peggy was too much younger to spoil the old close relation between the older girls. Yet Peggy was a bit of fire and energy and real loveliness to them both, and old enough in her ways to adapt herself to them if they forgot to adapt their plans to Peggy. Through Sarita, Peggy was introduced to the different gulls and other sea birds that flapped or sailed or flew over the bay and in the woods. Leslie knew them too and Peggy was envious, she said, until she found out that looking through Sarita's good lenses, she, too, could distinguish the differences and learn to identify some of them. The little sandpipers that flew in wheeling flocks or skimmed with rapid feet over the sands were her particular delight.

Leslie and Sarita wondered what Peggy's real name might be, if Mr. Ives were only her step-father, but Peggy did not seem inclined to talk about herself and they were too polite to ask. That she had been christened Marguerite, Margaret, or some other more dignified name than Peggy they naturally supposed, but they were puzzled a little, as doubtless mischievous Peggy intended, when she wrote large upon the sand one day at the beach the name Angelina.

"That, of course, is my real name, and Mother used to call me Angel sometimes till Dad said that it wasn't very 'characteristic.'" But Peggy's pretty lips were parted in what might easily be called an impish grin.

"Don't tell whoppers, little girl," advised Sarita.

"Thanks. I'm glad you think that 'Angel' is appropriate."

"Your lightning deductions are something wonderful," lazily said Leslie, who was lying on the sand in the sun. It was really a hot morning "for once," as Peggy said, and the girls could safely take their time to their dip. Peggy was telling them about bathing in Florida, and how she loved it. "But I'm glad to be here with you girls now and the peppy days that we usually have here just suit me. How about going around home after a while, letting me have a lunch fixed up and exploring that little cave we found. Perhaps there is a passage to that hole in Pirates' Cove."

"Whoever heard of a hole in a Cove?" Sarita queried.

"You know what I mean, the hole in the rocks there."

Leslie jumped to her feet. "Come on, then. Let's do something. One more dip and then for camp!"

Three heads bobbed up and down in the surf as they tossed a big ball, one that Peggy had brought from Florida, from one to another while they swam. By this time they had learned where it was safe for them and where the undertow might be a little too strong. Dalton, who was a strong swimmer, had both inquired and investigated.

A run and a climb and running again brought them into camp, where they changed to dry garments and started on a hike through the woods toward Steeple Rocks. By this time Leslie and Sarita had become quite familiar with the way. They scarcely liked to appear at the great house there just because they knew that Mr. Ives was away; yet Peggy frankly wanted them, and her mother cordially urged them to come often. She thanked them for making life at the coast so pleasant to Peggy.

Count Herschfeld was away, too. Peggy said that it was like a different place with him away and openly rejoiced in the absence of "the Kravetz," as Jack called her, most disrespectfully. Where she had gone Peggy did not know. The pleasant fact was enough for her she told the girls, though not in just those words. Peggy was a great girl to "rattle on," Sarita said; but Leslie thought that there was always a point to Peggy's remarks and enjoyed them.

When they arrived at Steeple Rocks, Peggy ran in to interview the housekeeper, while Leslie and Sarita strolled about the grounds, which by this time were in their prettiest summer garb. In part the gardens were formal, but there were nooks cleverly wild, yet rescued from the uncomfortable features of real wildness. They sat down on a rustic bench near the tennis court and surveyed the arbors, the porches, the solid, handsome house, the mass of Beth's Cathedral Rocks and their steeple spires, towering behind and above.

"Grim and mysterious, aren't they, Sarita?"

"Yes, Leslie. I rather like the distant view best."

"We get advantage of the distance for the outlines."

"I wonder if Mr. Ives has built anything into the rock,—I mean bored or blasted into it See how

closely that wall joins the rock."

"That is where Mr. Ives' library and office are, Peggy said, and I think that she mentioned a safe built into the rock. She said that was why he keeps everybody away from that part of the house."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"So Peggy said. She says it's no temptation to her to go near his 'old office.'"

Sarita smiled. "Peggy has turned out to be the most enthusiastic member of our 'triumvirate.' Do you like her mother?"

"I don't know what to think of Mrs. Ives. She is lovely to us and she seems to think a great deal of Peggy, if she does turn her over to other people. Perhaps she has to. Do you remember Mrs. Peacock? She didn't do a thing but preen her feathers and play bridge and golf till the crash came; then she gathered up her kiddies from various schools and went to work to take care of them."

"Yes. It's hard to tell about the society women."

The girls rose as they saw Peggy tripping down the steps with a picnic basket in her hand. They joined her and went toward the path which led around into the rocks. They crossed the path by which they had entered the grounds from their own and the Ives' woods, crossing also the rocky way with the steps which led down to the dock where the Ives' yacht was supposed to stay.

On a narrow ledge to their left they had need to be careful, but it led to a small cave which they had discovered before. It was not like one hollowed out by the action of water, but more like a space in the midst of rocks which some giant had been piling, one upon another. There were cracks and fissures, too, and the retreat was large enough to be interesting.

"I've got sandwiches and doughnuts, pickles, some shrimp salad, and a blueberry pie," Peggy announced, "and there is some lemonade in the 'icy-hot.'" She swung the basket to the rocky floor as she spoke and sat down beside it.

"You are all hot with climbing and carrying that basket," sympathetically said Leslie. "You should have let me carry it part of the way as I wanted to."

"It helped me swing around that narrow place," laughed Peggy. "Besides, let the hostess provide the eats."

"Are you hostess?"

"Isn't this Steeple Rocks? I know that you are laughing at the lunch, but those were the things I found and they all looked good."

"I know by experience, Peggy, that anything from your house is good," said Leslie. "This isn't the first time that you have treated us. Hurrah for blueberry pie in Maine! We found a new place for blueberries, Peggy, scrumptious ones."

Peggy had saluted when Leslie complimented the Steeple Rocks cooking. Now she changed expression. "Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum, I smell the—smoke of an English-*mun*! Isn't that funny? Don't you smell cigar smoke, girls?"

"I believe I do a little, Peggy," Sarita replied. She was at the opening, and taking a careful step or two she looked over the ledge, her hand on a rocky protuberance for safety's sake. "Somebody's going down toward the dock. Perhaps we are getting a whiff from the pipe he is smoking."

"Please see who it is, Sarita, if you can without being seen. Mother said that Dad might be home to-day, and if he is, I want to keep out of sight as much as possible."

Leslie, listening, puckered her brows and Peggy saw her.

"Now Leslie, don't worry. It isn't bad of me to keep out of trouble. You just don't understand, that's all." Peggy gave Leslie an engaging look out of frank, affectionate eyes.

"Little flirt," laughed Leslie. "She knows, Sarita, that she only has to look at us with 'them eyes' to have us melt. Why don't you try that on Mr. Ives?"

"You think that I'm just pretending! I don't like you any more, Leslie Secrest!" But Peggy was half smiling as she spoke and Leslie did not apologize.

Sarita was still looking out over the ledge. Then quickly she stepped back behind the jutting rocks and plumped herself down by the other girls. "It's Bill," she said. "He was going on down, but I couldn't get a good look at him till he suddenly turned; and then I was afraid that he would see me watching him,—hence my sudden retreat!"

"Could there be some other ledge along here, and someone on it?" Leslie suggested. "This one ends here, I suppose, with that big bulge of rock."

"Suppose we fasten a sign of some sort here and then look up from below and see just what is near us here. That does not smell like a pipe, and I can smell it yet. Can't you?"

"Yes, Peggy, though not so much," said Leslie. "Sarita, this is more like an Eyrie than ours, isn't it? You can see most of the bay, our headland, the sea and a bit of the village from here. Do you suppose that we can see this with our 'mind's eye' next winter when we are digging into our books and have nothing better to look at than the flat plains of home?"

"I wonder," said Sarita. Below them lay the bay, sparkling in the sun. Its salty waves leaped up on many a half-submerged rock near the shore, that sent back the spray. Beyond the rim of confining rocks and the Secrest headland, the sea surged more quietly than usual, though there was a line of breakers to be seen. The sky was a deep blue, its clouds in heaps of billowing, floating white.

"This," said Peggy, "is the home of the 'triumvirate.'"

"'Triumvirate' is not exactly appropriate, Peggy," Sarita remarked.

"No," said Leslie. "How about the Three Bears?"

"Who's been sitting in *my* chair?" squeaked Peggy in a high voice.

They all laughed. It did not take much to make them laugh to-day. Peggy was rummaging in her basket and now handed out some paper napkins. "Let's have a good name, then," she continued. "What would a triumvirate of girls be?"

"*Femina* is the Latin word for woman," said Leslie. "Put it in place of *vir* and see what you have."

"Tri-tri—" began Peggy, thinking; "trium-feminate!" she triumphantly finished, flourishing a bottle of olives so vigorously that the cork, previously loosened, came out and the liquid spilled.

Soon the girls were munching sandwiches and olives, drinking copiously of the cold lemonade and

talking as busily as ever of Jack, Dalton and the prospective log house; of the queer happenings at camp and at sea; and of their secret, the 'mystery', in regard to which they had teased or tried to tease the boys.

"Tell me again, Peggy," said Leslie, "just what you heard said and just where it was. I want to get it straight. It may be that we ought to tell Dal and Beth."

"It's all right with *me*, Leslie, if you do," said Peggy. "I'm sure that Dad has something up with the Count, and if either he or the Count are going to do anything to you folks, I don't want it to happen. But I'm hoping, of course, that for Mother's sake Dad isn't into anything real wicked."

"Well, it was the night after he was supposed to have gone away that last time. I was as wide awake as anything and I thought that I'd slip out of the house and go down to the shore a while. The house was all still, you know, and I guess it must have been about two o'clock. I would have taken my bathing suit for a dip, but I promised Mother that I would never go in all alone. So I just slipped out in my silk negligee and slippers, though it was a little shivery."

"I sauntered down the long flight of steps, holding to the railing, and all at once I heard Dad's voice below me. I almost ran up the steps in a hurry, but what I heard was interesting, so I scrooched down on the step right where I was to listen a minute. *That* was curiosity, I'll admit, and I ought to have been noble enough not to have done it,—only that things are queer, and when they are, a body has *some* right to find out. What do you think, Leslie?"

"I don't know, Peggy; but it does seem that way."

"Anyhow Dad was saying next, 'They are not mere children to be frightened and driven off as you supposed. If I had known that what you told me was an absolute lie, I wouldn't have gone as far in my statement to them as I did. Just let it drop.'"

Peggy's air and dignified speech so reminded the girls of the suave Mr. Ives that both of them smiled broadly. The words were brutally frank, but Peggy's tone robbed them of sharpness. Now she was the cold Count in her recital. The girls could fairly see him draw himself up in courteous resentment.

"You do not mince words, I see. It was the only way to produce the effect through you. If you believed it yourself, you could intimidate them."

"But they were not intimidated. I do not like this intimacy with my daughter any more than you do. But the first object must be to avoid suspicion. I would suggest that we employ'—then I missed a few words just at the important place! Dad dropped his voice a little, and you know how the surf roars sometimes. But I got *one clue* or one thing that might be as important. The Count started in to talk. 'See to it,' he said, 'that they'—then a mumble of words—'by the twenty-eighth.'

"I said it over to myself, so I wouldn't forget to tell you girls exactly what had been said, and then I realized that Dad was coming up the steps. They shook, as you remember they do a little when somebody walks. It was too far to get to the top before he reached me, so what did I do but whisk out to the side and drop under the steps to wait till he passed!"

"But it is some distance, in places, to the rocks underneath!"

Peggy nodded. "I knew it, but it was 'instinctive,' as you say, Leslie, to get out of Dad's way, and by good luck a nice rock was reachable under my step. I just scrooched there again till Dad went by and I'm sure he never saw me. I waited, because I thought the Count might come next, but he never did, and I was so curious that when I hitched up again—you ought to have seen my acrobatic performance, girls,—I sneaked down the steps to the bottom and finally all around the place and never a sign did I see of the Count. There wasn't a sign of a boat, either, and there had scarcely been time, I think, for a boat to get around behind the channel entrance."

"I don't know," Leslie said. "You may have taken more time than you thought."

"Perhaps so, but wouldn't I have heard a boat?"

"A launch certainly, but not a row boat against the sound of the surf if it was rather rough that night."

"Perhaps the Count was behind a tree," Sarita suggested.

Peggy looked at Sarita to see if she were in earnest. "You know very well, Sarita, that there isn't a tree there!"

THE INTENTIONAL "ACCIDENT"

"I wonder what Bill was doing down at your dock," said Sarita.

"It needs some repairs," Peggy replied. "I heard Dad say to Mother that he was going to bring the yacht down from where *it* has been undergoing something or other. I smell that smoke again, Sarita. Where do you suppose it comes from?"

Peggy jumped up and went out upon the shelf again. "Don't smell it at all out here," she said. Sniffing, Peggy walked back further within their rocky den. "Must be a volcano under here, girls. I smell it more strongly."

"Do volcanoes smoke tobacco?" joked Leslie.

"This must be a new kind," Peggy returned. "Come here, girls."

Sarita and Leslie, rather cramped from long sitting, rose and shook out their frocks. Leslie tossed a bit of her last sandwich to the rocks below and said that the birds might have it.

"You are right, Peggy. It isn't very strong, but I do notice a bit of tobacco smoke. Isn't it queer? Perhaps someone is outside and there is some current that whisks the scent through here."

"Nothing like having an imagination, Sarita. Perhaps there is a smuggler's den below us. We may smell the liquor if we stay long enough. Perhaps Bill has some little cave inside, too." So speaking, Peggy again ran out upon the ledge to look toward the Ives' dock on this side. There was no sign of Bill.

"If there is this much of a cave here, why *mightn't* there be one somewhere below? We haven't found the way to one, but we just might have missed it."

"That is so, Peggy," said Leslie. "*Isn't* this odd!" Leslie and Sarita were sniffing till Peggy laughed at the whole performance.

"If I looked as funny as you girls do, sniffing and going from one crevice to another, I wonder that you didn't make fun of me at the start!"

"We were more interested in the smoke than in how anybody looked," Sarita returned. "It is stronger way back here, don't you think so?"

Sarita was back where she was obliged to stoop considerably. There was a crack, or fissure, and a hole of no great size into what Peggy called the "inner darkness." "I believe that I could crawl into that," said Peggy, with some decision.

"Not for the world!" cried Leslie. "My dear chief investigator of the 'tri-feminate,' you might step off into space and fall into some crevice that we *never* could get you out of!"

"That *would* be a calamity," grinned Peggy. "I won't then,—not now, at any rate. It must be as you think, somebody is smoking somewhere and a current brings the odor up here,—but some way that theory doesn't satisfy me."

"That is because we *scent* a mystery, Peggy," said Sarita. "It's fun to imagine things. I'd just as lief find *Bill* to be a villain, but perhaps we'd better not meddle too much with things around here, Peggy."

Peggy set her lips together. "If there's anything that *ought* to be found out, why, then, it ought to be,—that's all there is about it!"

Peggy's attitude settled it. Though the older girls felt that care should be taken not to go beyond the bounds of courtesy within the limits of Steeple Rocks, they certainly had no objections to Peggy's solving any mystery there, particularly if the Count were the chief villain.

Peggy had not told them of her little adventure in such detail before. With the words of Peggy's step-father clearly in her mind, Leslie felt jubilant to think that their possession was to be practically undisputed. But what other plan was there in which they were probably concerned? She would tell Dalton, or get Peggy to tell him. Probably Peggy would enjoy the excitement of it. The date was interesting. That would be July twenty-eighth, perhaps. Was something to happen to them before that time? "See that they ... by the twenty-eighth!" Pleasant prospect!

Such thoughts ran through Leslie's mind and Sarita asked her what she was thinking about.

"I'm just thinking what the next enemy move will be. Peggy, I hope that you can find out what the plan is and what they intend to do to us."

"I'll try," Peggy promised. "What I'm wondering about is how we can get over on the front of the cliff and see if there are any caves there."

"I don't know that I ever used my glasses on the headland when we were close," said Sarita. "Suppose we take the Sea Crest out and go over that way."

"You forget how we watched those gulls and things that were roosting up there," Peggy reminded Sarita in her usual indefinite way at which Sarita always laughed.

"Gulls and things, indeed. I'm sure that I found an eagle's nest and we were following a bald eagle as he flew. However, girls, I'm not so sure that we'd see anything if it were there. We never saw *this* from the bay, you know. There is one opening that we know of."

"What's that?" Peggy inquired.

"There in Pirates' Cove."

"But there is the whirlpool, or whatever it is, and the buoys say danger."

"Sometimes I have wondered if that were a fiction," thoughtfully Leslie remarked, "just to protect the old pirates or smugglers; and maybe Bill and his rum-runners take advantage of it. Do you remember, Sarita, how those gulls the other day were floating near that place? It was fairly quiet, you know, not much spray on the rocks, and I noticed how wide that low opening is. I think that a person could almost stand up there, if there is anything to stand on. I'd like to find out how it looks at low tide. I'm not sure that we ever were out there or thought of it at low tide. Were we?"

The other girls did not know, but Sarita suggested that they would not dare risk going among the rocks there in any event and the girls agreed with her. "Dalton would go up in the air if we rowed in

there, to say nothing of Elizabeth," said Sarita.

"I'd like to *do* it, girls," and Peggy's tones vibrated with her suppressed energy.

"Much you would, if you once got inside and found that the whirlpool, or undertow, or what not, was no joke. Promise me that you'll not try it."

"Oh, I'll not do anything of that sort without you girls. But if ever you do, I want to be along."

"It is a bargain," laughed Leslie, with no serious thoughts of its possibility.

Peggy had asked permission to stay at the Eyrie if she were asked for supper, rather imagining that she would be, if chance took her there at the time. Jack probably would be working with Dalton until late. She welcomed, accordingly, the suggestion of their going out in the Sea Crest to take a look at the great bulk of the headland where it jutted out in its irregular masses over the waters that bathed its base. Before leaving, however, Peggy tarried behind to carry out an idea.

It took the girls some time to climb carefully back to level ground and they took their own pace through the woods, or along the cliff, as fancy directed on their way back to the camp. They found Jack and Dalton perspiringly happy over their wood-chopping activities, for they were now trimming the trees of their branches and taking these to an open spot where they would dry for firewood.

"Don't take the Sea Crest," said Dalton. "Catch us a fish for supper, girls."

"All right, we'll either catch or buy one for you boys. Where's Beth?"

"Haven't seen her this afternoon. She said that she was going to write to Mrs. Marsh. I went down to the village for her to get some groceries; so mind you have a good supper for your workmen, Les!"

"We will. I'll stop to see Beth."

At the camp they found Beth bringing up her correspondence, which was such a waste of valuable time in this glorious spot, the girls thought. Leslie and Beth planned their meal, which was to be a good one, whether they caught a fish or not. Peggy received her desired invitation before they descended the rocky way to where the row boat was moored. Sarita had stopped at the tent to get her field glass.

They looked rather longingly at the Sea Crest, but their purpose could be as easily accomplished in the Swallow and there was a better chance of catching a fish for supper. Leslie was in charge of the fishing tackle and prepared to lure some unwary denizen of the deep to its destruction. So Sarita said, as she put her glass in a safe place and took the oars.

The bay was calm and beautiful. This, after all, was their chief pleasure.

Rowing steadily, for there was really no time to waste if they caught any fish for supper they reached the spot immediately opposite Pirates' Cove and its frowning cavern.

"See? There are a lot of water birds now," said Leslie, pointing to some herring gulls that floated contentedly in the cove, not very far from the opening.

"Yes," said Sarita, "but remember that they can lift their little feet and fly away from any wave or tugging below."

Letting her oars rest, Sarita took her glass and began to scan the rocks above. "What's that sign up there?" she queried, her glass turned toward the left. "Funny! I never noticed it before."

Sarita lowered her glass and looked at the girls. Peggy was as sober as a judge, her eyes widening. "Let Leslie look first," she said, as Sarita offered her the lenses.

Sarita put them into Leslie's hand and she, too, expressed surprise. "There doesn't seem to be anything written on it," she remarked, still looking. "It is just a square white thing of some sort."

Sarita looked again and then offered the glass again to Peggy, who did not try to keep from laughing now. "You little mischief!" Leslie cried. "Sarita, that is where we were this afternoon and Peggy stuck something up there. What is it, Peggy?"

"Oh, there was just a piece of pasteboard in the bottom of the basket and I had a brilliant thought. That is why I stayed behind and you had to call to me to hurry up. I just pinned our paper napkins on top of the pasteboard and then stuck it up. The first good wind will blow it down. I thought that we could tell from down here what was next to it, you know, and whether there would be any chance of getting around any further."

"Did you want our retreat discovered, Peggy?"

"I thought of that, but I imagine that people have climbed all over there before, don't you?"

"Very likely," Leslie replied. "Now be good children while I get ready to catch Dal's fish."

The boat had drifted a little, and Peggy, who now was the only one with oars, looked mischievous as she allowed it to go just within the circle indicated by the chief buoy and one or two others. The other girls did not notice. Sarita was scanning the cliff and Leslie was engaged with the line.

But they heard a hail and saw a boat approaching. "They'd better do all their calling before I begin to fish," said Leslie, looking at the approaching boat. "That's Bill and there's somebody else,—oh, it's Tom! We haven't seen him for an age."

Tom was beckoning and Leslie looked around to see what could be the matter. "Peggy," she said; "child, you've gotten us inside the forbidden territory. Pull out!"

Peggy did so without a word, but Tom continued to pull toward them and came up smiling. "How do you do, Miss Secrest and—?" He did not mention the other names, but took off his cap in salute. "Bill called my attention to you and I saw that you were in dangerous quarters, so I rowed over. See what luck we have had."

Tom displayed the fish in the bottom of their boat with pride, while the girls acknowledged the presence of Bill with little nods and "how do you do's." He was not very responsive and one "How do you do, Miss?" sufficed for all.

"Oh, Tom!" exclaimed Leslie, who felt that she knew the lad that had shown them how to run the Sea Crest. "Couldn't we buy some of those fish? We're not doing it for fun this time. The boys are hungry for fish and Dal doesn't have time to fish these days—he's so busy getting ready to build our log cabin." Leslie cast a surreptitious glance at Bill, remembering his warning to Dalton. But Bill was looking at Sarita's glass, which she held loosely in her hand.

"Of course you can have some of our fish. We were going to sell them anyhow. It will be all right with you, Bill, won't it? I'm working for Bill now sometimes, Miss Leslie."

Bill had surlily nodded assent to Tom's question, while Leslie bent over eagerly to look into the other boat, now close beside them, and to select her fish.

"Kin ye see very fur with them, Miss?" Bill was now asking Sarita.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "It isn't exactly like a spy glass, you know, but you ought to look at the moon with it some night when it's full!" Sarita bid fair to start on her favorite fad now.

"I noticed ye lookin' at the rocks. What wuz ye lookin' fur? Do ye mind lettin' me look through 'em?"

Sarita handed over her glass immediately. "Certainly you may use it," she said, though by this time it had occurred to her that Bill's question might have some other ground than mere curiosity. But it would never do to show any reluctance. "I thought that I found an eagle's nest the other day, and I was looking for that first. Then that forbidding old cliff is interesting anyway, don't you think so?"

Bill grunted some reply as he focused the lenses with no unpracticed hand. "Somebody's tacked something up there," he said presently, the glass pointed in the direction of the "retreat."

"I did that," said Peggy. "That is to show our prowess. We've been climbing around about as far as we could go, I guess, and I was wondering if there weren't other places we could get to."

This was very bold, Sarita thought, to the man who was very likely the chief smuggler. But then, Bill worked for Mr. Ives, she knew.

"You'd better be keeful, Miss Peggy. Fust thing ye know, ye'll miss yer footing and git drawn under in Pirates' Cove. Here, Tom, I guess she wouldn't mind if you took a look, too," and Bill handed the glass to Tom, who wiped his fishy hands first, then took it and looked through the lenses with deep interest.

"No wonder you are crazy about the birds, Miss Sarita," said Tom. "I can see every feather on that gull."

"I ought to have showed you when we were all on the Sea Crest so much," replied Sarita.

"I was busy then," said Tom.

Bill Ritter now asked Leslie if she had picked out the fish that she wanted. Leslie then pointed them out and Bill started to gather them up. Suddenly the boat tipped a little. Bill, stooping, seemed to lose his balance and fell against Tom, unexpectedly. For *calamitas calamitatum*,—Sarita's cherished field glass flew from Tom's hand, seeking a watery grave just inside of Pirates' Cove.

Sarita gave a little exclamation. Bill's boat righted. Bill himself caught hold of Tom, then of the seat, to place himself again, and the incident was ended so far as the final disposal of poor Sarita's bird glass was concerned.

Tom gave an angry and startled look at Bill, then began to kick off his shoes and pull off his old sweater. "What're you doing?" growled Bill.

"Going down after her glass. You knocked it out of my hand! What did you mean by falling over me that way!"

"I was trying to get their fish and put it over. Stay in the boat! You can't dive here. You'll never dive deep enough to git it!" Bill laid a detaining hand on Tom, who was distressed.

"Oh, yes, Tom," cried Sarita. "Don't go in after it. Bill is right, and you didn't mean to do it!"

"I should say I didn't!" exclaimed Tom, struggling with a desire to pitch Bill overboard. "I will get you some other good glass, Miss Sarita, as soon as I can. No, Miss Leslie, not a cent for the fish. That's the least we can do now. It was Bill's fault, too. I'll be up at the camp to see you about this, Miss Sarita."

Seizing the oars, Tom rowed furiously away, paying no attention to Bill's growlings. "Those squatters on Ives' land have enough money to pay for our fish. That other girl picked three beauties and had her money out to pay for them!"

Meanwhile Leslie, rather dazed by what had happened, picked up her oars and with Peggy's help rowed quietly toward home. Sarita sat idle, presently putting her face in her hands, while her shoulders heaved a little. Peggy looked serious. "She cares a lot, doesn't she?" she said in a low tone to Leslie.

Leslie nodded, her face also serious, and a frown between her brows.

Presently Sarita dropped her hands and wiped her eyes a little. "I couldn't help a little weep, girls," she said. "You don't know the things I went without to save up for that field glass! But it doesn't do any good to cry. Perhaps I can buy another some time. I can't let poor Tom buy any. He is taking care of his old grandmother now, Dal said. They live in one of the neatest cottages in the village, but Tom has to make what they live on. Dear me! Think of the birds that I'm going to miss!"

"Sarita," said Peggy, "I'm going to buy some glasses. I'll tell Mother that Sarita has gotten me simply crazy about birds and I must have some binoculars like what Dad has, or some good field glasses right away!" Peggy bent over her oars well satisfied with her plans, while the other girls looked at each other and at her with smiles.

"What should we do without our Peggy?" affectionately Leslie inquired. "Don't go too far, though, in saying how crazy you are about birds. Stick strictly to the truth, honey."

"All right, Leslie. But I do like them and I want the glass awfully anyway. I'd lend Dad's, only I don't suppose you'd want to use that. You can teach me birds, Sarita, and we'll keep the glass at the Eyrie, so Dad will not find out. I'll use my own money if you would feel better."

"Please, Peggy, don't do anything about it. I can get along. There are enough other nice things in this grand place! And please don't say a word about it at supper. I'll be able to enjoy the fun then. But if the boys know, they may talk about it and I don't believe that I can stand it just now."

Sarita's voice was quivering again. Peggy spoke at once. "It's a perfect shame! Don't worry. I'll not say a word at camp. Besides,—I think that Bill did that on purpose!"

"I wonder if he did!" exclaimed Leslie, looking at Sarita.

CHAPTER XII

ELIZABETH HAS AN ADVENTURE

It is not to be supposed that Elizabeth Secret was not having as good a time as the rest of the party, or that her days were altogether spent in the work and play of the artist. In a delicious rest of mind and body she had quickly gained back her nervous energy. Her camp life soon settled into a brief routine of daily duties, quickly accomplished with the help of the other girls, and into a rest and freedom from responsibility that she had not known for a long time.

In this place of beautiful views and big spaces, worries seemed small. She often went alone to the beach, to walk up and down, sketch a little, pick up some newly deposited shell, or merely to sit, feasting her eyes upon the apparently limitless sea.

One afternoon Beth was perched upon a rock, near the place where sand gave place to rock and their headland. She was thinking of their log house, so soon to go up now. Dalton was expecting the men on the following day. Her back was toward the village and she was not conscious of anyone's approach until she heard herself addressed.

"Pardon me, madam, is this the Ives' headland, and are these what are called Steeple Rocks? From appearance I should say that they are farther on, but my directions pointed here."

Beth looked around to see a young gentleman lifting his neat straw hat and regarding her rather seriously. He looked like any young business man from the city.

"No, these are not Steeple Rocks. This is the Sea Crest headland," said Beth, making up the name as she talked. "Steeple Rocks lie around the bay, or across it from here."

"They are those large masses of rocks with the two towers, then."

"Yes. I call them Cathedral Rocks."

"A good name." The young man smiled, looking at sea, rocks and sky, turning away from Beth a little and putting his hands in his pockets, like a boy who has just found a good place to play. Beth said nothing. He looked good, but Beth was not in the habit of making acquaintance with strange young gentlemen.

"I wonder if you would mind giving me a little information about this neighborhood. I have just come by boat and rail from New York. I might add auto, if one could so denominate the ancient ark in which I was transported to the village."

Beth laughed at this. "It must have been an ideal ride," she said. "We know all about that."

"I wonder if you are not Miss Secret." Beth's interviewer hitched himself up on a projecting rock near her. "I shall not trouble you long, but you may be willing to give me some advice. I can not find a desirable place in the village to stay, that is, a desirable place which is not already full of tourists or town families.

"I came prepared to camp, but my driver told me that I must get permission to camp in any of these woods and I was referred to the home of a man named Bill Somebody. I caught a glimpse of him and I passed the house instead of stopping! I thought I would stroll a while first. For some reason I was not prejudiced in his favor." A whimsical smile curled around the newcomer's lips.

"Bill seems to be the village type of ward boss and manager of the general situation. My brother found that out when he had occasion to inquire what sort of protection we might count on here. He found that there was none at all aside from such as this man and his friends might furnish."

"Indeed. Have you had trouble?"

"Nothing very serious so far, but it is just as well for a stranger to know about this. It is a funny little village. I have sometimes felt that I ought to do something for some of the people whom I have seen there. Some of the women are so hopeless looking. But my brother tells me to wait until we are better established. We are building a cabin."

"I am sure that this is Miss Secret, then. My name is Evan Tudor and I belong to that great army of aspiring writers that throng New York. While I am writing that best seller, you know, I am on a certain newspaper, and have another side line at times.

"Down at the dock a while ago I met a young fellow named Carey, who told me that you owned the first woods up on the heights and that I might ask you for permission to camp there for the night at least."

"Yes." Beth was hesitating. She liked the appearance of the gentlemanly stranger, but would it do to offer him a place to camp in their woods?

"So, if your brother agrees, will you not consent? I make a neat camp and I will not set the woods on fire."

Beth looked into the smiling face of the earnest young man and returned his smile. He might be a help, indeed, if they needed a friend at any time. "We are not stingy about our woods," she said, "to any one who is careful. It is, I know, a fine place, because of the spring and good water. We expect some friends to camp with us later on in the summer. I think that I shall have to talk with my brother before I can say positively that you can make a real camp on our place, but surely for to-night we shall not refuse hospitality. Did you say that you have your outfit ready? We might spare you some things."

"Thank you. You are generous and kind. It is quite a relief to have it settled temporarily. Where shall I find your brother?"

"He went out with our launch this afternoon, but he may be back at any time. You will probably want your equipment brought up by the road, not on the trail along the cliff. I can scarcely tell you now where to go, but you may select any spot that you like, if Dal is not there, and someone can show you the way to our camp; whoever brings you up will know the direction. It is toward the cliff, in any event. I will be there, or at the Eyrie, our little watch tower on the cliff."

"Young Carey may bring my stuff, or get me some one," he said. "I will be at the camp or the Eyrie in about an hour, I think."

Evan Tudor smiled as he mentioned the Eyrie, for he was thinking that the "dove-cote" would be a more suitable place for a pretty, gentle girl like Beth. But people did not always recognize in Beth's soft speech and ways of a gentlewoman her real energy and the fire of purpose which made it possible to do what she did.

Bowing his thanks, Evan Tudor left Beth, treading quickly and surely close to the line of swirling foam, where the retreating waters were leaving the sand more or less closely packed. Beth watched him naturally enough, as he was the only person on the beach except herself. He carried his hat and let the breeze blow his thick brown locks as it would while he strode along. If the young lawyer at home had seen the interest in Beth's eyes, he would very probably have refused the opportunity which had just come to him to try an important case, and might have come to Maine on the next train.

Mr. Tudor was above medium height, slender, active, with a lean, attractive face and a pair of keen gray eyes which were to be employed with great effect during the next few weeks in the lines of a duty and interest. Beth followed him with her eyes till he had left the beach for the village; then she rose to go back to camp. But she had another slight interruption before she reached the place where the Secrest party usually climbed to the trail.

Rarely villagers were to be found on this part of the beach, unless it might be a few children gathering shells. Now, however, an odd party was slowly advancing along the shore. Two women with little shawls tied over their heads, long, full skirts and big shoes, were behind a few children who were shouting in their delight.

The women were talking together and madly gesticulating as they talked. One of the peculiarly dressed children went too near the water and a wave which came in farther than the last one, as waves have a habit of doing, drenched the little one's feet. His mother, presumably, jerked him away roughly and spanked him soundly.

Beth halted a moment at that and eyed the woman with some disgust. But that was an ignorant woman's way of bringing up her family. As Beth paused, one of the older children saw her and ran to show her a shell, probably attracted by Beth's face. An elfin face, none too clean, looked up at Beth, speaking a jumble of words in a foreign tongue. Beth shook her head to indicate that she did not understand, but she smiled and patted the little shoulder. In a moment the motley group stood around her.

As Beth had picked up a handful of pretty shells when she first walked out upon the beach, she divided them impartially among the children. The mothers began to talk in guttural and foreign words, but Beth replied in English, knowing that it would be useless to try French, the only foreign tongue in which she could speak at all.

The women and children laughed, and one little chap spoke proudly, waving his hand around. "Merica!" he repeated several times.

"Yes, this is America and the United States," Beth added.

The child nodded. He understood that.

Beth turned to the women and inquired, "New York?" But they looked at each other and obviously did not understand.

Beth tried it again. "Boston?" she asked, for she felt that they must have come in on some recent immigrant trip. Again the women shook their heads. If they had docked at either New York or Boston they had not learned the name of the port.

The older boy who had spoken before was watching Beth closely. He now pointed out to sea and said, "Ship,—Merica." Beth nodded, smiled and turned to go, with her inadequate words of farewell. But they understood the friendliness in Beth's eyes and responded with more unintelligible words from the women and farewell shouts from the children, who went back to the swirling foam, or as near as they were allowed to go.

More fishermen and their families brought to the village by Bill, Beth supposed. He must bring them directly from the immigrant ships,—or—another thought came to Beth. What if these people had no right to be here! Were they aliens properly coming in under the quota allowed by the government? Perhaps Bill brought in some of his fishermen illegally. "Poor little kiddies," Beth thought, "this is probably the first time that they ever played upon a beach!"

When Beth reached camp, she found that Dalton and the girls had already returned. "I'm so glad that you are here, Dal," said she, "for I don't know but I've done something that I ought not."

"What has the head boss done," grinned Dalton, "that she is willing to confess to a mere underling?"

"Underling—nothing! You are the protector of this camp."

"Come out, Les, Sairey,—and hear what our sister has to say for herself," Dalton called.

The girls came out from the tent with smiling faces, ready to hear some joke on Beth. "What's Beth been up to?" queried Sarita. "Has she made friends with the Count? Promised Bill and Mr. Ives to leave these shores?"

"Worse," laughed Beth. "I've rented camping space to a dangerously handsome young man. Seriously, Dal, if the young man I met on the beach just now is as good as he looks, it may not be a bad thing for you to have him somewhere near us while you build. But I made arrangements only for his camping in our woods to-night. You will have to decide the matter."

"How old is he?" Sarita inquired.

"I'm sure I don't know. He is a writer, from New York, and must have come here as blandly ignorant of accommodations as we might have been. I think that he expected to find a suitable room for a night or two in the village. But he has all his camping outfit, I understand. Tom Carey must have directed him to us, from what he said."

To her interested audience Beth gave the details of her two adventures. Leslie was more interested in the children than in the young man and asked all about the party. "Funny that Bill gets all these new immigrants," she remarked.

"No, Leslie," said her brother. "You see, Bill ships fish by boat or rail and he can get these people to work for him for next to nothing. You ought to see the shacks they live in. I bet some of them wish that they'd never come to Merica."

"But at least they have enough to eat, catching fish," said Sarita.

"I doubt it, if they work for Bill."

"Come, children, I must hurry," said Beth. "There is a meal to cook and I promised to meet our boarder at the Eyrie." Beth put on an expression of great dignity.

"Ha!" exclaimed Dalton. "Do you girls realize what has occurred? Never can we leave our sister unchaperoned again!" Dalton linked his arm in Beth's and began to stride around the camp with such long and exaggerated strides that Beth, laughing, had to run to keep up with him. But when she told him that the stranger would really arrive by way of the wood, he stopped and more sensibly directed their way into it, while Leslie and Sarita not understanding what that move meant, waved a goodbye.

"I'll walk with you a little way," said Beth. "Have you seen anything of Peggy or Jack to-day?"

"Not a thing. Peggy was coming early, too, for I told them that I was taking a day off before my men came to work on the house and that we would take out the Sea Crest."

"Probably Mr. Ives has come home. Peggy so cherishes coming here, or so she says, that she does not risk him forbidding her to come."

"He knows all about it, though. Didn't Peggy relate what he said about disliking the 'intimacy' with us?"

"Yes, but that makes Peggy all the more afraid that he will stop it. Possibly he thinks that he will know what we are doing through her, however, though I can't imagine his getting much out of Peggy unless she wants to tell. Leslie worries about it slightly."

"That is because it is not the sporting thing to accept a man's hospitality when one is opposing him. That is what bothers Les when Peggy takes her out in his launch or insists on her going around Steeple Rocks. After all, the hospitality is extended by Peggy and her mother."

"Certainly, Dal. But Leslie and Sarita are not 'opposing' Mr. Ives exactly, are they?"

"I am not so sure that their search for the 'secret' of Steeple Rocks will not result in their finding Mr. Ives much concerned in something decidedly out of the way. By the way, the launch put out from the village last night, or early this morning. I was awake and I heard it. It had disappeared in a thick fog by the time I reached the rocks."

"Peggy herself seems to think that something is wrong," said Beth, thoughtfully, "but our girls scent a 'mystery' chiefly, and Sarita hopes to find some 'pirate gold.'"

"Much good that would do her if she found it at Steeple Rocks, and the Ives have enough wealth as it is."

"WAVES OF BURNISHED GOLD"

Before Beth realized it she was some distance within the thick forest with Dalton and she was just saying that she must go back, when they heard someone coming, off the scarcely recognizable trail, and struggling through bushes. Dalton, called, "this way," thinking that it was probably Mr. Tudor.

It was the young man himself, fortunately for his good suit of clothes, in which Beth had first seen him, now attired in camping costume, with high leather buskins. "I missed the path, didn't I?" said he, smiling and pulling off his cap, "but I was pretty sure of the general direction toward the sea."

"Mr. Tudor, this is my brother, Dalton Secrest," said Beth. "He will help you choose a place for your camp."

Dalton held out his hand, liking Evan Tudor at once. "I'm glad to meet you, sir. If you are a writer, I suppose that you want a quiet spot?"

"You are right; I should prefer to be back in the woods rather than near the shore. It will give me exercise to take a run to the ocean every day. But I want to thank you for allowing me to camp in your woods. I shall help protect it, I assure you."

"I believe that you will, and we may need you, indeed. There is no reason why you should not stay as long as you like."

Evan Tudor was surprised and delighted at this quick decision and told Dalton that he should have no reason to regret it, while Beth, seeing that her share in the affair was over, excused herself and went back to camp, though not before she had invited Mr. Tudor to be their guest at supper. "Perhaps I will send the girls to call you after a while," she said. "I suppose that you will show him to some place not too far from the spring, Dal?"

"Yes, Beth."

While Dalton and Mr. Tudor went back along the poorly defined bridle path to the road, which came from the village to the wood, then took a great curve to avoid it, Dalton explained that there would be some noise for several days while the men were putting up the log cabin, but that there was a good place for a camp of which he was thinking. "You will be surrounded by woods, though the spot is comparatively open, and if it is not too far from the spring you may like it. The little stream from our lake takes a turn there, and there are rocks on which your fires will be safe. Indeed, you might use that water safely, for the lake is never polluted in any way. It is little more than a big pool, fed by springs and a tiny brook above."

"That sounds fine, but are you not building near your 'lake'?"

"Not too close, though we are nearer the spring than we are at our camp. Beth hated to leave the vicinity of the sea. But now she sees that it will be better to be closer to the water supply."

Mr. Tudor asked a number of questions and seemed to be interested in the way to reach Steeple Rocks from the woods. He inquired, too, about who were spending the summer there, in such a way that Dalton wondered if he had heard of the Ives before.

Not knowing of any reason why he should not be communicative to this sincere appearing young man, Dalton mentioned Peggy, her mother and step-father, the Count, the foreign governess and the guests. He even told him of Mr. Ives' request that they should leave. "I tell you this, Mr. Tudor, because you, too, may not be wanted here. I'd keep an eye out. Have you any way of defending yourself? By the way, though, we'd rather not have any hunting done here."

"I have no interest in hunting—animals, or small game of any sort," and Evan Tudor laughed. "But I am armed, after a fashion." Evan Tudor knew only too well that he would not be wanted, but he hoped to carry out the idea of a harmless writer on a vacation and to conceal his real purpose in coming. It was true enough that he was a writer, also that he needed a vacation. "Is there anyone besides Mr. Ives who feels inhospitable?" he asked.

"Yes. A man whom they call Bill interviewed me, too, and warned me to mind my own affairs around here. He has a lot of people fishing for him and ships the fish. I rather think that Bill does a little rum-running, for there is much drinking in the village. Bill may ship that, too, for all I know. You may have to convince Bill that you are not employed by the government to detect rum-runners."

"If Bill inquires," said Mr. Tudor with a smile, "you may tell him from me that I am not a prohibition agent, though I might do my duty as a citizen in that line, if necessary. However, I've another purpose, and I'll mightily enjoy this woods of yours."

"By the way, I'd like to interview some of those interesting foreign citizens in the village. The setting for them here is just a little more intriguing than in New York, for a change. A friend of yours down there told me a good deal about you. What sort of a chap is Tom Carey?"

"Oh, Tom Carey is straight and all right, if he does work for Bill. Bill has taken a notion to Tom and I suppose he finds him smarter and more reliable than most of his workers. You will have to be careful if you interview those foreigners. Bill may not like it."

"I see. I'm to be careful about one Mr. Bill Ritter."

They were pushing through the woods as they talked. Presently they reached the road where a man waited with a heavily-laden mule. Evan Tudor picked up a typewriter from the protection of some bushes and Dalton gathered up a suitcase, which he saw by the side of the road, and a basket of what he judged were groceries. "It was quite a walk for you with these things," he said.

"Not so bad," said Mr. Tudor. "I had help and the mule carries the most of the outfit."

It took almost as much time to get through the woods as to unload the outfit, but Dalton assured Mr. Tudor that in the direction of their camp the woods would be found more open and that it was not as far as it seemed. Evan Tudor was delighted with the camping spot and started at once to set up his small tent and arrange his supplies. Dalton began to help him, but the departing man, after he had received his pay, waited a few moments and then asked Dalton to "walk a piece" with him. "I want to

ask ye somethin’,” he said.

There was a twinkle in Evan Tudor’s eye as he glanced after them. He hoped that Dalton would establish what the modern youth sometimes calls his “alibi” and successfully divert suspicion; for Evan Tudor was on a quest.

“Say,” said the man, as he and Dalton had reached a spot out of hearing and Dalton stopped, not thinking it necessary to go any farther. “Say, Bill wants to know what this chap is up to. Is he any coast guard feller?”

“Bill came to see us when we first came, and I just told Mr. Tudor that Bill was the high ruler of this little village and would very likely want to know about him. He laughed and said that he had nothing to do with catching rum-runners, or words to that effect. He is a writer looking for material and taking a vacation, I suppose. He just came from New York.

“But I’m going to say to Bill sometime that he is going a little too far. The way he does things around here makes any square people suspicious. I’m too busy right now to spend any time on fellows like Bill Ritter, but I am a good citizen of my country and I’m not *protecting* that sort of thing, either. Bill had better stick to fishing if he doesn’t want to get into trouble some day.”

“I kinda thought you’d feel that way about it,” said the man, “but you’ll have to tell Bill that. Some of the rest of us don’t like Bill any too well, but—well, the kids has to have bread and butter. Bill didn’t tell me to ask was he with the coast-guard. That was my put-in. Bill told me to find out what he was up to. See?”

“Well, now you know, and you can tell Bill from me that I informed Mr. Tudor about unfriendliness shown us and told him to be on the lookout!”

The man laughed roughly. “I will. Sure he’s a writer fellow all right?”

“That is what he told me, and he talked like one. You noticed that he carried his little typewriter case, didn’t you?”

“Was that what it was? I noticed that he parked it kinda careful.”

Dalton felt that this conversation had not been in vain. He repeated it to Mr. Tudor, who was setting up a small heater and began to demur in regard to taking supper at the Secret camp. “It’s an imposition,” he declared. “I have plenty to eat right here.”

“Sure you have, but what will Beth think? Moreover, we caught too many fish to-day for four people to eat up. Better not refuse to come,—make it a celebration of getting into the woods on your vacation.”

Dalton had scarcely stopped speaking when a feminine “Hoo-hoo” sounded from the woods across the stream. Leslie and Sarita were calling them. “Hoo-hoo,” replied Dalton in shrill imitation, and added, “we’ll be there, girls; give us ten minutes longer here.”

Evan Tudor straightened up from his work to look across at the two smiling girls. Introduction was impossible, but he raised his cap and smiled, standing “at attention,” Sarita said, till they were lost again among the green spruces and birches.

The girls reported to Beth what Dalton had said and preparations went on accordingly. The big fish were baking in the outdoor oven which Dalton had made. Beth was stirring up some blueberry muffins, to be baked in the oven of the “portable.”

“We were stunned, Beth,” said Sarita, “by the style and bearing of your latest conquest. Not to be conceited at all, he looks like our kind of folks. Let’s see, what’s that sweet poem?”

“When I behold thy lovely face

Neath waves of burnished gold,—what’s the rest of it, Les?”

“That’s all we ever did get, Sarita. Beth found us as we had just begun to read it off, Dal and I.”

Beth, her lips tightly pressed together to keep them from laughter, pretended to be deeply offended. “Such girls! Come, now, Leslie, get out a glass of that jelly we brought from home and finish up the table.”

“It’s serious, Sarita,” laughed Leslie, still teasing her sister. “She is giving him our precious jelly!”

“Don’t you really want to, Leslie?” Beth asked.

“Of course I do, silly. I know well enough that you are following Mother’s rule of the best for guests. Where are the rest of those linen napkins? I suppose you will use those this time.”

“Yes, if we have any. Look in my trunk, top tray. If you can’t find them, we’ll just use the paper ones.” But Beth kept laughing at the girls, for when Sarita suggested that Mr. Tudor was probably about forty, Leslie corrected her to “I should say thirty, just right for Beth, and poor Jim writes that they can’t come yet!”

“I don’t blame him for taking that case, do you, Leslie?”

“No, Sarita, of course not, but what is it that Shakespeare says about opportunity?”

“Perhaps Mr. Tudor is not as good as Jim.”

“He is much more attractive, though I’d vote for Jim now because he is such a good friend.”

“Well you can’t help whom you fall in love with or don’t.”

“Yes, you can. At least you can keep away from people you don’t want to fall in love with, like some *fascinating bad* man; but I suppose that you can’t very well make yourself fall in love with *everybody* that likes *you*.”

“I’m *so* glad that I have you girls’ wisdom and experience to guide me,” demurely said Beth, and Leslie was just thinking up some brilliant reply when they saw Dalton and their guest. But Leslie managed to whisper to Sarita before real introductions took place, “There’s where Jim will have to do his best, because Beth doesn’t care enough for him, if I’m any judge.”

Courteously Evan Tudor met the two girls, but he actually seemed almost embarrassed about having accepted the invitation to supper. “Really I think that it is enough to let me camp here, Miss Secret,” he said.

“I finally persuaded him,” said Dalton, “by telling him that his ‘name was already in the pot’ and that it would upset all your arrangements if he didn’t show up.”

“Of course we would have been disappointed,” cordially Beth added. “Now just excuse us a moment till we get up this camp meal.”

With her flushed cheeks and pretty smile, Beth made a charming hostess and Sarita whispered to Leslie as they began to do a few last things, "For all Beth says, he sees the 'burnished gold' all right."

There was gay conversation and exchange of news during the good but very informal meal that camping made necessary. The Secretsts described the locality, in which Evan Tudor was so much interested and he, in turn, had bright accounts of his recent experiences in the great city. "I am going to forget it all for a few weeks," he said. "If I write here, it will be because I can't help it. I brought the old typewriter along for fear the 'best seller' might insist on being written; but all that I really expect to do toward my future profession is to fill a notebook or two for future use. Well, I have one or two sketches to get off at once."

"Will you put us all in for 'characters' in your 'best seller,' Mr. Tudor?" Sarita asked.

"You might all figure in my fiction, but I'll not use you as 'types.'"

"Thanks. I'd be proud to be in one of your novels, but I'd rather not be a 'character sketch.'"

"Beth 'sketches' too," said Leslie.

"Now, Leslie, are you going to play the part of *l'enfant terrible*?" asked Beth. "Please don't mention my efforts!"

"Your brother has already told me that you are an artist, Miss Secret. I wish that I might see how you interpret this place."

Quickly Beth looked at Evan Tudor. He spoke of interpretation. Perhaps he was one who understood. But voices were coming from the woods and Mr. Tudor turned to look in that direction. "Hitch 'em anywhere, Jack," they heard. It was Peggy Ives with her cousin.

THE NEW CAMPER

It could be easily seen that Peggy was under some excitement. She almost sparkled as she ran into the little clearing, alone first, for Jack was doing her bidding with the horses. She was wearing a new riding outfit and cried, "Look at me, folks. Don't I look grown up?"

Not a little was she taken back upon seeing the stranger, but she recovered herself quickly, especially as Dalton rose and took a step toward her as if to protect her from criticism. Gaily Peggy extended her hand high, its fingers drooping. "Congratulate me, Dal," she said, "on some new clothes. We're having company,—but excuse me, Beth, for rushing in this way." Then she paused and waited to be introduced.

"Miss Ives," said Beth, formally and sweetly, as if Peggy were as grown as she claimed to be, "you will be glad to meet Mr. Tudor of New York, a writer who is taking a vacation in our fine country."

Peggy stepped forward a little to offer her hand prettily and modestly, as she had been taught to do. "I am glad to see you, Mr. Tudor, and I am sorry that I interrupted your visit, but this is the first time that the Eyrie has had company.

"The great excitement, girls," she continued, looking at Leslie and Sarita, "is that we are having important guests and I can't get over having new clothes and part of the responsibility."

Evan Tudor had said the few pleasant words of greeting that were proper when he met Peggy, and stood by, interested. Jack Morgan now appeared, equally resplendent in riding togs that were new. He came forward as eagerly as Peggy had done, but as he was not saying anything, he was not embarrassed when he observed the stranger.

After Jack had been introduced, he began to explain why they had not been over. "Peggy and I have been trying to help my aunt with her plans. Uncle is bringing down, or up, from wherever they are a prince and princess, a grand duchess or two and I don't know whom else for a sort of house party, I suppose. Aunt Kit had a telegram some time ago, but we just heard about it lately. Then Uncle wired that he did not know just when they could get together, but he would bring them in the yacht and everything was to be ready to entertain them in their accustomed style."

"That might depend upon their recent fortunes, don't you think, Mr. Morgan?" Mr. Tudor asked. He was standing with his hands behind him, a little smile on his rather thin face. "European royalty has had rather a hard time of it in some countries since the war."

"You are right. I imagine that the Russian grand duchess doesn't find it any too pleasant at home."

"In fact she could not stay there at all," said Dalton, "if I know anything about it."

"But probably Mrs. Ives' guests are not all exiles," Mr. Tudor added, open for information.

"Mother and Dad met some of them abroad, I think," Peggy volunteered. "And I think that Count Herschfeld knows some of them, and the Kravetz, too."

Beth looked rather disapproving of Peggy's reference to her governess and Mr. Tudor wanted to ask who the Count and "the Kravetz" were; but he thought it not in good taste to ask any more questions. Peggy, however, explained. "The Count, Mr. Tudor, is a sort of secretary for my step-father. Do come over to see my things, girls. I shall have time to play around for several days. Dad wrote that they would be here at the latest somewhere around the twenty-eighth, he thought,—oh, girls, that—" Peggy had just thought.

But Leslie spoke at once. "Indeed, we shall be over right away, Peggy. Would to-morrow morning be too soon? It is not very long till the twenty-eighth, is it, Dal?" Leslie looked soberly at her brother.

"Not very, Les."

"I wish that you would come, too, Dal. You have never been over and Mother was saying that she wanted to see the rest of the Eyrie family."

"I want to see your mother, too, Peggy, but I'm too busy with the building, you see. Bring your mother over here."

"I will, when the company goes. But then, she always has somebody." Peggy looked rather cross at the thought.

"We'll ask your mother out for a little trip in the Sea Crest," Beth suggested. "Perhaps she will feel that she can run off for a little while."

"I believe that she might," Peggy replied.

Evan Tudor had noted Peggy's startled pause, and Leslie's question concerning the date. He had a particular interest in matters here which he was not disclosing yet, but he welcomed anything which threw any light upon it. When Peggy and Jack went away after their short visit, he walked beside Peggy's horse for some distance till it was necessary to strike off from the trail or bridle path to his own little camp. Several notes went into his small pocket notebook that night before he went to sleep. He was inclined to go abroad to do a little investigating, but he decided that first he should get some familiarity with the woods and coast by daylight. It might be just as well, too, to have one good night's rest. He expected to have few before the twenty-eighth.

Early the next morning Evan Tudor was at the roadside, waiting, and who should come to meet him there but Tom Carey, who then rode to the town at the railroad and sent a telegram, written at length, and signed E. T. It was very innocent and related to a certain article which would be ready for the press to meet the editor's date.

"Are you deeply engaged in the affairs of a certain man here named Bill?" Evan Tudor facetiously asked Tom, as he handed him the written message.

"No, sir. I catch fish for him," said Tom. "I might be doing something else, perhaps, if he meant some things that he said to me, but what I do I do in the open."

"Do you know what it is that Bill meant?"

"No; I thought that it was liquor, but I am not so sure now." Tom dug his shoe into the turf by the

side of the road with a troubled face.

"Would you consider finding out for me, if I should take you into my employ without interfering with your work for Bill? Indeed, that would be a part of it."

Tom looked up quickly. "You are after Bill!"

"I am not sure that I am at all. Something is wrong up here. Can I count on you not to betray me?"

"Yes, sir. Something *is* wrong up here. I've got to stay here with my old grandmom that has been here all her life, and I'd like to see somebody beside Bill running things."

"I picked you yesterday, from something you said," Mr. Tudor continued. "I am taking quite a risk to tell anyone that I have a quest here, but I shall need someone, and I happened to find that I need you right away. I made this appointment with you not knowing that I should have to send this telegram, but I hoped to secure your services. I *did* expect to enjoy a little fishing, but I suppose that I shall have to keep up my writing a while, to give you the excuse of bringing fish to me every day. Tell Bill that the writing chap has ordered fish, shrimp, lobster, anything that you get particularly fine and every day. I mean to write, too,—but not *all* the time."

This mystery appealed to Tom, whose eyes sparkled. "You can count on me, sir. Prob'ly Bill will charge you fancy prices, though."

"That is all right, and I'll pay you, too. It's going faster than I thought. Sure you can carry it off so that Bill will not suspect? It's all right for you to show an interest in me, of course."

"I've kept more than one thing from Bill already, sir."

"Don't forget, then."

Tom carried the telegram into the station with an air of great indifference, as he happened to see a man who worked for Bill, in fact one of Bill's chief henchmen, on the platform.

"H'lo, Tom. Wot'e ye doin' here?"

"What ye doin' yourself?" Tom was grinning. Perhaps it would do no harm to let the man see the telegram. It would be better at any rate than to make any mystery over it. He went right ahead about the business of sending off the message, making out the blank and stuffing the original paper, scribbled by Evan Tudor, into his pocket.

But the man was waiting curiously at the door. Tom hoped that it was mere curiosity that moved him. "Wot's the matter? Any of yer folks sick?"

"No. I'm sending a message for somebody else, the new man that came in yesterday. I s'pose everybody in town knows—"

"Say, wot was it about? Bill was kinda suspicious las' night."

"Bill's always suspicious," laughed Tom. "Read it yourself." Tom pulled the mussed paper from his pocket. "The man's on some paper. Abner said that he wouldn't let anybody carry his typewriter but himself yesterday."

"That so?" The man scanned the paper. "Lemme show this to Bill?"

"I don't know whether I ought to give it to you or not. There's nothing private in it, I suppose, but he paid me to bring it and I was to ask whether there was any message for him. Suppose he asks me about this?"

"Was they any message fer him?"

"No."

"Well, I don't want it anyhow. I kin remember if Bill asts me."

But Bill was not quite satisfied with the report of his henchman. He decided to see himself what the "young chap was up to," as he had done in the case of the Secrests. Evan Tudor was quite pleased with himself that he was running his typewriter at top speed, under the trees in his chosen retreat, when a rough man appeared before him with a "Hello."

"Good morning sir." Evan looked up from his improvised seat on a boulder. "Too fine a morning to waste this way, isn't it?"

"Might just as well stay in the city if you have to write."

"Just what I was thinking. But I don't know. This is a pretty good place to think; and I don't intend to keep it up after I get this off by mail, and maybe one or two other things out of my system."

"Hunting a quiet place, then?"

"Yes; but it is partly for a vacation, too. Aren't you the man who runs a lot of the fishing around here?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I think I saw you in the village, and someone told me. I got hold of a boy that works for you and I told him to bring me something every day, fish, shrimp, your choicest of anything. Can that be done?"

"Yes, but you will have to pay for it."

"All right. Want a little pay in advance?"

"No objection."

"Don't cheat me, then." Evan Tudor's tone was not one which would give offense, rather one inclined to banter. He felt in his vest pocket and took out a folded bill, for five dollars. "That all right?"

"We'll do the best we kin fer ye." Bill pocketed the money. This chap was easy. "Say are ye a friend of them Secrests? You was eatin' there last night."

"Certainly I am a friend of theirs, though I never saw any of them before last night. And I don't like that, Mr.—" Not recalling Bill's name Mr. Tudor paused for a moment. "That looks a little as if I were being spied on. Are there any parties around here from whom I may need to protect myself?"

Evan's eyes flashed. Bill's eyes fell. He was used to taking the initiative in threats. This was something new for him.

"If ye mind yer own business, I reckon ye needn't be afraid of nobody."

"That is good. I'll not be, but it is just as well in a new country to be ready, I suppose. How are the village people about talking to strangers? I want a little material in the line of characters and I may wander among those interesting shacks a little. Will they throw me out?" Mr. Tudor's face wore a whimsical smile.

"They might. I wouldn't advise ye to git too smart around here."

Bill sauntered off. He had come from the direction of Steeple Rocks, Mr. Tudor noted. He smiled to himself as he started the typewriter once more. He was *paying* Bill, Bill the chief sinner, aside from *those who paid him for doing what he was doing*.

Evan Tudor spent the rest of the day in spying out the land. He searched the woods, finding it a glorious grove of beautiful trees and interesting growths of bush and fern. He had the love of a scientist for the different phases of wild life and spent some time over curious flowers, taking a list of those he knew for future use in some setting of a story. Toward dark, he entered the Ives' land and after dark he wandered around Steeple Rocks, feeling justified in the intrusion, for his quest was a trust.

But as it grew late he hurried back to his tent, for he rather expected that some watcher would know whether he spent the night in his tent or in "snooping." He thought that so far he had escaped observation since evening fell. And after all, an early trip about would be only natural to a newcomer. Evan tried to put himself in the place of the evildoer, suspicious, fearful, and he wished at first to allay those suspicions.

As he approached his tent, he thought he heard a rustle in the bushes. He put a tree between himself and the noise, but hummed a little. A shot in the dark would be possible, but scarcely likely. Bill would be the first one to be suspected, and Bill, whether able to prove an alibi or not, did not want any investigating authorities.

So reasoning, young Tudor boldly walked to his tent, turned his flashlight inside of it and finding it empty, except for his undisturbed possessions, entered, lit a candle and prepared for the night. He lay awake for some time, a little uncertain whether or not he might be the intended victim of some attack. He was ready but nothing happened. No suspicious noise of any human source disturbed him. Finally he had to fight to keep awake, but when the stirring of the birds denoted the dawn, he fell into a deep slumber and slept far into the morning.

CHAPTER XV

MORE DISCOVERY

There was early rising at the Eyrie on the morning after they had shared their supper with the new camper. Jack arrived from Steeple Rocks even before the men who were to help Dalton, and wore his working clothes. He reported that Peggy was up, expecting the girls at any time, but he drew Leslie aside, as he sometimes did, to tell her the developments at Steeple Rocks. Leslie was glad that Sarita was still getting ready, for Sarita was inclined to tease her over Jack's preference. It was clear that Jack valued Leslie's opinion on affairs at least.

"My aunt is nervous and worried, Leslie," said Jack. "She announced this distinguished company about to arrive, but does not seem certain just when they will arrive. The Kravetz is back, but disappears for a long while and pays no attention to Peggy. I overheard her say to Mrs. Ives that it was absurd to dress up Peggy to help entertain *'for so short a time.'* Then my aunt said that she intended to have someone of her own right at hand, and she said it almost in a tone of desperation. The Kravetz sometimes has an air of dictating to my aunt that I have wondered about.

"Aunt Kit said 'all my own friends have been sent away on one excuse or another and I have this lot of foreigners to entertain *again*, half the time without my husband, I suppose!'

"He will be here,' the Kravetz said, 'and the Count and I will help you.'" Jack laughed. "The Kravetz got up and went into the house, and Aunt Kit, who knew that I was in the hammock, came right over to me. 'Jack,' she said, 'if I ever needed my own people it's now. Promise me that no matter how insulting Madame Kravetz or anyone may be, you will stay around.' So of course I promised, though if I get scared out at 'royalty' I may come here and bring Peggy any time. Peg, though, is all keyed up and tickled over her new clothes. It will be all right if I escape to the Eyrie, will it?"

"You know that it will, Jack," said Leslie heartily. "Do you know who any of them are?"

"No, not by name. I supposed that they were people of title that my aunt and uncle met abroad; but from something she said I think that they are people whom she has never met at all. Yet she spoke of entertaining them 'again.' How do you account for that, Leslie?"

"Perhaps she has had to entertain a different lot of them some other time," said Leslie.

"I expected you to say that. I rather think that she has, and if they are like the Kravetz, well, good-night!"

Leslie laughed at Jack's expression, but Jack looked around to see that no one was near and bent to say something low into Leslie's ear. "Jack!" she exclaimed, as if startled. Then she looked into his eyes. "Jack, you've got it! That must be the matter over there,—and your aunt suspects it, but isn't sure, or else,—"

Leslie broke off, for Sarita was coming. They both turned with smiles and Leslie said, "Jack was just telling me of all the excitement over the guests that are coming. He does not appreciate it at all and would rather help build log cabins, I guess."

As Dalton came up to claim Jack, the girls started toward Steeple Rocks. Sarita led the way, partly by the woods, but they decided to enter the grounds near the cliffs and Sarita suggested visiting the "Retreat," or Peggy's little Eyrie.

They found the rocks slippery from the mist, but the more cautious Leslie followed Sarita's lead and they reached the cave without accident. "That was a bit risky, Sairey," she said. "We'd better come here when it is dry." But Sarita hushed her and reminded her that they had come to see if they could notice smoke again.

Stooping, they went as far back as they could and Sarita observed that a piece of rock was loose at the hole where Peggy had been tempted to crawl in. She knelt and tugged at it, without any particular purpose except that of general investigation. To her surprise, it gave way and she nearly fell backward, losing her hold upon the rock, which rolled in the other direction, instead of out, though it seemed to stop with a bump against something.

Sarita looked up at Leslie with a comical expression as she straightened herself and leaned forward to the opening again. She was about to say something, when to the girls' surprise they heard an exclamation, "What is that?" someone asked. Both girls instinctively drew back and put their fingers to their lips in warning to each other. But what they next heard they placed more as if the sound were conveyed through a speaking tube in this curious place.

Another voice was answering. "Rocks fall once in a while. There's quite a crack by you. It's more or less honeycombed, but there is no danger here."

"I see. I noticed a little draught when I lit my cigaret." More followed, but the persons speaking were not in the proper position now for more than a murmur to be heard.

"How *lucky* that we didn't say anything near that hole!" whispered Sarita, as both girls withdrew toward the entrance. "Do you suppose that anything we *have* said here has been heard?"

"I scarcely think so. Something would have been done about it, you know. It looks as if the secret of Steeple Rocks were nearly ours, Sarita, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does. Wait. I'm going back a minute." Sarita knelt again at the opening and thrust her head within, to Leslie's disapproval. She followed her, catching hold of her dress and looking at the rocks above her to see if any more had been loosened. She was relieved when Sarita drew back again. "Too dark to see anything, Leslie," she reported when they were outside.

They covered the rest of the way to Peggy's house with very little conversation. "That was a stranger," Sarita commented.

"The other voice was like the Count's," said Leslie.

"Shall we tell Peggy?"

"I suppose so," said Leslie doubtfully. She was thinking about that. What Jack suspected she would keep to herself for the present, but Peggy had a right to know the secret of her Retreat.

Peggy was delighted to see them and took them to her room for what she called the "gorgeous display," some very pretty but suitable frocks for a young girl about to mingle with others who had them. "It is going to be quite a house party," Peggy said, "and a few of them may stay for some time, Mother says. It's awfully interesting, though 'royalty' doesn't mean so much any more. We had a princess once while we were in Florida and she had wonderful jewels. Mother thinks that there is one girl about my age. You simply must come over, girls!"

"Clothes, my dear Peggy. Wouldn't we look great to a grand duchess, in this rig, for instance?"

Leslie turned slowly around, with the air of a fashion show model, displaying a sweater much the worse for wear and her oldest gym bloomers. "I really meant to put on something better, like Sarita, but I thought that I could sneak up to your room without your mother's seeing me, and we want to go out in the boat afterwards, or we *did* want to go."

"I mind the maids more than I do your mother," laughed Sarita. "The last time, you should have seen the scorn with which your mother's maid looked at me."

"Pooh! What's the difference? You girl's always look like somebody nice, no matter what you have on. Jack says so, too. But what has happened to change you about going out in the boat? Is it going to be bad weather?" Peggy glanced toward the window, where sunshine was driving the mists away.

"Mercy no! It's going to be a *wonderful* day. Leslie, tell Peggy what we heard. It's a great discovery, Peggy."

Peggy threw across the bed her most cherished frock which she had saved for the last to show them, and clasped her hands together in her eagerness to hear what had happened. They all sat down together on Peggy's low day bed, a pretty wicker affair which stretched at the foot of the other bed. Peggy was in the middle. A background of silk and fluffy chiffon and tulle behind them set off the three heads bent close together, as the girls related in whispers what had occurred.

Peggy was delighted, with little thought of what the discovery might imply. "Then there *is* a cave somewhere! Girls, we have simply *got* to find it! Will you go back there now with me? I'll call Pugs, to hang up the things, and get into my knickers and sweater in a minute!"

Peggy's maid came into the room while the girls were still waiting for Peggy to scramble from one costume into another. She tried to smile and help Peggy, but the girls could see that she had been crying. Peggy explained as soon as they started out.

"I didn't know that dear old Pugsy cared that much for me. I've been a lot of trouble to her. But honestly, she's almost a part of the family to Mother and me. Perhaps Mother can get out of it, but Dad says that Pugsy's got to leave. I must have a maid that speaks French now! If it were Mother that wanted it, I could understand, but what does Dad care whether I speak French or not?"

"It will be fine when you travel," said Sarita.

But Leslie, thinking of what Jack had said, wondered if Mr. Ives did not want to employ another foreigner instead of "Pugsy."

A dark-browed maid who was dusting in the hall looked at them in none too friendly a way. Even Sarita spoke of it afterward. But Peggy paid no attention to their surroundings as they left the house behind and darted past flower beds and masses of shrubbery on their way to the rocks.

Once there, Peggy viewed the hole and was duly impressed. She had brought a flashlight, which disclosed nothing but rock beyond the hole, with a slight descent to where the loose rock had rolled. Granite walls and an arching ceiling were above.

Leslie knew that it was foolish for all of them to enter, though Sarita declared that never a rock could fall on them. Nevertheless the prospect was so tempting that Leslie crawled in after the others. There was at least good air within. They hoped to find a passage to the cave whence the voices had come; but after a short distance, which they could cover without stooping, they were stopped by a granite wall as hard as the rest of Steeple Rocks. There was a deep fissure, however, and there they could feel a decided draught.

The light turned off, they sat down to listen. Perhaps they could hear something more, if the people were still in the cave. Peggy suggested that perhaps they had heard the Count and someone back in the office. "I feel pretty sure that they have something back in the rock," whispered she, "perhaps a real cave, and more than just Dad's safe."

But Leslie shook her head. "I may be mistaken, but I think that this came from below."

As if to confirm her words, there came the sound of conversation, a mere murmur at first, then a few words very loudly conveyed by this queer speaking tube which nature had provided. The next were fainter, and then there was the murmur. "He's walking around," Leslie suggested.

Peggy had a picture of someone restlessly pacing a cave.

"Well, I hope that Ives will hurry up this house party. I'm certainly sick of staying here. How do I make up as an English lord, Bill?"

A hoarse laugh was the answer to this, but Bill was not standing so close to the fissure, it was obvious.

"And how am I going to get out of this?"

"Same way you got in, by boat and at night."

"Why can't I leave in the daytime if you can?"

"Well, in the first place, you wouldn't care to play the fisherman, I think, the way you look now, or to stay in one o' the shacks with the rest o' the crowd. I kin take you out to-night, if you want to go, but what I'm going to do now is to swim under water a ways. Want to try it?"

"No thanks. But I'll join the rest to-night. A little dirt on my face will make it all right, and I'd rather be with folks than in this terrible place."

"A little timid, huh?"

"I'll show you whether I'm timid or not!"

The girls were breathless, wondering what was going to happen, but the ferocious Bill was evidently possessed of soothing powers. "No, now there ain't no call to git excited. There's going to be enough people here when the schooner comes in."

"Yes," sarcastically said the other man. "You're going to make enough money to give up fishing by

that time, aren't you?"

"I might if they wasn't others I had to divide with," growled Bill. "You pay attention to yer own affairs. You got it fixed with Ives about yerself?"

"Yes."

The girls heard Peggy gasp, but the voices were not sounding as if either man were very near the "Steeple Rocks speaking tube," as Leslie began to call it. Probably Peggy would not be heard.

For some little time the girls sat still, in uncomfortable positions, but they heard nothing more. Peggy was the first to jump up, and by the light of the flashlight which she carried, they all found their way back to the opening and crawled out. "I forgot to look, girls," said Leslie, "to see if there were other rocks that could get loose outside, and after we were in there, listening to Bill and that other man, I began to think what if a rock fell down and closed up this hole!"

"We could have called down the speaking tube, Leslie," Sarita suggested.

"Yes," said Peggy, "and have Bill see that we stayed in there forever! 'Sad loss of three bright young people at Steeple Rocks', would be in the paper."

Peggy was so funny as she said this that Leslie and Sarita both laughed, though the subject was far from laughable. Peggy was frowning now. "Let's go right now and tell Jack," she said. "I certainly heard enough about Dad, didn't I?"

Neither Leslie nor Sarita replied to this question, for they knew that Peggy did not expect comment. They were helping each other around the jutting part of the cliff now and did not resume conversation until they were on the path. Then Peggy cried, "Oh, girls! I was going to watch to see where Bill came out, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Leslie. "I thought of it when Bill said that he was going to 'swim under water a ways.' What possessed us? But, after all, we could not have seen anything from the Retreat. Come on; let's climb down sort of near your yacht dock, Peggy. Perhaps we can see Bill come out of the water yet."

This was no sooner said than done. As quickly as possible, the girls found a spot which would command most of the shore around the bay. The girls looked over the surface of the cliff, as they had done many times before, without finding any opening. "If he has to swim under water, the cave *must* be at the bottom," said Leslie, decisively, "and the only place, girls, where a boat could go in, is in Pirates' Cove!"

"Then Bill will swim out there and get to the rocks outside on *this* side,—unless he has a boat tied in the channel."

"I think that it would be too great a swim to the channel, unless it would be right near our dock around there, and Bill would run the risk of Mother's coming down to the beach or of somebody's seeing him from the house."

"Your mother wouldn't be surprised to see Bill there,—not very, would she, Peggy?"

"Perhaps not. Let's get up a step higher. We can look over these rocks then, and duck down if Bill should come out anywhere near the dock. *Then* we shall have to scamper up and out of sight as quickly as possible." In spite of Peggy's evident chagrin at the implications about Mr. Ives in the conversation which they had overheard, she was enjoying the excitement, Leslie could see. There might be some compensations for Peggy, Leslie thought, in the discovery of Mr. Ives' operations, if it led to her freedom from their shadow. But would it? What ought to be done now? She must tell Jack at once,—so much was clear. But it might be even dangerous for anyone who interfered. Could Jack and Peggy keep their knowledge from Mr. Ives and that household of suspicious foreign servants? The more Leslie thought, the more undecided she felt.

For some time the girls waited uneasily. Perhaps Bill had gone, or perhaps he was taking some time, making ready for the "enough people" who were to be there when the "schooner" came in! Probably they would miss him altogether. No! There he was!

Peeping over the rocks, the girls caught each other's hands in their excitement. Bill came up out of the water and shook it from him like a big mastiff. He looked around hastily to see if he were observed and the girls kept very still. Sarita and Leslie, indeed, ducked behind the rocks, but Peggy, who had taken a black silk handkerchief from her neck, wrapped it about her head and kept on looking.

It was not very likely that Bill would see them, yet he might if he looked above on his way over the rocks from those at the base of Steeple Rocks, where he had emerged from the Cove waters.

Peggy gave the word to start up. "He's going over the rocks now. Stoop low and you'll get to the top in a jiffy! He'll only hope that we haven't seen him, if he does see us. But it isn't so wonderful for a person to go in swimming anywhere here."

CHAPTER XVI

THE DILEMMA

From the rocky steps where they had been watching the return of Bill Ritter, Leslie, Sarita and Peggy plunged into the woods as soon as possible and by that more devious route reached the Secret camp. They were rather surprised to find it not yet ten o'clock, but they had spent much less time with Peggy, at what she called her fashion show, than they had expected. Then the time spent in the Retreat and in waiting for Bill's appearance must have been much less than it seemed.

When they reached the new clearing on the slight rise of ground not far from the spring, they found Dalton and his men hard at work and Dalton jubilant over the prospect of speedy building. Beth was sitting on a pile of logs making a sketch of the place and the workers, "for us to remember how it looked," she said.

Dalton dropped his work to join the girls and look at the sketch. "Pretty good, sister," said he. "Do you know I've a great notion to plaster this house and stay here through the winter."

"What do you mean, Dal,—stay *alone*, or no school for any of us?" The tone of the surprised Beth was not as reproving as Dalton might have expected.

"No school for anybody," asserted Dalton, though he had really not thought this out before. "It would be the best thing in the world for you, Beth, and think what snow scenes you could immortalize with your pen, pencil and brush!"

"Ridiculous boy!"

"Oh, let me board with you instead of going to Florida. I never *have* had any winter sports!" Peggy's voice was coaxing. "We'll have skiing down the hills, that hill where you saved my life, Dal,—and skating, and ice-boating and everything on the bay!"

Even Leslie and Sarita, who were more interested in lessons than Peggy, brightened at the thought. "Poor me!" exclaimed Sarita. "I'd have to go home and miss it all!"

"Vacation, Sarita," suggested Peggy, "the Christmas vacation."

"We'll skate on our little lake, Peggy," said Dalton, "as if it were already decided, and we can have a dog-sled to take us to town,—"

"Crazy!" laughed Leslie. "But, Beth, I believe that Dal is in earnest."

"Wait till he has fires to make some morning when it is below zero, ice to break, water to carry and everything frozen up."

"Not much worse than a furnace to take care of, Beth," said the man of the house. "We'll have a big fireplace in one room and a big heater somewhere, a shed full of coal, and wood on the place,—think it over. I've got to work." Whistling a little, Dalton went back to help and direct.

"Dalton just loves this," said Leslie, "but look, Beth, here comes Mr. Tudor."

With a salute to everybody, Evan Tudor stopped first to speak to Dalton, then joined the other group with greetings. Peggy, remembering her impulsive entrance of the previous day, bowed sweetly, but with dignity, while Leslie asked if he had been annoyed by the sounds of building so early.

"I slept as if I should never waken this morning and I have only just eaten my breakfast. There must be something in this air, as advertised! I prowled around a while last night, enjoying the woods and the shore. At this rate, it looks as if you would have a house up in no time."

"They will," said Peggy, "and Dal is planning to make it so they can stay all winter." Peggy looked wickedly at Beth.

Evan Tudor looked surprised, but said, "It would be very beautiful here in winter."

"I'd like to try it once," said Leslie, "but not unless the whole family wanted to do it, for Beth might get pneumonia and then we'd be in a pretty pickle!"

"It would be lovely here, with the ice and snow," Beth acknowledged, relenting a little, "and I seldom ever take cold. I'd have to watch the rest of you to see that you were not careless."

"Oh, Beth," cried Peggy, assuming her own presence, "we'd fish through the ice, and Leslie and I would do the cooking!"

Then Leslie and Sarita did laugh, for Peggy could not cook anything and had confessed the fact before. "Well," Peggy continued, answering their thought, "couldn't I *learn*?"

At this point Beth glanced at her wrist watch and asked if a short trip in the Sea Crest would not be possible before lunch, in order to show Mr. Tudor the bay and the rocks. "If we should be late, Dal will make the hot coffee for the men. They bring their lunches, but we give them something hot, and I have everything ready, beans all cooked and some meat."

Everybody thought this a good plan, especially as they could take Peggy home by launch and Jack, if he thought best. Otherwise, Jack could have beans and coffee with Dalton. But Jack decided to go with them, for Peggy privately informed him that she must consult him about something.

On the way to the boat, Beth exhibited the Eyrie to Mr. Tudor, while Jack, Leslie, and the other girls went on down the rocks to get the launch ready and start the engine. None of them were disappointed by any lack of enthusiasm on the part of their guest, for though Evan Tudor was not particularly voluble in his speech he gave the impression of not missing any practical or inspirational detail in the comments which he made.

After the start Mr. Tudor sat or stood with Beth, who pointed out the sights, while Jack at the wheel listened to what the girls had to tell him with Peggy as chief spokesman. He made little comment at first and the impatient Peggy urged him, saying, "Well, Jack, why don't you go 'up in the air' about it?"

"It is too serious, Peggy. I don't think that you know just how serious it is. That fake English lord in the cave only proves what I have been suspecting."

"*What* have you been suspecting, Jack?"

"I'd rather not say, Peggy. Suppose we wait a little. I am thinking that about the twenty-eighth we may find some others of the same sort, only pretending to carry out the house party idea with your

mother, and then some that are very likely real titled exiles."

"But why would they do that? Why should this man hide away? Is he afraid of somebody? And why should Dad let him hide there? Just what is it that Dad is doing?"

"I am very much afraid, Peggy, that your step-father is helping these people into the country against the law, and probably for a good price. I hope that it is the Count who is doing it,—that is, I have been hoping that, with Uncle's just letting him use the place and entertaining as his guests only some people brought here in his yacht that really have a right to be here. But I think now that the yacht is a blind and that everybody will come in on the 'schooner.'"

"Oh!" Peggy began to understand more clearly. "Shall I tell Mother, Jack?"

"No. I've got to find out *what* to do."

But as it happened, neither Jack nor Peggy nor any of the Secretsts decided what was to be done; and it was better so.

The little cruise was delightful. Troubles seemed far away after they gave themselves to the lure of the water and sky and the motion of the boat. Even Peggy, who had at first been startled and distressed at Jack's clear statements, seemed to forget and joked as usual with the girls. Leslie was thoughtful, wondering what their duty was. It was not pleasant to have such a problem presented to them.

Evan Tudor, who could run a launch quite well himself, was entirely content to be a passenger, visiting with the pretty artist and forgetting his quest in these parts, except to fix in mind the location of Steeple Rocks and Pirates' Cove. He intended to go out in a row boat to investigate that region.

Jack and Peggy were left at the dock in Ives Bay, while Leslie took the wheel for the homeward trip. This they made quickly, landing in time for Beth to superintend the hot lunch. Mr. Tudor was invited to partake, but he thanked Beth and declined, saying that he had work to do and that his late breakfast made a late lunch desirable.

For Leslie and Sarita it had been a full and surprising morning. After lunch was over, with its work, they found a quiet place apart where they could discuss the present dilemma.

CHAPTER XVII

PIRATES' COVE

Bill's men, out in the boats, reported to him at noon the short trip of the Sea Crest and the passengers upon it. Bill accepted the report, thinking that the "writin' feller," if he liked the girl who made pictures and kept himself to his work and his visits with the Secrests, was probably harmless so far as Bill's pursuits were concerned. He dispatched Tom Carey with an excellent choice of fish, which he could leave at the tent if the man had not returned. But Tom chose to wait for Mr. Tudor.

"Hello, Tom," Evan Tudor called, as he approached his tent and saw Tom stretched out on a rock by the stream. "Have you been waiting long? You might have left the fish, but I'm glad that you did not. Anything to report?"

This last was in a lower tone, after he had jumped across the stream by its little stepping stones to the rock where Tom now stood.

"Yes, I have. Here are the fish."

"Good. Those are fine. Bill must think that I have an appetite, but then I did not limit the quantity and the more delivered the better business for Bill."

"Yes, sir," grinned Tom. "I didn't expect to have any news for you so soon, but Bill is about sick to-day, having a chill or something. So he wants me to take a boat, go to Pirates' Cove, row into the cave and bring out a man."

"What?" Evan Tudor was a little puzzled. "I thought, from what I have been told that it was not safe to go into the Cove at all. Miss Secrest just spoke of it on a trip that they took me around the bay and through the channel to Ives Bay."

"Yes, sir. I was there when a man told Bill about your being with them." Tom and Evan Tudor exchanged glances.

"Miss Secrest told me quite a tale of disappearances and of the danger where that opening occurs."

"Yes, sir; that is what is generally thought around here. But my grandmother has always laughed to me about it, and she remembers the time when people used to visit the pirates' cave."

"Then probably smugglers built up this tale for their own purposes."

Tom nodded assent. "I've told you how Bill wants to get me into all this, and get some hold on me, you know. If you weren't here I'd never do it in the world, but I've pretended to listen to what he says about 'making good money.' I don't know why he doesn't have someone else go, unless it is dangerous and they will not do it, or there is some smuggled stuff that he can't trust them with, or he just wants to get me into it. I'm not afraid to go, and it is a good chance to find out."

"Don't risk anything on my account, Tom; but if you think it safe to go, I shall be among those rocks somewhere with a boat. Call if you are in any danger. I am a good swimmer."

Tom, rather glad that there would be help at hand if any were needed, went away and Mr. Tudor examined his fish. Soon they were cooking over a good fire, while a well satisfied young man watched them and made more plans. This was a great opportunity. He would visit the cave after Tom and the man had left. There was a possibility of there being others in the cave, but he would risk that. It was not very likely. Perhaps Tom could let him know in some way if there were, though no signal had been agreed upon. Indeed, he must keep out of sight.

Evan Tudor did not know, of course, that he would not be the only watcher that night. The only decision that the girls and Jack had been able to make was that of immediate action in seeing Bill take out the man whose voice the girls had heard through the "speaking tube." It would never do to miss that. Leslie thought that perhaps Peggy would want to give up their plan after hearing Jack's plain statements. But the last thing that she said before the Sea Crest left her and Jack at their dock was, "Now don't forget to-night!" Peggy still loved mystery.

More than once Peggy afterward remarked to Dalton, with whom she became so very, very well acquainted, that it was funny how the different people who were engaged that night in Pirates' Cove affairs had no knowledge of each other. Bill's man escorted Tom part way, but did not know about Tom's relation to Mr. Tudor. The pretended nobleman had no idea how near discovery he was. The Ives-Secrest group knew nothing about Mr. Tudor and he knew nothing of their interest or presence at first.

Peggy and Jack decided that rather than steal out of the house late at night it would be better to go out openly for a row to the Eyrie, early in the evening. Peggy's mother would assume that they had returned, they hoped, for Mrs. Ives was concerned about other things. Their plan was to return with the girls and hide among the rocks in the channel, where there was a view of the Cove. About the time the last boats were going in they would quietly row out from the Eyrie. This plan was carried out.

It was about one o'clock when a boat came into the bay from the sea, and after reaching quiet waters, edged around into the channel. Naturally Leslie did not know that it was their own Swallow, borrowed from Beth and Dalton by Mr. Tudor, though he had not come for it till long after the first party had left the Eyrie. Sarita had gone to sleep, lulled by the gentle rocking of their boat, for the wait seemed long. Her head was on Leslie's shoulder, but she was startled awake when Peggy clutched Leslie and whispered, "Oh, who is this? One of Bill's spies?"

"Sh-sh," Jack warned. But it would not be easy to see them among the shadows of the rocks, and presently they saw the boat no longer as it gently glided farther within the channel, and none too soon for its occupant, for two more boats, rapidly rowed, approached the mouth of the Cove. In one was Tom, who was given final orders and directions by the man in the other boat.

Bay and Cove were comparatively calm. The night, too, was clear so far, bright with stars and a late moon, a condition good for the watchers, but not so favorable to any underhand project. The girls located the dark opening into the cave and watched tensely.

The one boat waited at the rocks which marked the beginning of the Cove. Tom's boat entered the

Cove and went straight across to the mouth of the cave, with only one exception, when Tom avoided a foaming, restless stretch where some hidden rocks lurked like Scylla of old.

"Look! He's gone right on in," said Leslie, "without a bit of trouble!"

"Wait till you see if he ever comes out again," Sarita returned, for she still more than half believed in the old story.

"If he does and they get away all right, let's go in, too," Peggy suggested, a wild desire to see the inside of that cave taking possession of her. They could take the same course. That boat had kept steady, unharmed, not tossed about by any current or whirlpool.

"It would be safe enough," said Jack, looking at his watch, "if we can do it before the tide comes up much. It is not quite low tide now. I looked up the tides before we came out. It will be easier to get in at low tide, though we may have to watch for rocks more. Make up your minds what you want to do, girls."

"If it were a question of *wanting*," said Leslie, "I'd say go at once, but I'm not sure it would be very safe. What do you think, Sarita?"

But Sarita did not answer, for at that moment Tom's boat shot out from the dark, spray-washed entrance. All had seen the flash of light, presumably from Tom's flashlight, as he took his bearings before starting out of the cave. Two figures were in the boat this time. Over the legend-cursed waters of Pirates' Cove Tom's boat sped, faster than when it was attempting an unknown course. Again they saw him avoid the one tempestuous spot. Again they saw him reach the rocks and the buoy where the other boat waited.

The watchers did not hear, however, the rough jeer with which the man who rowed the accompanying boat greeted Tom. "So Bill's got ye at last, has he? Ye'll work fer him now or yer life won't be safe. That's yer 'nishiatio, did ye know it?"

Tom was spared an answer by the rough order of the man whom he had brought from the cave. It was to the effect that this was his trip and that he wanted to get to land as quickly as possible. So did Tom.

The two boats bobbed over the waves and out of the bay to some mooring at the village. The boat load of young people watched, still keeping in the shadow of the rocks and discussing in low tones the likelihood of their being still watched, if at all, by the other boat which had come into the channel.

Then they heard the soft plash of oars. Startled, Jack braced himself for possible trouble and Peggy clutched Leslie again. The boat passed them, its occupant leaning to look in their direction. Then it shot back and a voice addressed them. "Why, it's the Eyrie crowd, isn't it?"

What a relief! It was only Mr. Tudor!

"My, how you scared us, Mr. Tudor!" cried Peggy. "How did you happen to get out here? Did you see that boat come out of the Cove?"

"Yes. It would seem that the old story is not true, yet I heard Miss Secrest tell it only to-day."

"We're going over. Don't you want to go with us?"

"Peggy!" Leslie exclaimed. "Have we decided to go?"

"I have, unless you really hate to go."

"We're crazy to see it," said Sarita.

Mr. Tudor was inwardly amused at the turn of events. Again they were in his favor. "If you think that it will not be a trespass, Miss Peggy, I should like to go with you. It seems safe to me. Suppose you let me go first, however. I noted the boatman's course, and we shall avoid the same rocks that took him aside."

"Good!" cried Peggy. "Have you a light? We brought some."

"Yes. I have a large flashlight."

It seemed like a dream,—the late night, the restless waters, the mystery of the Cove, the yawning entrance of the cave. The Ives boat followed exactly the trail of the Swallow, which the girls now recognized. Now they passed the boiling surf. "Between Scylla and Charybdis," quoted Leslie to Sarita, and Peggy, who did not know what she meant, decided to look that up.

Bowing his head, Mr. Tudor pulled upon his oars, and his boat disappeared into the yawning maw of the cavern. Jack was wondering if it were safe to follow immediately, but he heard a call, "Come on," and the entrance was illuminated by the light which Mr. Tudor carried and which he flashed upon the churning waters in the center of the opening. Down went the heads,—a breathless moment! Now!

The Secrest-Ives combination were within the pirate cave! Looking about by the steady light which Mr. Tudor held for them, they saw his boat drawn aside a little and near a floating dock, as it might be called, a mere plank tightly fastened to posts at the very edge of a worn rocky ledge, the floor of the cave. Waters stretched to the right and left of them. Above, the roof of the cave was low at the entrance, but lifted to a high vault farther in. "Snug place," said Leslie, turning her own flashlight from side to side.

Mr. Tudor examined the landing, made it firm by some quick manipulation, and leaped out of his boat, which he had fastened. "Want to get out?" he inquired, leaning toward the passengers of Jack's boat, which now occupied the other side of the landing space. He held his hand to the girls, while Jack kept the boat steady. "Let us keep together," suggested Mr. Tudor. Having the largest light, he naturally took the lead.

They found it a large cave, quite evidently often and recently used. Nature had been assisted in making it a safe storage for either goods or persons, for they found more than one room, with steps cut in uneven places, and a long passage leading somewhere. They did not follow that very far, for Mr. Tudor suggested that it would not be best to stay long "this time" on account of the tide. There were cots standing on end, and one which had been left with bedding on it.

Peggy shuddered. "Think of sleeping with such damp bedding!" she said.

"This room seems fairly dry, though," said Leslie, "and I feel quite a breeze from somewhere."

"Oh, it must be the place where the men were when we heard them talking!" Peggy exclaimed. She and Leslie searched the wall and ceiling and found a crack which they decided to be the opening to the "speaking tube," for the immediate surroundings were like a wide funnel.

A pile of old and foreign-looking clothing in one corner gave Mr. Tudor good evidence of what he was seeking. There was a portable stove all greasy and rusty, with a cask which they thought contained gasoline. A wooden door boarded up one opening off from the passage but it was locked. As there was a narrow opening across the top of the ill-fitting door, Mr. Tudor suggested to Jack that he climb up to see what was inside. "Stand on my shoulders," he said.

Jack helped himself first by the edge of a thick board in the door, which had been made by nailing horizontal planks across a frame. Partly lifted or supported by Mr. Tudor, Jack clung to the top of the door, with one foot on Mr. Tudor's shoulder, and looked over. "Case after case, and a lot of loose bottles of liquor," he reported.

"Bill's activities include more than one line of smuggling," Mr. Tudor replied, as Jack dropped to the floor again.

"My muddy feet will not help your coat any," said Jack.

"It will dry and brush off. We have not found any pirate treasure for the girls yet," he continued. "Perhaps there is a safe somewhere with the pirate jewels; but we must hurry. I want to see the front space again. Come, please."

The party went back into the front of the cave, while Mr. Tudor and Jack searched the wall on the side toward the Ives' little bay and dock. There, indeed, in a little recess, were some steps, the same sort of rocky steps, where the hand of man had assisted nature. At the top there was another door, locked. But this time Mr. Tudor drew a key from his pocket which unlocked it. A breeze blew in, fresh and sweet and cool. Carefully lighting his steps before him Mr. Tudor stepped outside, then made room for the rest.

They found themselves on a rocky ledge, rather narrow and walled in by rock. Mr. Tudor rounded a corner carefully, looked and came back. "Very clever," said he. "This door is concealed by the mass of rock, and when you turn that corner, there you are in a narrow opening between rocks that looks just like a hundred others. Look, but be careful not to step off the edge."

Each followed directions and looked. "A long plank would reach over to our steps," said Peggy. "I've often wondered why that wide, long board was laid along the side of the steps. There is a sort of fastening there, too. I asked Mother about it once and she said she supposed it was there to strengthen the stairway. I wonder why they go in and out by boat when that is there."

"Perhaps," said Jack, "there is more danger of discovery, or maybe it is not as safe a way."

"That is what became of the Count that time. I was not far enough down, or not smart enough to see it."

Mr. Tudor looked inquiringly at Peggy. "Count Herschfeld?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I know of him."

They were now back within the cave and Mr. Tudor locked the door again. "A place like this develops," said he. "It is not planned from the first. It has probably been the resort of smugglers from early times."

"But we'd better hurry away while the tide is low. There is a plank to be found inside, if you girls would prefer to cross to the steps. I am sure that I saw one somewhere."

"No walking the plank for me *yet*," said Peggy. "Are you going to tell on Bill yet, Mr. Tudor?" From what he had said, Peggy knew that he must know about Bill. What else did he know? But she would not be the one to tell about her step-father.

"What do you think we ought to do about it, Miss Peggy?" Mr. Tudor countered.

"I suppose we can't let smuggling go on."

"No," soberly Evan Tudor replied. "It will have to be broken up sometime. Probably we should have a little more proof about Bill and his friends."

"Oh, yes," eagerly Peggy replied.

"Poor child," Evan Tudor was thinking.

Safely they all went through the spray. Mr. Tudor went first, then turned his light upon the place for Jack's exit. To their surprise they found it foggy and by the time they reached Ives Bay and the dock there the fog was rolling in so thickly that it was decided to leave the Swallow among the Ives boats till the next day. Evan Tudor and the girls would walk home.

Jack was distressed about this and wanted to accompany them, but Peggy insisted that it would be foolish and the rest agreed. "The more quickly and quietly we get into the house the better, Jack," said Peggy, "and no one will notice the Swallow, Mr. Tudor. We do all sorts of crazy things going back and forth, and Jack and I might easily have rowed home in the Swallow, or all of us landed here and gone on some hike or other."

Tired as the girls were, they managed to give a full and clear account of their suspicions and discoveries to Mr. Tudor on the way home. It was a comfort to pass over some of the responsibility to him, though he did not tell them that this smuggling of aliens was the subject of his quest, nor that he represented the law and the United States government. The other smuggling would naturally be attended to at the same time, but it was desired to find the heads of a ring having operations at different points.

"We have been so troubled, Mr. Tudor, about our duty, how to notify the right authorities, or whether to do so or not, with Peggy and her family to consider,—though I suppose that it is wrong to be hindered by that." So Leslie told the man who represented the right authority.

"It would be a hard thing for you to take up without more proof, Miss Leslie. Suppose you just do nothing but keep your eyes open and tell me about it. I will watch, too. Did you say that a schooner was expected about the twenty-eighth?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will talk it over with your brother and Miss Beth. Good-night; do not worry about this."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NET IS SPREAD

The girls found Elizabeth up and greatly worried. She had gone to bed and fallen asleep, she said, waking at midnight to find that they had not come in. "If Dalton had not needed his sleep so much, I would have wakened him," she said.

Again the sleepy girls told the story, gathering up the details in the process and filling in what Beth did not know. "But we have passed the responsibility over to Mr. Tudor, Beth. He thinks that more proof is necessary, too. We've found out more than enough for poor little Peggy, though she is the stoutest little piece you ever saw. One thing, she does not like her step-father, or trust him, and she sees that he makes Mrs. Ives miserable. Mr. Tudor asked if she would be likely to warn her step-father and of course, we could not know. So far she has not said anything to her mother."

"Do you suppose that Mr. Tudor will do anything?" asked Beth, very much interested.

"I don't know. He said that he would talk to Dalton and to you. I'd say wait till they get here, anyhow. We surely are going to watch for that schooner, Beth,—but not to-night!"

On the very next day another young man arrived at Evan Tudor's camp. Largely for Bill's benefit, a heavy package marked manuscript was mailed by Mr. Tudor from the village post office. When Tom arrived that day with the regular supply of fish, he was told that he might make his report in the presence of the other young man. He did so, showing some money that Bill had paid him for the trip, a sum which Tom had inwardly hesitated to take, feeling like a traitor. He spoke of his feeling in the matter, but Mr. Tudor assured him that he must seem to be a part of the smuggler group. "You may even have to be arrested with the rest, though if there is any resisting, get out of range! Can you meet that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Our people will be instructed about you, and you have only to tell who you are. I'm not anticipating any war. Things are coming to a climax now. Have you any information about the schooner that is bringing in the immigrants?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ives is out with the yacht now. He is expecting to take them off the schooner some distance out, but the yacht has trouble with the engine and they may have to dock her. In that case they'll bring what Bill calls the big bugs to the yacht, by the launch, of course, and take the rest into the cave till they can get them 'distributed.' That is what Mr. Ives calls it. I saw him. He came in to Bill's on the launch, about ten o'clock last night."

Mr. Tudor had also seen him, but he did not mention the fact to Tom. "Does Mr. Ives know that you are in this with Bill?"

"Yes, sir. He asked me questions and gave me a ten dollar bill. I feel like a Judas."

"Remember what he is and you will not feel so. You can give the money back later, if you like."

The more puzzling part of this matter to Mr. Tudor was to make no mistake about having the government officers and men on hand at the right time. With careful scouts out on land and sea to guard against surprise when the schooner actually arrived, Mr. Ives and Bill would be thoroughly informed about any suspicious movements. But an innocent looking hunting and fishing party had just arrived at a camp a few miles away, and a few miles down the coast a small passenger vessel had put in, apparently for repairs. A regular coast guard steamer had passed as well and had duly been reported to Bill and Mr. Ives, who were feeling none too easy about this next cargo of aliens to be smuggled in. But thousands of dollars were already in their pockets and they expected to make as much again.

Patriotism? Bill had been smuggled in himself years before, and Mr. Ives often told his wife that he owed nothing to Uncle Sam or the flag. He was a brilliant scoundrel, thoroughly selfish and of the type that enjoys intrigue and power. The Count had been embittered by the results of the world war and was glad to do what he could against the country and its laws. Some of the alien immigrants themselves were to be pitied, though they were lending themselves to this scheme. Many of them were caught in some unhappy circumstances at home and cared nothing for governments, only for a refuge.

Others were of the dangerous class of communists that were willing to pay and pay heavily for the chance to spread their doctrines in a country that wanted none of them. Then there were the ignorant ones, of "low degree," who believed almost anything that they were told of the chances in America. They were to be largely Bill's prey, robbed of their savings and forced to work for him if he chose. That was the "fine opportunity" waiting for them in America!

The new man with Mr. Tudor carried the messages now, at night, for it was no longer best to telegraph from the nearest town. After the sending of the manuscript, the two men now spent long hours in fishing or in tramping about after the manner of tourists. They took notes in prominent places, to carry out the idea of their profession, and, indeed, both of them were correspondents for certain papers. Mr. Tudor told Beth that his "best seller" could more easily be a detective story than anything else.

Dalton was admitted to councils now, but he was more anxious to get on with the house than to do any detective work. The chief benefit to him was the knowledge that someone else was watching Bill and Mr. Ives. His family was safe without his being on guard any longer. Like magic, Leslie said, the house went up and it was decided to finish it within and without for cold weather. They would at least have what Sarita called a "proper home" and if they wanted to stay through part of the cold weather they could.

At night watch was kept in the Eyrie, as they had planned, for now it was but a short time till the schooner was due. On the twenty-sixth the Ives yacht came into the bay and men were sent for to fix some part of the machinery. Mr. Ives, "cross as two sticks," according to Peggy, appeared at his home

and had long consultations with the Count. At other times he could be heard pacing up and down in his office. "He has something on hand that worries him terribly, Peggy," Mrs. Ives told her daughter, "and just at the time of the house party, too! He says that perhaps the yacht will not be ready in time to go for them, but that if it isn't he will get them here some other way."

Peggy did not confide this to the other girls. She had stopped talking about the matter. It was not fun any more. They missed her at the Eyrie, for while Jack came as usual, still interested in the house and Dalton, and still wanting to confide in Leslie the matters of the Steeple Rocks mystery, now a mystery no longer, Peggy tried to seem interested in her clothes and the plans for the house party. Would it come off? Would Mr. Tudor tell? He didn't talk as if he would right away. What ought she to do about telling her mother?

Peggy's mind was somewhat in confusion. The servants were quiet, inclined to watch Peggy, she imagined. It would have been hard to find opportunity for the secret talk with her mother which she rather longed for sometimes. She and Jack did not attempt to discuss the matter and Mr. Ives asked Jack to drop his "carpenter work" at the Eyrie. Once, while they were playing tennis, Jack muttered to Peggy, "No use, can't do a thing now, Peggy. We'll just wait."

A very pleasant thing happened at the Secret camp in the shape of a surprise for Sarita. Through Mr. Tudor, Tom Carey sent her a package in which was her lost glass. Tom had recovered it that very night after it had fallen into the water, by swimming from his boat and diving where it seemed safe. The glass had lodged upon a rock not far from the surface, he discovered, and while its appearance was spoiled, the lenses were not broken.

Keeping the recovery a secret from Bill, Tom had made a trip to town and had the field glass put in shape again, with new covering. A little note explained the facts and Sarita was quite overcome, almost sorry that Tom had gone to the expense but admiring his spirit. "Oh, the poor boy!" she exclaimed.

"He paid for it with Bill's money, though," said the smiling Mr. Tudor, in whose presence Sarita had opened the package, "and as he is making a little more than usual, you need not worry about Tom. I will explain in a few days, Miss Sarita. It comes just in time for good service."

Meanwhile the net was being drawn more tightly. It was desired to take the Count and Mr. Ives after their connection with the smuggling was further proved by the presence of the aliens illegitimately brought in in the Ives home or upon the Ives yacht. On land and by sea the arrival of the schooner was awaited.

SAILS ON THE HORIZON

On the night of the twenty-seventh, Leslie Secrest and Sarita Moore were sitting in the Sea Crest to talk. Gently the boat rocked a little in the lapping water of their little cove. Beth and Dalton were above in the Eyrie, where they had a spyglass, not one belonging to Peggy, but one which Dalton had procured. "It would be a fine thing, wouldn't it," he asked, "to hunt down Peggy's step-father with a glass that he will probably pay for?"

Idly Leslie dipped her hand in the water. "Let's go over after Peggy," Sarita suggested. "Lots of boats are out yet, and the sunset isn't over. See what entrancing shades there are. Beth is probably copying those over there in the east. Too bad the sun itself isn't in that direction!"

Without a word, Leslie sprang into action. "I see a few twinkles of stars coming out, but it isn't too late," she said. They were soon out upon the bay, Sarita waving a farewell to Beth, who had walked out upon the rocks. Before they had gone far toward the channel, by which they would reach Peggy's, to their surprise, the Ives yacht gave forth a deep and sonorous sound.

"Listen to Peggy's yacht tooting!" cried Sarita. "Look out, Les. Let's keep out of the way."

The yacht, indeed, was moving out; but as there was but one straight course for it out of the bay, Leslie was not concerned. She drove the Sea Crest in another direction, and circled around, as they often did. To their surprise again, there was Peggy herself, waving from the deck.

Leslie chose to follow in the wake of the yacht, which drew farther and farther away from them, and finally turned north along the coast, disappearing from view. It had not been Leslie's intention, to be sure, to go out into the open sea very far, but she saw Mr. Tudor and his friend in another launch no bigger than the Sea Crest and she found the sea very little rougher than the bay. "It will be fairly light for more than an hour, Sarita, let's stay out a while."

Sarita was willing, and they turned the little Sea Crest toward the open sea and sped on. Suddenly, upon the horizon, a lovely sight greeted their eyes. There hung a large schooner as if suspended from the clouds. It was in full sail, the last pink and lavender of the sunset imparting a tinge of color to the swelling sails.

"How lovely!" exclaimed Leslie. "Is it a fishing schooner, or *the* schooner, I wonder?"

"It might be either, or both," laughed Sarita. "How odd! It's simply fading from view! See, it's turned, too."

The girls watched the schooner till they could see it no more. Then Leslie turned the launch and ran straight for the bay. "Do you suppose that it *is* the schooner and that the yacht has gone to meet it now? They certainly would not take Peggy and Mrs. Ives, would they? How terrible it would be if they were boarded out there and Peggy would be in the midst of it!"

But as they came on, they saw Mrs. Ives and Peggy in a launch run by no less a personage than Bill himself. Peggy said something to Bill, who ran the launch within speaking distance while she called, "Engine stopped and we had to signal for help. Dad and the Count may have to stay there all night!" Peggy's face was bright. There was much else that she wanted to tell the girls, but Bill wouldn't want to wait, she knew.

After nodding brightly to Peggy, Leslie and Sarita looked at each other. "Camouflage," said Leslie "They meant to send them back all the time. Their engine is all right and that's the schooner! Bill will go out with the launch, of course, taking the plumber!"

"Plumber!" laughed Sarita.

"Well, isn't that whom you send for when anything is out of fix?" Quick-witted Leslie's imagination was right, as it happened. Sending on her boat at full speed, she felt very much relieved to think that Peggy would be safely at home. "I'd pay five cents," she added, "to know if Mr. Tudor is taking this in."

As that was Mr. Tudor's chief business at this time, he was not ignorant of all the moves. Like Leslie, however, he was going in to shore. The schooner would be taken care of at the proper time by others. He knew who was on the yacht and where it lay. He was not so impatient as the girls, for he knew what it all involved. The denouement might be dramatic. He hoped that it would be neither dangerous nor fatal to anyone. No move at all was to be made until the alien passengers were transferred from the schooner. Bill's scouts were then to be quietly seized, in order that no signal might be given the yacht, though even then the chase upon the open sea would probably be successful. Tom Carey was of great help in learning who these scouts were.

Again that night, like a wraith from the sea, the schooner was seen. Leslie in the Eyrie, where poor Dalton was trying to keep awake after his day of physical labor, found it with the spy-glass and exclaimed. The rest sprang up to look, and while they still tried to distinguish the vessel, whose lights had apparently been extinguished, there was a knock at the door. "It's Tudor," spoke a voice.

"Come right in." Dalton hastened to open the door for Mr. Tudor, who was not quite as calm as usual.

"Good evening, friends. Have you seen the schooner?"

"We have just been looking at it," said Beth, offering the glass to Evan, who looked for some time.

"It is flying here and there, like a bird trying to reach its nest and avoid the owl that is watching. Ostensibly it has fishing grounds in the vicinity. Perhaps it was a mistake to have our boat pass again, but it is not investigating. The Ives yacht is lying off the coast with some broken machinery, they say. Bill has just brought off the Count and Mr. Ives.

"It will probably be to-morrow night when the schooner unloads. Our boat is leaving just a little before dawn, to assure them that they are not to be searched, and also to prevent their unloading to-night. I believe that our ship is to hail the schooner, appear to be satisfied with inquiry and steam away. Our boat is not very large,—but there is another, not too far out at sea.

"Circumstances often determine what it is best to do. I thought that you would like to know what is going on. I am going to take a sleep now, my friend on guard. If I were you, I should sleep, too."

After this explanation, Mr. Tudor took his leave. The rather serious Secrest group decided to take his advice. The girls were soon asleep in the Eyrie with their door barred, though Leslie wakened before daylight to lie and think about Peggy.

Peggy herself had many thoughts on the morning of the twenty-eighth. She did not know that the schooner had arrived, but that was the date of the house party. Mr. Ives was still nervous but in better poise, giving orders in regard to certain provisions for the guests. Mrs. Ives was mistress of herself and the situation, for her house was ready, the menus made out with the housekeeper.

Never had Peggy had such a problem to face. She could not bring herself to inform authority against her step-father, and in her indecision she was ready to see who came, what sort of people they were and whether it were really Mr. Ives who was the real smuggler or not. Perhaps he could be persuaded to give it all up, she thought. Mr. Tudor's knowing worried her. She now felt persuaded that he had been investigating, though she hoped that she was only imagining it.

It was out of Peggy's hands, however. If the girls had never started to find a mystery out for themselves, the result would have been the same.

Before midnight men were hidden in the pirates' cave, for Tom had fortunately been appointed watch there. Whether tide and hour would permit entrance by water or by plank and the door, they were ready. Tom Carey could tell them little this time, for plans were known only to Bill. The rest followed his orders.

One government boat was to take the yacht, another was to follow the schooner, and lest slippery Bill should escape in the launch, provision was made for that. It was hoped that the entire number of aliens, high and low, might be transferred to the yacht first because of its size. No interference was to be made until after that occurred. Mr. Tudor told Elizabeth that the smugglers were doubtless hoping for fog to conceal their activities.

The first excitement at the Eyrie occurred about ten o'clock that night, when Dalton, uneasy, sauntered down to their cove and discovered the Sea Crest foundered, not in very deep water to be sure, but it was an unwelcome calamity. The Swallow was floating, but Dalton examined it to find that someone had begun to cut a hole in it. "My coming probably frightened the man away," Dalton reported at the Eyrie. "They do not want the Sea Crest abroad to-night."

It did grow somewhat foggy, though not enough so to annoy what boats were out upon the bay. Long since the "engine trouble" of the yacht had been overcome and it had steamed away, up the coast and out of sight. Now, shortly after midnight it appeared, regardless of who might see it, well lighted, its pennants waving in honor of distinguished guests. It approached the bay, at full speed and cutting the waves valiantly.

CHAPTER XX

CAPTURE

Peggy and Jack, at Steeple Rocks, had gone to watch for the yacht at the tops of the steps which ran down to the dock where the yacht was expected. At the sight of it, Jack waited, but Peggy hurried in to announce the arrival. Mrs. Ives and Madame Kravetz were sitting in the drawing room, while Timmons, the butler, was in the hall.

"The yacht is coming," said Peggy in her clear voice, "all lit up and everything. It just passed another vessel that was going along and it's coming into the bay! Shall I tell Jack to light the lights outside?"

"Timmons will do it. Timmons, rouse the maids if they are drowsy." But Mrs. Ives wondered at the alarmed expression on the face of the butler, and that Madame Kravetz went outside immediately. Mr. Ives and the Count had gone out to the yacht in the morning, ostensibly to go to the port where he was to meet his guests. Some train must have been late to delay them this long, or perhaps the engines had not worked properly. It was all decidedly queer. She looked at Peggy.

"What's the matter with 'em?" bluntly asked Peggy.

"I am sure I do not know, unless Timmons is excited for fear things may not go as they should."

The bay was a trap. No sooner had the yacht gotten well into it than the passing vessel, manned by government men to catch both aliens and smugglers, turned about and rapidly sought the mouth of the bay. The pursuit was short, as Mr. Ives and Count Herschfeld, on board the yacht knew it must be. Hastily the word was passed around among the more important passengers, who were panic-stricken, facing deportation, having many jewels which they were smuggling in.

Smaller boats also gathered around the yacht, but it reached the dock, though boarded at once. It attempted no useless defense, for it was immediately seen that a concerted plan on the part of the government forces made them too strong for the smugglers.

How Mr. Ives got away, no one knew. He was not seen upon the rocks, but someone saw him take off his coat and leap into the water, though it was thought at the time that he was at once picked up by one of the boats. The approaches to the house were all guarded, it was supposed, but a secret entrance from the cliff, which the girls had not discovered, admitted Mr. Ives to a rocky chamber behind his office.

Peggy, sitting in the drawing room with her mother, heard the door to the library and office open behind her. Mr. Ives, a wild figure, appeared. Water was dripping from him. He was drawing on a dry coat as he entered and stuffing its pockets with money from his safe.

"Get the car quickly, Kit! They're after me! Call Timmons! Peggy, run up and get my overcoat and all the clothes that you can lay your hands on!"

Mrs. Ives in her pretty evening dress ran outside, followed by her husband, while Peggy instinctively started after the overcoat and clothes. But she met Timmons on the stairs, a hurrying Timmons, dressed for departure, carrying her step-father's top-coat and two suit-cases. Her assistance was not necessary. Timmons must have seen the capture at which Peggy guessed. She stood aside to let him pass, but followed rapidly herself.

At the foot of the stairs Peggy and Madame Kravetz nearly collided. The governess was rushing out from the dining room with what appeared to be a sack of food, a brown paper sack carried by the particular, elegant Kravetz! She picked up a suitcase in the hall and dashed out of the front door.

Peggy heard the sound of the car and immediately thought of her mother, outside in the chill air with only that thin dress to protect her. Perhaps her husband would make her go with him! Luckily Peggy had wrapped herself in her mother's coat when she had gone with Jack to look for the yacht. There lay the pretty silk-lined evening wrap with its warm fur collar. Peggy snatched it up from the hall seat and rushed out as wildly as any of the fleeing conspirators had done. It was only a moment after Madame Kravetz had passed her, before Peggy was at the side of the car with her mother's wrap.

She tossed it in, hearing Mr. Ives say, "Very well, ride a short distance with us, Kitty. You have been a good wife,—” But the car started to speed, Peggy knew, over the terrible roads till they reached the good highway and what hiding place Peggy could not imagine. But while she stood there, watching the darkness into which the car had taken her mother and scarcely seeing the stupefied maids that gathered around her, Mr. Tudor, breathless and much chagrined over the escape of Mr. Ives, came hurrying around the house from the dock. Unfortunately for plans, guards around the house had all rushed to prevent escape at the yacht.

"Where is your mother, Miss Peggy?" he asked. "Is your father inside? It will be better for him quietly to surrender."

"Don't ask me anything, please," said Peggy, suddenly feeling utterly alone. But her maid, the beloved "Pugsy," who had avoided being sent away after all, came with alarmed face from the house just then and went to Peggy, who collapsed upon her shoulder in a storm of sobs.

"I am very sorry, Miss Peggy,—*believe* me, I am," Mr. Tudor stopped to say, though he had one eye on two officers who were entering the house.

"I know it," sobbed Peggy, "but do go away now, and find out things for yourself!"

Jack, who had been down at the yacht, joined the maid in soothing Peggy and between them they persuaded her to go to bed, promising to let her know when her mother came back.

Mrs. Ives was one of the women who believe that vows for better or worse should be kept. Had her husband desired her to accompany him, she would have done so, though it took her into danger and unhappiness. His wet hands drew the cloak around her, as he outlined briefly what had happened. Amazed, in spite of previous suspicions, she listened, while the ear jolted them from side to side. They were all in great suspense. It was a terrific dash for freedom, but at last they reached a good highway

where they went on for some miles, turning off finally upon one short, bad stretch to a small village. There Mr. Ives said that he had kept horses for some time, using them in "his business" as he needed them.

"Go back with the car," he directed, "stopping somewhere for something to eat, if any place is open. We shall be aboard a ship after a short ride with the horses. I will get word to you, from abroad, probably, in some way. I have plenty of money now."

Mrs. Ives knew that scouting parties would be out in every direction as soon as it was known from the servants how Mr. Ives made his escape. Accordingly, she quickly took the car to the main highway and drove slowly homeward, faint and worn, and in no mood for questions. But unlike tempestuous Peggy, she responded courteously when she was stopped. Yes, she had accompanied Mr. Ives part way. They could scarcely expect her to help them, could they? She knew very well that trains would be examined, the woods searched and the coast followed. As it was, her husband was foolishly expectant of escape, she thought.

But Mr. Ives was clever enough to elude them, it happened. The Count had been taken, on the yacht. He was the real organizer of the ring. Bill Ritter, trying to escape, had been arrested and through Tom Carey's information, all his chief assistants in this work were gathered in. The village was in a turmoil, for some of the people there were due to be deported. Through Evan Tudor, however, the work of investigation was carried on in a way as little distressing to these poor victims of others' greed as was possible. Tom Carey set to work to organize again the fishing industry, filling orders and carrying on the shipping.

Through Jack, Mrs. Ives sent for Mr. Tudor, who was still in his camp, in the intervals of these affairs in which he was concerned. He came to Steeple Rocks rather uncertain of his reception, but Mrs. Ives, sober and depressed, made no reference to his part in the disclosures.

"I have heard of you from Peggy, Mr. Tudor," she said, "and I want to consult you as representing the government interests. Your report will probably be accepted, will it not?"

Mr. Tudor, relieved, bowed. "Yes, Mrs. Ives."

"I want it understood that whatever in the way of restitution is to be done, I will do. I am sorry that I could do nothing for those poor foreigners that were hurried right away. Whether Mr. Ives is ever found or not, I should prefer to have everything made clear and to be free from obligation. So I have made out a list of our property, not including, of course, the small estate which is Peggy's from her own father. My husband told me that the liquor in the cave was Bill Ritter's, though I suppose that my husband was partly responsible for letting it be housed upon our property.

"I want to show you the safe and what I found in it, some bonds, cash and important papers. Now will you act for me?"

"I will be glad to do so, though I am not a lawyer."

"You will be more a witness, I should think. I am dismissing most of the servants; indeed, some of them left because they were afraid of being arrested as aliens. Steeple Rocks will be for sale. I have not found any smuggled jewels, and I scarcely think that my husband ever was concerned in that."

"The whole place was thoroughly searched, Mrs. Ives, before your return. After the steamer took charge of the aliens, the force searched yacht and house at once."

Mrs. Ives sadly shook her head. "It is a tragedy to me, but if only the shadow does not rest on Peggy, I can bear it."

"Nothing of all this attaches to you, Mrs. Ives, and I have seen to it that a very general account so far has been published by the papers. My friend and I so promptly sent in our reports that they are the ones given. I will send you some of the papers."

"Thank you. It is a relief to know that all the details are not spread broadcast."

Following this conference with Mr. Tudor, Mrs. Ives and Peggy quietly went about Steeple Rocks making ready to close it early, for Mrs. Ives felt that she must get away from the place. Peggy, on the other hand, wanted to stay and asked her mother if she might not stay at the Eyrie.

"Will they want you after this?"

"I don't see why not. I belong to the 'trium-feminate', you know. Sarita likes me for taking an interest in birds, and Dalton saved my life. I know that *he* likes me. Leslie is just like Dalton and Elizabeth is *always* sweet to me. Dal would like to stay all winter and keep Beth from teaching. Why, Mother, why couldn't she tutor me? They might like a boarder that would pay and work, too, and it wouldn't be as expensive for you, I'm sure. Think of traveling expenses and boarding, especially if we have to give nearly everything we have to the government!"

Mrs. Ives smiled. "It is not quite as bad as that, Peggy, but we shall see."

"I'm going right over now!" declared Peggy.

This is how it came about that after a quiet summer, without the expected visit from the Lyon-Marsh party, but with cruises and hikes and picnics, Peggy Ives was still with the Secretsts. She was called by her own name, Peggy or Marguerite Nave, though the girls occasionally called her Angelina for fun and Dal said that he was "always sure an angel descended when she leaped out of the air into the blackberry bushes."

Beth had consented to tutor Peggy and take care of her as long as it seemed best for her to stay at the Eyrie, "and that may be all winter," Peggy confided to Dalton, who nodded assent.

Jack tried in vain to persuade Dalton to go to college with him, but Dalton could not be persuaded. "No, Jack," he said at their final talk. "You go to college, and Leslie and I may both come year after next. But I want to finish this home, and keep Beth out of school this year if possible. The way it looks now, she never will go back. It will be nip and tuck between Jim Lyon and this Evan Tudor, I think, though Jim seems to be losing out at present. I think that Beth is the heroine in that best seller that Mr. Tudor is always joking about."

Jack nodded. "All right, Dal. I don't blame you for wanting to fix up this place. And if you bring Leslie to my college year after next,—it will be worth waiting for."

By fall the quaint new home was ready for cold weather. Plans had grown, with their interest, till now it included the living room with its big fireplace, two bedrooms and a tiny kitchen, though that

would not be used much when it grew cold. Dalton was full of plans for plumbing and electricity and a still larger house, but Beth, while she never threw cold water on the projects, was quite content to regard this as a happy interlude and a summer home. There were more school days for Dalton and Leslie, and as for her,—she had just received a letter from Mrs. Ives which informed her that the father of Evan Tudor wanted to buy Steeple Rocks! Simply, too, Mrs. Ives wrote that she was now a widow and that the long strain of anxiety about her husband's always impending capture was over.

On Christmas Eve, Peggy and Dalton were decorating the large room with spruce boughs and some holly wreaths and mistletoe sent by Mrs. Ives. The most perfect little Christmas tree that the Secret woods could furnish stood in front of the window, ready to be lit up for the world to see, though that world might consist only of a few village children in whose welfare Beth and the rest were interested.

Leslie sat in front of the fireplace stringing the last bit of corn out of the popper for festoons upon the tree. Beth was finishing little net stockings for nuts and candy. "We *must* stop for some supper, children," she was saying.

"Oh, never mind about supper; there's too much to do." Peggy gave Dalton a mischievous glance as she spoke.

"Never," he promptly replied. "Didn't I bring home the bacon myself?"

"Yes, you did," answered Leslie, emptying the corn popper and rising from the floor. "I'll cook that rabbit myself. I can watch it while we finish up. What more is there to do, Beth?"

"Not so much. Anita's doll has to have a sash, Sonia's a cap and Josef's drum needs hanging on the tree. If you will get the supper, I will finish, Leslie. The baskets of food for them need a little more arranging. Peggy and Dal may drape the popcorn on the tree, if they will."

Something was already bubbling in an old-fashioned iron pot in the fireplace; but it was the same old reliable and speedy "portable" which Leslie used to cook the rabbit. Behind a tall screen in one corner of the room stood a table, the stove and a cupboard, but primitive ways of cooking in the fireplace, were fun when "used in moderation," as Peggy put it.

Soon the savory supper was over and everything cleared away. Peggy and Leslie lit the candles on the trees, for they knew that eager feet were trampling the light snow in the path from the village. Childish voices were heard outside before long and then there came a pause. Leslie was about to fling open the door, but Beth signaled to her to wait. It was Anita whose clear voice led the Christmas carol which Beth had taught them, but the children were almost too excited to finish it properly for the lights of the tree shone out over the snow to invite them within.

"I couldn't make 'em sing it vera good," said Anita, as Beth drew her inside with the rest of the children and several mothers, one of whom Beth had first met that day on the beach when someone else important entered Beth's life to stay.

"It was *beautiful*," Beth answered lovingly. "Now we'll all sing together while you warm your toes and fingers by the fire. Leslie, get your guitar, please, and Peggy, you may lead us if you will. We shall have Sarita to sing with us after Christmas. After we sing about the little Christ-Child, we shall see what Santa can find for us on that tree!"

Obediently the children sang and how they shouted when Dalton, who had disappeared during the singing, appeared as Santa Claus with a rosy-cheeked, white-bearded Santa Claus mask. There was no delay in presenting the gifts, in providing which some absent friends had a share.

It was much later, after the guests had gone, that Beth sat alone by the fire. Dalton, Leslie and Peggy had taken their skates to the lake. Beth felt a little lonely and was not in a mood to read. She was thinking of someone whom Tom Carey had promised to take in whenever he could get away for a trip to Maine. She was still thrilled over his last letter and she wondered if he had yet received her reply. The flames curled lazily around the last log that Dalton had put on before he left.

Unexpectedly, but appropriately to her thought, there came a little rap that Beth knew. "Oh,—why —" she said, as she opened the door quickly to a traveler in a big fur coat.

"I couldn't help it, Beth," said Evan Tudor, closing the door upon icy breezes, tossing off his thick gloves and taking both her hands. "Beth, dear, I have sold the 'best seller'! It has just been accepted and I had to come on to make *sure* that I am, too. It's Christmas Eve, Beth!"

"I didn't make any conditions, did I, Evan, in my letter? I'm glad about the 'best seller'—and—you needn't worry about the rest. Oh, how *wonderful* to have you for Christmas!"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET OF STEEPLE ROCKS ***

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