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by Josephine Chase**

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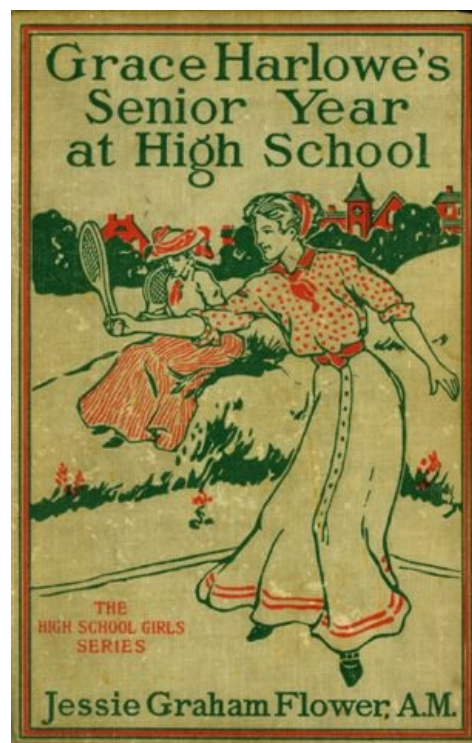
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GRACE HARLOWE'S SENIOR YEAR AT
HIGH SCHOOL ***



Grace Harlowe's Senior Year at High School

OR

The Parting of the Ways

BY JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER, A. M.

Author of Grace Harlowe's Plebe Year at High School, Grace Harlowe's Sophomore Year at High School, Grace Harlowe's Junior Year at High School, etc.



"Who Is That Girl?"

Première—High School Girls No. 4.

"Who is that Girl?"

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CHAPTER I

A PUZZLING RESEMBLANCE

"Oakdale won't seem like the same place. What shall we do without you?" exclaimed Grace Harlowe mournfully.

It was a sunny afternoon in early October, and Grace Harlowe with her three chums, Anne Pierson, Nora O'Malley and Jessica Bright, stood grouped around three young men on the station platform at Oakdale. For Hippy Wingate, Reddy Brooks and David Nesbit were leaving that afternoon to begin a four years' course in an eastern college, and a number of relatives and friends had gathered to wish them godspeed.

Those who have read "GRACE HARLOWE'S PLEBE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL" need no introduction to these three young men or to the girl chums. The doings of these merry girls made the record of their freshman year memorable indeed. The winning of the freshman prize by Anne Pierson, despite the determined opposition and plotting of Miriam Nesbit, also aspiring to that honor, Mrs. Gray's Christmas party, the winter picnic that ended in an adventure with wolves, and many other stirring events furnished plenty of excitement for the readers of that volume.

In "GRACE HARLOWE'S SOPHOMORE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL" the interest of the story was centered around the series of basketball games played by the sophomore and junior classes for the High School championship. In this volume was narrated the efforts of Miriam Nesbit, aided by Julia Crosby, the disagreeable junior captain, to discredit Anne, and force Grace to resign the captaincy of her team. The rescue of Julia by Grace from drowning during a skating party served to bring about a reconciliation between the two girls and clear Anne's name of the suspicion resting upon it. The two classes, formerly at sword's points, became friendly, and buried the hatchet, although Miriam Nesbit, still bitterly jealous of Grace's popularity, planned a revenge upon Grace that nearly resulted in making her miss playing on her team during the deciding game. Grace's encounter with an escaped lunatic, David Nesbit's trial flight in his aeroplane, were incidents that also held the undivided attention of the reader.

In "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL" the four chums appeared as members of the famous sorority, the "Phi Sigma Tau," organized by Grace for the purpose of helping needy High School girls.

In that volume Eleanor Savelli, the self-willed, temperamental daughter of an Italian violin virtuoso, furnished much of the interest of the book. The efforts of Grace and her chums to create in this girl a healthy, wholesome enjoyment for High School life, and her repudiation of their friendship, and subsequent attempts to revenge herself for fancied slights and insults, served to make the story absorbing.

The walking expedition through Upton Wood, the rescue of Mabel Allison, an orphan, by the Phi Sigma Tau, from the tender mercies of a cruel and ignorant woman with whom she lived, proved interesting reading.

The class play in which Eleanor plotted to oust Anne Pierson, the star, from the production and obtain the leading part for herself, the discovery of the plot at the eleventh hour by Grace, enabling her to balk Eleanor's scheme, were among the incidents that aroused anew the admiration of the reader for capable, wide-awake Grace Harlowe.

The seven young people on the platform looked unusually solemn, and a brief silence followed Grace's wistful question. Saying good-bye threatened to be a harder task than any of them had imagined it to be. Even Hippy, usually ready of speech, wore a look of concern decidedly out of place on his fat, good-humored face.

"Do say something funny, Hippy!" exclaimed Nora in desperation. "This silence is awful. In another minute we'll all be weeping. Can't you offer something cheerful?"

Hippy fixed a reflective eye upon Nora for an instant, then recited in a husky voice:

"Remember well, and bear in mind,
That fat young men are hard to find."

There was a shout of laughter went up at this and things began to take a brighter turn.

"Now will you be good, Nora?" teased David.

"Humph!" sniffed Nora. "I knew his sadness was only skin deep."

"After all," said Anne Pierson, "why should we look at the gloomy side. You are all coming home for Thanksgiving and the time will slip by before we realize it. It's our duty to send you boys away in good spirits, instead of making you feel blue and melancholy."

"Anne always thinks about her duty," laughed Jessica, "but she's right, nevertheless. Let's all be as cheerful as possible."

"I hear the train coming," cried Grace, always on the alert. "Do write to us, won't you, boys!"

Please don't forget to send us some pictures of the college."

"Yes, don't let that new Eastman of yours go to waste, Reddy," said Nora.

"I will make Hippy pose the minute we strike the college campus," laughed Reddy, "and you shall have the first results, providing they are not too terrifying."

"I want pictures of the college, not the inmates," retorted Nora.

"Inmates!" cried Hippy. "One would think she was speaking of a lunatic asylum or a jail. I forgive you, Nora, but it was a cruel thrust. Here comes the train. Get busy, you fellows, and make your fond farewells to your families, who will no doubt be tickled pink to get rid of you for a while."

With that he made a rush to where his father and brother stood. David turned to his mother and sister Miriam, kissing them affectionately, while Reddy grasped his father's hand with silent affection in his eyes.

The last good-byes were reserved for the four chums, who felt lumps rise in their throats in spite of their recently avowed declaration to be cheerful.

Nora shoved a white box tied up with blue ribbon into Hippy's hand just as he was about to board the train.

"It's walnut fudge," she said. "But it isn't all for you. Be generous, and let David and Reddy have some, too."

"Good-bye. Good-bye. Don't forget us," chorused the chums as the train pulled out, while the young men waved farewell from the open windows.

"I hope I won't be called upon to say good-bye to any more of my friends for a blue moon!" exclaimed Grace. "I hate good-byes. When it comes my turn to go to college I believe I shall slip away quietly without saying a word to a soul except mother."

"You know you couldn't leave your little playmates in such a heartless manner," said Jessica. "We'd visit you in nightmares the whole of your freshman year if you even attempted such a thing."

"Oh, well, if you are going to use threats I expect I shall have to forego my vanishing act," said Grace, with a smile.

The four girls had walked the length of the platform and were about to turn in at the entrance leading to the street when Grace suddenly clutched Anne, pointing, and crying out, "Oh, look! look!"

Three pairs of eyes were turned instantly in the direction of her finger, just in time to see a dark blue touring car crash against a tree at the foot of the hilly street leading down to the station.

Its two occupants, the chauffeur and a woman who sat in the tonneau, were thrown out with considerable force and lay motionless at one side of the street.

In a twinkling the four girls had reached the woman's side. Grace knelt beside her, then sat down on the pavement, raising the stranger's head until it rested in her lap. The woman lay white and still, although on placing a hand to her heart Grace found that it was beating faintly. Calling for water, she dashed it in the woman's face, without any noticeable results.

By this time a crowd had collected and several men were busy with the chauffeur, who was conscious, but moaned as though in pain.

"Do go for a doctor, please," Grace cried to her chums. "I am afraid this woman is badly hurt."

"Here's Dr. Gale now," exclaimed Anne as the old doctor came hurrying across the street.

"Hello, what's the matter here?" he called. "It's a good thing I happened to be driving by."

"Oh, Dr. Gale, do look at this poor woman. She must have struck her head, for she lies as though she were dead."

Kneeling beside the stranger, the doctor busied himself with her, and after a little time the woman opened her eyes and gazed vaguely about, then again relapsed into unconsciousness.

"Whom does she resemble?" thought Grace. "Her face has a familiar look, though I am sure I have never before seen her."

"Stand back and give her air," ordered the doctor, and the circling crowd fell back a little.

"Grace, look out for her while I order the ambulance and see to this man."

The doctor bustled over to the injured chauffeur, and began his examination.

"Broken arm," he said briefly. "Send them both to the hospital."

The ambulance proved large enough to hold both victims of the accident and the attendant took them in charge, and signaled the driver, who headed for the city hospital, leaving the crowd to examine the big car.

"It's pretty badly damaged," said one man. "It must have hit that tree with a terrific crash. Skidded, I suppose."

"Come on, girls," said Anne. "There is no use in staying here any longer. We've had excitement enough for one day."

"I should say so," shuddered Jessica. "I hope that woman doesn't die. We must go to the hospital to-morrow and inquire for her."

"Of course," responded Anne. "What a sweet face she had, and her eyes were such a beautiful brown, but they haunted me. There is something so familiar about them."

"Why, that's just what I thought, too!" cried Grace. "Who is it she resembles?"

"Give it up," said Nora. "Although I noticed it, too."

Jessica alone made no remark. Her face wore a puzzled frown, as though she were searching her memory for something.

"Oh, well, what's the use of worrying over a resemblance," said Nora. "I wonder what days visitors are allowed at the hospital."

"By the way, Jessica," said Anne, "where is Mabel! She usually waits for you."

"Mabel is—" began Jessica. Then she stopped, her eyes filling with wonder, almost alarm. "Girls," she cried, her voice rising to an excited scream. "I know who that woman resembles! She looks like Mabel Allison."

CHAPTER II

WHAT THE DAY BROUGHT FORTH

For a second the three girls fairly gasped at Jessica's discovery. Grace was the first to speak.

"You have hit the nail on the head, Jessica. That's why her face seemed so familiar. The resemblance is striking."

The four girls glanced from one to another, the same thought in mind. Perhaps the mystery of Mabel Allison's parentage was to be solved at last.

Those who have read "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL" will recall how the Phi Sigma Tau became interested in Mabel Allison, a young girl taken from an orphanage by Miss Brant, a woman devoid of either gentleness or sympathy, who treated her young charge with great cruelty.

It will be remembered that through the efforts of Grace and Jessica, aided by Jessica's father, Miss Brant was forced to give Mabel up, and she became a member of the Bright household, and the especial protegee of the Phi Sigma Tau.

Grace and her friends had always believed Mabel to be a child of good family. She had been picked up in the streets of New York when a baby, and taken to the police station, where she had been held for some time, but on remaining unclaimed, had been sent to an orphanage outside New York City, where she had spent her life until she had been brought to Oakdale by Miss Brant.

Although Mabel had been in the Bright household but a few months, Jessica, who was motherless, had become deeply attached to her, while Jessica's father was equally fond of the young girl.

She had spent her vacation with the Phi Sigma Tau, who were the guests of Judge Putnam, a prominent Oakdale citizen, and his sister at their camp in the Adirondacks. The judge had conceived a great affection for her, and on hearing her story had offered to adopt her.

This proved a cross to Jessica, who was torn between her desire to keep Mabel with her, and the feeling that the opportunity was too great for Mabel to refuse. Mabel had left the decision to Jessica, and the judge was still awaiting his answer.

"I might have known something would happen to take her away," almost wailed Jessica. "First, the judge, and now—"

"Don't be a goose, Jessica," said Nora stoutly, "and don't jump at the conclusion that this strange woman is a relative of Mabel's. There are lots of chance resemblances."

"Of course there are," consoled Grace. "When we go to the hospital to-morrow we'll find no doubt that our stranger is named 'Smith' or 'Brown' or anything except 'Allison.'"

"Don't worry, dear," said Anne, slipping her hand into Jessica's. "No one will take your one chicken from you."

"I don't know about that," responded Jessica gloomily. "I feel in my bones that something terrible is going to happen. I suppose you girls think me foolish about Mabel, but I've no mother or sister, and you know yourselves what a dear Mabel is."

"Forget it," advised Nora wisely. "We've had enough to harrow our young feelings to-day. Let's go and drown our sorrows in sundaes. I'll treat until my money gives out, and then the rest of you can take up the good work."

"Who will go to the hospital with me to-morrow!" asked Grace when they were seated around a table at Stillman's.

"Let me see. To-morrow is Sunday," said Jessica. "I'm afraid I can't go. Papa is going to take Mabel and me for a drive."

"I'll go with, you," volunteered Nora.

"And I," said Anne.

"Good girls," commended Grace. "Meet me here at three o'clock. I am fairly sure that visitors are allowed on Sunday, but if I am mistaken we can at least go to the office and inquire for our stranger."

The three girls met in front of Stillman's at exactly three o'clock the following afternoon, and set out for the hospital.

"Visitors are allowed on Sunday from three until five," remarked Grace as they strolled down Main Street. "I telephoned last night to the hospital. Our stranger is not seriously hurt. She is badly shaken up, and awfully nervous. If she feels more calm to-day we may be allowed to see her."

"What is her name?" asked Anne.

Grace looked blank, then exclaimed: "Why, girls, how stupid of me! I forgot to ask. I was so interested in hearing about her condition that I never thought of that."

"Well, our curiosity will soon be satisfied in that respect," said Nora, "for here we are at the hospital."

"We should like to see the woman who was thrown from the automobile yesterday afternoon," said Grace to the matron. "Is she able to receive visitors?"

"Oh, yes," replied the matron. "She is sitting in a wheeled chair on the second-story veranda. Miss Elton," she called to a nurse who had just entered, "take these young women up to the veranda, they wish to see the patient who has 47."

"What is her—" began Grace. But at that moment a nurse hurried in with a communication for the matron. Grace waited a moment, bent on repeating her question, but the nurse said rather impatiently, "This way, please," and the opportunity was lost.

The three girls began to feel a trifle diffident as they approached the stranger who was seated in a wheeled chair in a corner of the veranda.

"Visitors to see you, madam," said the nurse curtly, halting before the patient. "Be careful not to over-exert yourself," and was gone.

The woman in the chair turned quickly at the nurse's words, her eyes resting upon the three girls.

Grace felt a queer little shiver creep up and down her spine. The resemblance between the stranger and Mabel Allison was even more remarkable to-day.

"How do you do, my dears," said the woman with a sweet smile, extending her hand in turn to the three girls. "Under the circumstances I am sure you will pardon me for not rising."

Her voice was clear and well modulated.

"Please don't think of it," cried Grace. "We saw the accident yesterday. We were afraid you were seriously injured, and we couldn't resist coming to see you. I am Grace Harlowe, and these are my friends Nora O'Malley and Anne Pierson."

"I am very pleased to know you," responded the stranger. "It is so sweet to know that you thought of me."

"Miss Harlowe was the first to reach you, after your accident," said Anne, knowing that Grace herself would avoid mentioning it. "She held your head in her lap until the doctor came."

"Then I am deeply indebted to you," returned the patient, again taking Grace's hand in hers, "and I hope to know you better. I dearly love young girls."

She motioned them to a broad settee near her chair.

"There!" she exclaimed. "Now I can look at all of you at the same time. I am far more able to appreciate you to-day than I was at this time yesterday. It was all so dreadful," she shuddered slightly, then continued.

"I have never before been in an accident. I had been spending a week with some friends of mine who have a place a few miles from here called 'Hawk's Nest.' Perhaps you know of it?"

The three girls exchanged glances. "Hawk's Nest" was one of the finest estates in that part of the state, and the Gibsons who owned it had unlimited wealth.

"I was summoned to New York on business and had barely time to make my train. Mrs. Gibson's chauffeur had been running the car at a high rate of speed, and just as we reached the little incline above the station, the machine skidded, and we crashed into that tree. I felt a frightful jar that seemed to loosen every bone in my body, and remembered nothing further until I came back to earth again, here in the hospital."

"You opened your eyes, once, before the ambulance came," said Grace.

"Did I!" smiled the stranger. "I do not remember it. But, really, I am very rude! I have not told you my name."

"It's coming," thought Grace, unconsciously bracing herself. Nora and Anne had also straightened up, their eyes fastened on the speaker.

"My name is Allison," said the woman, wholly unaware of the bombshell she had exploded. "I am a widow and quite alone in the world. My husband died a number of years ago."

"I knew it, I knew it," muttered Grace.

"What did you say, my dear?" asked Mrs. Allison.

But Grace was silent. The woman was too nervous as yet to hear the news. Perhaps after all the name was a mere coincidence.

Anne, understanding Grace's silence, hurriedly took up the conversation.

"Are you familiar with this part of the country?" she asked.

"I have not been here for a number of years," replied Mrs. Allison, "although my friends, the Gibsons, have sent me repeated invitations. Mrs. Gibson and I went through Vassar together."

"We expect to go to college next year," said Grace. "We are seniors in Oakdale High School."

"The years a young girl spends in college are usually the happiest of her whole life," said Mrs. Allison, with a sigh. "Everything is rose colored. She forms high ideals that help to sweeten life for her long after her college career is over. The friendships she forms are usually worth while, too. Mrs. Gibson and I have kept track of one another even since graduation. We have shared our joys and sorrows, and in my darkest hours her loyal friendship and ready sympathy have been a heaven-sent blessing to me."

"We three girls are sworn friends," said Grace, "and we have another chum, too. She was very sorry that she could not come to-day. She will be glad to know that you are so much better. Her name is Jessica Bright. She was with us at the station yesterday."

"I should like to meet her," said Mrs. Allison, "and I thank her for her interest in me. I really feel as though I had known you three girls for a long time. I wish you would tell me more of yourselves and your school life."

"There isn't much to tell," laughed Grace. "The life of a school-girl is not crowded with many stirring events."

"You have no idea of how much has happened to Grace, Mrs. Allison, since we began High School," interposed Nora. "She never will talk about the splendid things she has done for other people. She is the president of her class, the captain of the senior basketball team, too, and the most popular girl in Oakdale High School."

"I refuse to plead guilty to the last statement!" exclaimed Grace. "Believe me, Mrs. Allison, there are a dozen girls in High School who are far more popular than I."

"There is only one Grace Harlowe," said Anne, with conviction.

"It is a case of two against one, Miss Grace," laughed Mrs. Allison. "I insist upon hearing about some of your good works."

"It's really time for us to go, girls," said Grace, laughing a little. She rose and held out her hand to the older woman.

"You are very cruel," smiled Mrs. Allison. "You arouse my curiosity and then refuse to satisfy it. But you cannot escape so easily. You must come to see me again before I leave here. I shall not try to return to the Gibsons before Wednesday. I expect Mr. Gibson here to-morrow and he will attend to my New York business for me. If I had accepted his offer in the first place, I might have spared myself this accident. However, I am glad, now. It has brought me charming friends. For I feel that we shall become friends," she added, stretching out both hands. "When will you come again?"

"On Tuesday afternoon after school," replied Grace promptly. "And we will bring Miss Bright, too, unless she and Mabel have some other engagement."

There was purpose in Grace's last remark. She wished to see if the name "Mabel" made any impression upon her listener, and therefore kept her eyes fixed upon Mrs. Allison.

As Grace carelessly mentioned the name she saw an expression of pain flit across Mrs. Allison's fine face.

"I shall be glad to see Miss Bright," she said quietly. "Is the 'Mabel' you speak of her sister?"

"No," replied Grace hastily, "she is a girl friend. May we bring her with us?"

"Do so by all means," rejoined Mrs. Allison. "She bears the name I love best in all the world." An expression of deep sadness crept into her face as she uttered these words, and she looked past her callers with unseeing eyes. "Good-bye, Mrs. Allison," said Grace, and the older woman roused herself with a start.

"Good-bye, my dears," she responded. "Be sure to come to me on Tuesday."

"We'll be here," chorused the three girls. "Take good care of yourself."

Not a word was spoken until they reached the street.

"Well!" exclaimed Grace. "What do you think of the whole thing?"

"I think there are several people due to get a shock," said Nora emphatically.

"I am sorry for Jessica," said Anne. "It will be very hard for her to give Mabel up."

"Then you think—" said Grace, looking at Anne.

"I am reasonably sure," replied Anne quietly, "from what I have heard and seen to-day that Mabel is no longer motherless."

CHAPTER III

WHAT HAPPENED IN ROOM FORTY-SEVEN

As the last period of study drew to an end on Tuesday afternoon, the hearts of the four girl chums beat a trifle faster than usual. What if after all their conjectures were to prove erroneous, and Mabel Allison was not the long-lost daughter of the woman in the hospital? All they had to go by was the remarkable resemblance between the two, and the slight emotion displayed by Mrs. Allison at the mention of Mabel's name.

When Grace had repeated the details of their call at the hospital to Jessica, the latter had turned very white, but had said bravely, "I expected it. We will go with you on Tuesday. Shall I prepare Mabel for it?"

"No," Grace had replied. "We may find ourselves mistaken, and think what a cruel disappointment it would be to Mabel. I don't mean by that Jessica, that Mabel is anxious to leave you, but you know perfectly well that the desire of Mabel's life is that she may some day find her parents."

In almost utter silence the four chums, accompanied by Mabel Allison, crossed the campus and turned into High School Street at the close of the afternoon session on Tuesday. Each girl seemed busy with her own thoughts.

"What has come over you girls?" inquired Mabel curiously. "When four of the liveliest girls in school become mum as the proverbial oyster, surely something is going to happen."

"'Coming events cast their shadows before'" said Anne half dreamily.

"Well, I wish they'd stop casting shadows over my little playmates then," laughed Mabel.

At this remark Grace made an effort to appear unconcerned.

"Are you going to play on the junior basketball team this year, Mabel?" she asked, by way of changing the subject.

"I don't know," replied Mabel. "I feel as though I ought to study every minute I am in High School, in order to be more thoroughly capable of earning my own living. I don't expect to be forever dependent upon my friends."

"Dependent, indeed," sniffed Jessica. "You know perfectly well, you bad child, that papa and I have been the gainers since you came to us, and now—" she stopped just in time.

"'And now,' what?" asked Mabel.

"Here we are at the hospital," broke in Nora without giving Jessica time to answer.

The little party waited what seemed to them an interminable length of time; although it was in reality not more than five minutes before the attendant returned with the news that they might see the patient in 47.

Grace had purposely voiced their request in so low a tone that Mabel had not heard her mention the patient's name, and she accompanied the four girls without the faintest idea of what their call might mean to her.

"Now for it," breathed Grace, as they paused at the door of 47.

"Come in," said a sweet voice, in answer to the attendant's knock, and the five girls were ushered into Mrs. Allison's presence.

"How are my young friends, to-day!" she cried gayly, rising from the easy chair in which she was sitting and coming forward with out-stretched hands.

"Very well, indeed," replied Grace, Anne and Nora in a breath as they shook hands.

"Mrs. Allison," said Grace hurriedly, "these are my friends, Miss Jessica Bright and Miss Mabel Allison."

The woman who was in the act of acknowledging the introduction to Jessica started violently when Grace pronounced Mabel's name, dropped Jessica's hand and began to tremble as she caught sight of Mabel, who stood behind Jessica, an expression of amazement in her brown eyes, that the patient's name should be the same as her own.

"Who—who—" gasped the woman, pointing at Mabel, then overcome sank into her chair, covering her face with her hands.

Grace sprang to her side in an instant, kneeling beside her chair.

"Mrs. Allison," she cried impulsively. "Forgive me. I should not have startled you so. I did not really know, although I felt sure that—"

But Mrs. Allison had uncovered her face and was looking eagerly at Mabel, who stood the picture of mystification.

"Who is that young girl who bears the name of my baby, and where did she come from?" asked the patient hoarsely.

"Speak to her," whispered Jessica, pushing Mabel forward.

"I am Mabel Isabel Allison—" began Mabel, but before she could proceed further the woman had risen, and clasping the girl in her arms, began smoothing her hair and kissing her, laughing and crying hysterically. "You are my baby girl that I lost long ago, my own little Mabel. I know it. I know it."

"Mrs. Allison," said Grace firmly, placing her arm around the sobbing woman, who seemed to have entirely lost control of her emotions, "try and be calm. There is so much to tell. Will you listen to me? And you must sit down, you were not strong enough for this. We should have waited."

Mrs. Allison partially released Mabel from her embrace, though she still held her hand, and allowed Grace to gently push her back toward her chair.

"I don't quite understand you, my dear," she said brokenly. "But I am sure that I have found my own dear little child."

"And I am sure of it, too," replied Grace. "In fact, we have suspected it since the day we first saw you at the station. We noticed the marked resemblance between you and Mabel, and when you told us your name was Allison we all felt that you might be Mabel's mother. Do you feel strong enough to hear our story and to tell us yours?"

"Tell me quickly," exclaimed Mrs. Allison eagerly, recovering in a measure from her violent agitation. "I must know the truth. It seems incredible that I should find my lost baby girl alive and in good hands. I am surely dreaming. It cannot be true. Yet she has the same sweet, serious expression in her brown eyes that she had in babyhood. Even her middle name, Isabel, that her father insisted upon giving her because it is mine!"

Anne, dreading another outbreak, gently interposed. "Try and be calm, Mrs. Allison, while we tell you about Mabel."

Then Anne began with the winning of the freshman prize by Mabel at the close of her freshman year, and the interest she had aroused in the girl chums, and followed with the story of her adoption by the Phi Sigma Tau.

Mrs. Allison listened in rapt attention until Anne had finished. "God is good," she murmured. "A higher power surely willed that Mabel should find true and worthy friends."

Then she began questioning Mabel about her life in the orphanage. Did Mabel have any recollection of the day she was brought there? Had Mary Stevens, the attendant, ever described the clothing that she had worn when found?

"I have the baby pins I wore with me. Jessica asked me to wear them to-day," replied Mabel, who looked like a person just awakened from a deep sleep. She had not yet reached a full comprehension of what it all meant.

"Let me see them," cried Mrs. Allison.

Mabel mechanically detached one of the little gold pins from her collar and handed it to Mrs. Allison, who examined it closely for a moment, then dropping it with a little cry, again clasped Mabel in her arms.

"They are the pins I had specially made and engraved for you," she said. "There is no longer any doubt. You are my lost child."

At these words a light of complete understanding seemed to dawn upon Mabel, and with a cry of rapture she wound her arms about her mother's neck.

It was a joyful, though rather a trying moment for the four chums, who were seized with a hysterical desire to laugh and cry in the same breath. Grace made a slight motion toward the door, which her friends were not slow to comprehend. It was her intention to slip quietly away and leave the mother and daughter alone with their new-found happiness.

Before she could put her plan into execution, however, Mrs. Allison divined her intention and turning quickly toward her, said, "Don't go, Grace. I feel as though you girls belonged to me, too. Besides, you have not heard my part of this story yet."

"Perhaps you are hardly strong enough to tell us after so much excitement," deprecated Grace.

"My dear, I feel as though I had just begun to live," answered Mrs. Allison. "The past has been one long dreary blank. If you only knew the years of agony I have passed through. When you hear my story you will understand why this reunion is little short of miraculous.

"My home is in Denver. Mabel was born there," continued Mrs. Allison. "Fourteen years ago this summer my husband and I decided to spend the summer in Europe, taking with us our baby daughter, Mabel, and her nurse.

"On the morning that we were to sail, circumstances arose that made it necessary for my husband and myself to be in New York until almost sailing time. He therefore sent the nurse, a French woman, who was thoroughly familiar with the city, on ahead to the vessel, with Mabel in her care. We had barely time to catch the boat and were met by the nurse, who said that she had left Mabel asleep in one of the state rooms engaged for us. It was not until we had put out to sea that we discovered that Mabel was missing, and a thorough search of the ship was at once made. The nurse persisted in her statement that Mabel went aboard with her. Every nook and cranny of the ship was overhauled, but my child could not be found, and the supposition was that she had in some way fallen overboard.

"I was distracted with grief, and nearly lost my reason, and when we reached the other side I passed into a long illness. It was many weeks before I returned to consciousness of my affairs, and the terrible realization that my baby was gone forever. I felt as though I could not face the future without her. I had scarcely recovered from the first shock attending my great loss, when my husband contracted typhoid fever and died after an illness of five weeks.

"We were in Florence, Italy, at the time and I prayed that I might die, too. It was during those dark hours that Mrs. Gibson proved her friendship for me. She sailed for Italy the instant she received the cablegram announcing my husband's death, and brought me back to America with her. I spent a year with her in her New York home, before returning to Denver. Since then I have never been east until this summer.

"Four months ago I received a letter from the nurse who had charge of Mabel on the day of her disappearance. It was a great surprise to me, as she had left us directly after we landed with the intention of returning to France. But the news the letter contained was a far greater surprise, for she stated that Mabel had never gone aboard the vessel.

"The nurse had had some personal business to attend to before going aboard, and in order to save time had taken Mabel with her. In some inexplicable manner Mabel had strayed from her side. She had made frantic search for the child and finally, not daring to go to us with the truth, had conceived the idea of making us believe that she had taken Mabel aboard the ship. She had bribed the purser, a Frenchman whom she knew, to corroborate her story, and had succeeded in her treacherous design.

"She wrote that she had longed over and over again to confess the truth, but had not dared to do so. She had heart trouble, she said, and her days were numbered. Therefore she felt that she must confess the truth before it became too late.

"You can imagine," said Mrs. Allison, "the effect this letter had upon me. For fourteen years I had mourned my child as dead. It seemed infinitely worse to hear that she had not died then, but was perhaps alive, and in what circumstances?"

"The day I received the letter I took the train for the east, wiring the Gibsons to meet me, and aided by them engaged the best detective service upon the case. There was little or nothing to furnish us with a clue, for the nurse's lying statement had misled us; we were out at sea before we knew positively that Mabel had disappeared, and my long illness in Europe, followed by my husband's death kept me from instituting a thorough search of New York City.

"I was bound for New York in answer to a summons from the men engaged on the case, when this accident occurred. Mr. Gibson had offered to make the journey for me, but I felt that I alone must

hear the first news—and to think that through that blessed accident I stumbled upon my little girl." She ceased speaking and with streaming eyes again clasped Mabel in a fond embrace.

The chums found their own eyes wet, during this recital, but of the four, Jessica appeared to be the most deeply moved. Mabel had meant more to her than to the others, and she found herself facing the severest trial that had so far entered her young life. She drew a deep breath, then went bravely over to Mrs. Allison, saying with quivering lips:

"It is very, very hard to give Mabel up. She is the child of our sorority, but she belongs most of all to me. She is the dearest girl imaginable, and neither hardship nor poverty have marred her. She is sweet, unselfish and wholesome, and always will be. I am glad, glad, glad that her dream has at last been realized, and I should be the most selfish girl in the world if I didn't rejoice at her good fortune."

She smiled through her tears at Mabel, who rushed over to her and exclaimed:

"Jessica, dearest, you know perfectly well how much I do and always shall love you, and Grace and Anne and Nora, too."

The four girls lingered a few moments, then said good-bye to Mrs. Allison and Mabel, who was to remain for the present with her mother. She kissed her friends tenderly, promising to see them the next day.

"I'll be in school to-morrow unless mother needs me here," she said with such a world of fond pride in her voice that the girls who had so willingly befriended her felt that their loss was a matter of small consequence when compared with the glorious fact that Mabel had come into her own.

CHAPTER IV

GRACE TURNS IN THE FIRE ALARM

"I wonder what sort of excitement we shall have next?" remarked Grace Harlowe to her three friends one afternoon as they gathered in the senior locker-room, before leaving school.

Three weeks had elapsed since Mabel Allison and her mother had met in Room 47 of the hospital, and many events had transpired in that short space of time.

The girl chums had been entertained at "Hawk's Nest" by Mrs. Gibson, and were in consequence the most important persons in the Girls' High School. They had found Mrs. Gibson charming, and had been invited to repeat their visit at an early date. Mabel's story had circulated throughout Oakdale, and she and her friends were the topic of the hour.

The one cloud on their horizon had been the fact of the inevitable separation. They had begged and entreated Mrs. Allison to take up her residence in Oakdale for the balance of Mabel's junior year, but on account of home matters she had been unable to comply with their wishes. So Mabel had departed for Denver with her mother, while the chums had kissed her and cried over her and had extracted a laughing promise from Mrs. Allison to bring her to Oakdale during commencement week to witness the graduation of the Phi Sigma Tau.

"It seems as though we have done nothing but say good-bye to people ever since school began," said Anne Pierson with a little sigh.

"I know it," exclaimed Nora. "First our boys, then Mabel, and—"

"And now all we can do is to wonder who will fade away and disappear next," finished Grace. "Promise me that none of you will run away from Oakdale, or elope, or do anything that can be classed under the head of vanishing."

"Oh, I think we're all rooted to the spot for this year," said Jessica, "but what about next? Nora and I will be in a conservatory, Grace will be in college and Anne—where will you be, Anne?"

"Goodness knows," replied Anne. "I'd like to try for a scholarship, but how on earth would I support myself even if I were fortunate enough to win?"

"Don't worry about that," said Grace quickly. "That is for that all-wise body, the Phi Sigma Tau, to consider. We will be your ways and means committee, Anna."

"Oh, I couldn't think of weighing you girls down with my cares," replied Anne soberly. "I must work out my own salvation."

By this time they had turned out of High School Street and were moving in the direction of Grace's home, where the majority of their chats took place, when Nora suddenly exclaimed in a low tone:

"Look, girls, there is Eleanor Savelli!"

"Where? where?" demanded three eager voices, as their owners followed Nora's glance.

"Across the street," replied Nora. "Don't let her know that we are looking at her."

Sure enough, on the opposite side of the street, Eleanor Savelli was to be seen strolling along in company with Edna Wright and Daisy Culver, two seniors who had been her faithful followers since her advent in Oakdale.

"Excitement number one," remarked Nora. "The fair Eleanor comes and our peace of mind departs. I had cherished vain hopes that she wouldn't favor us with the light of her countenance this year, even though she did inform Grace of her laudable desire to stay with the seniors for pure spite."

"Never mind, Nora," said Jessica, "I don't believe she'll worry herself about us, even though she did make dire threats."

"Remember what I told you last year, girls," said Grace in a tone of admonition. "Be careful what you do and say whenever she is near. She despises the Phi Sigma Tau and would revenge herself upon us at the slightest opportunity. She comes of a race who swear vendettas."

"She better not swear any when I am around," retorted Nora with spirit, "or she will find that the Irish are equal to the occasion."

"Don't excite yourself needlessly, Nora," laughed Anne. "That splendid Hibernian energy of yours is worthy of a better cause."

"How provoking!" suddenly exclaimed Grace. "I've left my library book in the gym. and it's a week overdue now. I shall simply have to go back and get it. It's only three o'clock," she added, consulting her watch. "Who will go with me?"

"Of what use is it for all of us to go," complained Nora. "We'll wait right here for you and you can hurry faster by going alone."

"All right, lazy, unsocial creatures," said Grace good-humoredly. "I'm off. Be sure you wait."

She hurried in the direction of the High School and in an incredibly short time was running down the corridor of the wing that led to the gymnasium. Remembering that she had laid her book on the window sill, Grace lost no time in securing it, and taking it under her arm waited toward the door. Suddenly the faint smell of smoke was borne to her nostrils.

She sniffed the air, then murmured, "I wonder what's burning. The smell seems to come from over there. Perhaps I'd better look around. It won't take a second."

She slowly retraced her steps, looking carefully about her. There was no smoke to be seen. She turned to go, then impelled by some mysterious influence, her eye traveled to the door of the small room at the left of the gymnasium.

With a cry of consternation she sped across the floor, flung open the door and staggered back, choked by a perfect volume of smoke that issued from within. The interior of the room was in flames.

To think was to act. Unless help arrived speedily their beloved gymnasium would soon be a thing of the past. Grace tore through the corridor like a wild girl, and darted out the door and across the campus. There was a fire alarm on the street below the High School, and toward this she directed her steps.

Pausing an instant before the box, she looked about her for something with which to break the glass. Spying a small boy strolling toward her, a baseball bat in his hand, she pounced upon him, seized the bat before he knew what had happened and smashed the glass with one blow. Giving the ring inside a vigorous pull, Grace shoved the bat into the hands of the astonished youngster and made for the nearest telephone.

Hurrying into Stillman's, she discovered to her disgust that the telephone was in use, but a moment later she was at the door and again out on the street. Her quick ear had caught the clang of the bell on the fire engines, and the thing to do now was to go back to her chums with the news—and then off to the fire.

"The gymnasium is on fire!" she cried, as she neared the spot where they awaited her. "Hurry, all of you! Perhaps we may be of some help."

Her three friends needed no second invitation and throwing all dignity to the winds, raced down the street in the direction of the burning building. When they reached the High School smoke was issuing from the windows of the gymnasium, and from the roof and chimneys, and situated as it was like a connecting link between the two buildings, it was an easy matter for the flames to spread in either direction.

Even in the short time it had taken Grace to turn in the alarm, the fire had made tremendous headway, and great tongues of flame shot up toward the sky. The roof had caught and was burning rapidly, although the firemen played a constant stream upon it.

As the fire grew hotter, the other companies were called out, and soon the entire Oakdale Fire Department was at work.

Ropes had been stretched around the burning part of the building to keep venturesome citizens

outside the fire belt. Grace stood as close as she dared, Nora, Anne and Jessica at her side.

"Oh, do, do save our gymnasium!" she shrieked, as several firemen hurried past her.

"Can't do it, miss," replied one of them. "It's a goner. If we save the school we'll do well, let alone the gymnasium."

Long and strenuously the firemen fought the hungry flames. The wind was in the wrong direction, and helped to fan the blaze. One of the gymnasium walls fell in with a terrific crash, almost carrying with it two firemen who had been playing a stream from the rung of a ladder that leaned against it. There was a cry of horror from the assembled crowd that changed to a sigh of relief when it was discovered that the two men had saved themselves by leaping.

"Oh, if only I were a man," breathed Grace, as she watched the firemen's efforts to gain control of the situation. "I wouldn't stay here a moment. I'd be in the thick of the fight."

"Hold her girls, or she'll dash straight over the ropes," said Nora.

"I'd like to," retorted Grace. "It's dreadful to stand here unable to help and see our dear old gym go, and perhaps our school, too."

"Well, you turned in the alarm, and that's a whole lot," declared Jessica stoutly. "If you hadn't seen the blaze when you did things might be a good deal worse. As it is, I believe they are getting the fire under control."

"It does look that way," exclaimed Anne. "See, the flames are dying out over on that side. Oh, if it would only rain and help things along."

"I believe it will rain before night. The clouds look heavy and threatening," declared Nora, squinting at the sky.

"The weather prophet has come to town," smiled Anne.

For the next hour the girls stood eagerly watching the gallant work of the firemen. A dense crowd, composed largely of High School boys and girls, packed the campus, while people blocked the streets outside the gates. Intense excitement prevailed, and when it became evident that the main building was safe a mighty cheer went up from the crowd.

"Bless their hearts!" exclaimed Grace. "They are just as fond as we are of Oakdale High School. But, oh, girls, where are we going to play basketball!"

The girls looked at each other in dismay.

"What is life without basketball?" said Nora sadly.

"True enough," said Anne, "but even though the gym. is gone we still have our school. It would be simply terrible to have had it go in our senior year."

"No doubt the gym. will be rebuilt at once," remarked Jessica.

"I am not so sure of that," replied Grace. "My father belongs to the common council, and I heard him tell mother the other day that the High School had been refused an appropriation that they had asked for."

"Oh, well, then, we High School pupils will raise the money ourselves," said Nora lightly.

"That idea is worth looking into," said Grace eagerly. "We might help a great deal."

"Grace has the 'Busy Little Helper' stunt on the brain," jeered Jessica.

"Anything to keep matters moving," laughed Grace. "I'm an advocate of the strenuous life. But seriously, girls, how splendid it would be to feel that we had been instrumental in rebuilding the gymnasium."

"Fine," agreed Nora. "We used to sing a song in kindergarten when I was very young and foolish that started out, 'We are little builders,' although at that time I never expected to really become one."

"Nora," said Grace severely, "you have all Hippy's bad traits and some of your own thrown in."

It was nearing six o'clock before the four friends left the scene of the fire and started for home. Nora's prediction of rain proved true, for just as they made their way across the campus the rain began to come down in torrents, wetting them to the skin, but in no respect dampening their joy over the fact that this shower had come just in time to save their High School from further ravage by the flames.

CHAPTER V

NORA BECOMES A PRIZE "SUGGESTER"

"The thing to do is to decide just what we want, and then go ahead with it."

Grace Harlowe energetically addressed her remarks to the members of the Phi Sigma Tau, who had taken possession of the Harlowe's comfortable living room.

It was Saturday afternoon, and a special meeting had been called with the object of discussing the best way to get money for the rebuilding of the gymnasium, that the fire had completely destroyed, although the splendid efforts of the firemen had prevented the flames from extending to the main buildings, and the rain had completed their good work.

Grace had allowed no grass to grow under her feet, but had gone to the root of the matter the day following the fire, and found that the school could expect no assistance from the city or the state that year. She had thereupon racked her usually fertile brain for money-making schemes, but so far had settled on nothing, so she had called in her friends, and the Phi Sigma Tau had been in council for the past half hour without having advanced a single prolific idea.

"Think hard, girls," begged Grace. "We simply must do something that will make Oakdale sit up and take notice, and incidentally spend their money."

"We might give a play or a concert," suggested Eva Allen.

"Not original enough to draw the crowd," vetoed Nora O'Malley. "Besides, the sophomore class has already begun to make plans for a play. While the other three classes are making plans we ought to go ahead and astonish the natives. The early stunt catches the cash, you know," concluded Nora slangily.

"Well, what would you suggest as a cash-catching stunt?" asked Anne. "You are generally a prize suggester."

"We might have a bazaar," said Nora after a moment's thought, "with ever so many different booths. We could have a gypsy camp, and tell fortunes, and we could have some Spanish dancers, and, oh, lots of things. We could have it in Assembly Hall and have tents with all these shows going on."

"Oh, splendid!" cried Grace. "And we could get the High School mandolin club for an orchestra. If we hurried we could have it week after next, on Thanksgiving night."

"And we could have a Mystery Auction," interposed Marian Barber eagerly.

"What on earth is a 'Mystery Auction'?" inquired Nora and Jessica in a breath.

"Why we write notes to every one in Oakdale, asking for some kind of contribution, anything from a jar of pickles to hand-painted china. Then all these things are tied up in packages and auctioned off to the highest bidder. There is a whole lot of money in it, for people often try to outbid each other, and the fun of the thing is that no one knows what he or she is bidding on."

"Marian Barber," exclaimed Grace, "that's a positive inspiration! You clever, clever girl!"

"Oh, don't think for a minute that I originated the idea," said Marian hastily. "A cousin of mine wrote me about it last winter. They had a 'Mystery Auction' at a bazaar that was held in the town she lives."

"Well it's a brilliant idea at any rate, and I can see us fairly coining money. Now we must all work with a will and put the affair through in fine style," responded Grace warmly.

"Oh, girls, the boys will be at home in time for it!" exclaimed Jessica in rapture.

"Sure enough," said Nora, "and won't I make Hippy work. He'll lose pounds before his vacation is over. Grace, you must write and ask Tom Gray to come."

Now that the question of the bazaar was settled, the Phi Sigma Tau went to work with a will. The services of the majority of the seniors were enlisted and notes were written to every one in Oakdale who was likely to feel even a faint interest in the movement. Eva Allen's brother, who was an artist, made a number of attractive posters and these were tacked up in public places where they at once attracted attention.

The Oakdale National Guard loaned tents, and public-spirited merchants willingly loaned draperies, flags, banners, and in fact, almost anything they were asked for.

As for donations, they fairly poured in, and the girls watched the growing collection with mingled rapture and despair.

"We'll have to sit up every night this week in order to get all these things wrapped," sighed Grace, on the Monday afternoon before Thanksgiving, as she stood resting after a spirited rehearsal of the dance that she and Miriam Nesbit were to do, and which was to be one of the features of the gypsy camp.

"And the decorating is only about half done, too," she continued. "Thank goodness school closed to-day. We'll just have to live here until Thursday, and work, work, work."

"Clear the way for progress on the fly," sang out a voice behind them, and the group of startled girls turned to face a stout young man who charged into their midst with a hop, skip and a jump.

"Hippy!" shrieked Nora in delight. "And David and Reddy, and yes—Tom, too!"

"Oh, frabjous day, callooh, callay," cried Hippy shaking hands all around. "It seems ages since I saw you girls. How well you all look, only you're not looking at me. These other good-for-nothing fellows are getting all the attention. Hello, Miriam," he called to Miriam Nesbit, who ran eagerly across the floor to meet the newcomers. "There's a prize package for you, too. It's outside the door shaking the snow off its coat."

Miriam flushed and laughed a little, then hurried over to greet Arnold Evans, who had just entered the hall.

"Oh, boys, you don't know how good it seems to have you all here again," said Grace, after the first greetings had been exchanged, as she beamed on the young men. "You're just in time to go to work, too. We've oodles of things to wrap for the 'Mystery Auction,' and Hippy you must be auctioneer. You can do it to perfection."

"Tell us all about this affair. I received rather indefinite accounts of it in the exceedingly brief letters that I have been favored with of late," said Tom Gray, fixing a reproachful eye upon Grace.

"Please forgive me, Tom," begged Grace, "but really I've been so busy of late that I just had to cut my letters short. Come on around the hall with me, and I'll tell you about all the stunts we've planned. Come on, everybody," she called, turning to the young people grouped about, "and remember, that I expect some original suggestions from you boys."

Around the hall they went, stopping before each tent, while the girls explained its purpose.

"What's this to be?" asked Tom, as he stopped at one corner of the hall that was closely curtained. "May I enter?"

"Mercy, no," gasped Grace, catching him by the arm as he was about to move aside one of the heavy curtains. "That's Eleanor Savelli's own particular corner. None of us know what is behind those curtains. You see, Eleanor hasn't spoken to any of us since last year. When we first talked about having this bazaar we decided to make it a senior class affair. We didn't care to go to Eleanor and ask her to help, because she hasn't been nice to any of the Phi Sigma Tau, but we asked Miss Tebbs and Miss Kane, two of the teachers who are helping with this, to ask Eleanor to do something. You know she plays so well, both on the violin and piano, then, too, the greater part of her life has been spent abroad, so she surely must have lots of good ideas.

"When first Miss Tebbs asked her she refused to have anything to do with it. Then she suddenly changed her mind and has been working like a beaver ever since. Miss Tebbs says her booth is beautiful."

"If I'm not mistaken here she comes now," said Tom suddenly. "I never saw her but once before, yet hers is a face not easily forgotten."

"Yes, it is she," replied Grace. "Let us walk on."

Eleanor Savelli, gowned in a tailored suit of blue and looking particularly beautiful, walked haughtily by and disappeared behind the heavy green curtain.

"She is certainly a stunning girl!" was Tom's low-voiced exclamation, "but, oh, what a look she gave you, Grace!"

"Did she?" replied Grace, with an amused smile. "That doesn't worry me. She has repeated that performance so often that I have grown used to it."

"Look out for her just the same," advised Tom.

"Where do we jollificate, to-night?" asked Hippy, as Grace and Tom joined them again.

"Right here," said Nora with decision. "No fudge, no hot chocolate, no cakes, nothing except work until this bazaar is over, then we'll have a spread that will give you indigestion for a week. Do you solemnly promise to be good and not tease for things to eat, but be a ready and willing little toiler?"

"I do," said Hippy, holding up his right hand. "Do you assure me that the spread you just mentioned is no myth?"

"I do," said Nora, "also that the indigestion, shall be equally realistic."

"Lead me to it," said Hippy. "I swear in this hour that—"

But Hippy never finished his speech, for Eleanor Savelli suddenly darted into the group with flashing eyes and set lips.

"How dared you meddle with my booth during my absence!" she cried, looking from one to the other of the astonished young people. "And what have you done with my things!"

There was a brief silence. Then Nora O'Malley spoke very coolly.

"Really, Miss Savelli, we haven't the remotest idea of what you are speaking."

"You know perfectly well of what I am speaking," retorted Eleanor. "I might have expected as much, however."

"I repeat," said Nora firmly, "that we do not know what you mean, and I am not used to having my word questioned. You will have to explain yourself if you expect to get a definite reply."

"Very well," replied Eleanor, with a toss of her head. "Last night I spent a great deal of time in arranging the booth over which I have been asked to preside. On coming here to-day I find that everything has been rearranged, completely spoiling the effect I had obtained. You and your friends are the only ones who have been here this afternoon. It looks like a clear case of spite on your part."

During Eleanor's angry outburst the boys looked decidedly uncomfortable, then by common consent moved away a little. This was a matter that the girls alone could settle.

Then Miriam Nesbit stepped forward with all the dignity that she could summon to her aid.

"Miss Savelli," she said quietly, "it is absolutely childish and ridiculous for you to make the assertions you have. No one of us has the slightest curiosity as to either you or your arrangements. This is not the first time that you have publicly accused us of meddling. Now I want you to understand once and for all that this must cease. You should not jump at conclusions and then vent your rage upon innocent bystanders."

"This much I will say as a matter of information, that we were not the only ones here this afternoon, as several of your particular friends spent some time in your booth, and I should advise that you call them to account and let us alone. Come on, girls," she said, turning to Grace and her friends, "we mustn't waste any more time."

With this Miriam turned her back squarely upon Eleanor, and without giving her time to reply, walked to the other end of the hall.

The girls were not slow in joining her, and in a moment Eleanor was left alone in the middle of the hall, with the unpleasant realization that for once she had overshot the mark.

CHAPTER VI

THE THANKSGIVING BAZAAR

The bazaar was at its height. No one would have guessed that staid old Assembly Hall could lend itself to such levity.

At one end a band of gypsies had pitched their tents in true Romany fashion. There were dark-eyed gypsy maids in gaudy clothing, who gayly jingled their tambourines and wheedled good-natured sightseers into their main tent with extravagant stories of the wonderful Romany dancing girls whose unequalled dancing might be seen for the small sum of ten cents. While aged gypsies crouched here and there croaking mysteriously of their power to reveal the future, and promising health, wealth and happiness to those who crossed their out-stretched palms with silver.

In front of one of the tents several gypsy boys sat grouped in picturesque attitudes, industriously twanging guitars and mandolins. The whole encampment was lighted by flaring torches on the ends of long poles, and was the final touch needed to give the true gypsy effect.

The rest of the space in the hall had been given up to booths. There was, of course, a Japanese booth, while across from it several Mexican seniors and senioritas were doing an enterprising novelty and post-card business under the red, white and green flag of Mexico.

There was a cunning little English tea shop, where one could refresh one's self with tea, cakes and jam, not to mention the booth devoted to good old Ireland, presided over by Nora O'Malley who, dressed as an Irish colleen, sang the "Wearing of the Green" and "The Harp That Once Thro' Tara's Hall," with true Irish fervor, while she disposed of boxes of home-made candy tied with green ribbon that people bought for the pleasure of hearing her sing.

Next to the gypsy encampment, however, the feature of the evening was the booth entrusted to Eleanor Savelli. It was a veritable corner in Italy, and it may be said to Eleanor's credit that she had worked untiringly to carry out her idea. She had furnished the peasant costumes for herself and three of her friends, and knew exactly how they were to be worn, and had spared no expense in the matter of fruit and flowers which were to be sold at a good profit. There were little bags of home-made confetti that were sure to be popular and various other attractive features truly Italian that Eleanor had spent much time and trouble in procuring and arranging.

There had been a heated altercation, however, between Eleanor and Edna Wright on the day after Eleanor had astonished Grace and her friends by her fiery outburst, Edna having admitted that she had been responsible for the changes that had aroused Eleanor's ire.

A quarrel had ensued, in which Edna, having been worsted, had retired from the field in tears, refusing to have anything further to do with Eleanor or her booth. At this juncture Miss Tebbs had appeared on the scene, and peace was restored, although Edna was still taciturn and sulky, and displayed little interest in what went on around her.

From the moment the doors were opened the citizens of Oakdale looked inside, feeling particularly good-natured after their Thanksgiving dinners, and prepared to spend their money.

"It's perfectly wonderful what these children have managed to do on nothing whatever," Miss Thompson was saying, as she and Mrs. Nesbit, in the guise of sightseers, were strolling down the middle of the hall.

"It looks to me like a scene from an opera," replied Mrs. Nesbit.

"Yes, we are all very prosperous and clean comic opera gypsies, Mrs. Nesbit," said Hippy Wingate, who had come up just in time to hear Mrs. Nesbit's remark.

"Why, Hippy Wingate, I never should have recognized you. You look like the big smuggler in 'Carmen.' I have forgotten his name."

"I am a smuggler, Mrs. Nesbit," put in Hippy mysteriously. "But don't give me away. It's not lace goods I've brought over the border, nor bales of silk and such things. Isn't that what gypsies are supposed usually to smuggle?"

"I believe it is," answered Mrs. Nesbit. "At least they always appear in plays and pictures seated at the foot of a high, rocky cliff in some lonely spot, with bales and casks and strange looking bundles about. No one would be heartless enough to ask what was inside the bundles, but I have always had a strong suspicion that it was excelsior."

"What have you been smuggling, Hippy?" asked Miss Thompson. "I wonder you managed to get it past that line of watchful gipsy girls."

"I won't give it away," replied Hippy. "It's a surprise. You'll see, and I wager it will be the talk of the place before the evening is over."

"Is it animal, vegetable or mineral, Hippy?" demanded Mrs. Nesbit.

"Animal," replied Hippy. "Very much animal."

"Now, what in the world," the two women exclaimed, their curiosity piqued.

"Hippy, I wish you would come on and get to work," called Grace over her shoulder, as she hurried past, and Hippy darted after her, remembering that he had not done a thing that evening to assist the girls.

"How fine Grace Harlowe does look, Mrs. Nesbit," remarked Miss Thompson, "and how I shall miss her when she leaves the High School! The time goes too quickly to suit me, when all these nice girls leave us for college."

Miss Thompson still cherished a deep regard for Grace, although, since the circumstance of Grace's refusal to betray Eleanor, narrated in "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," the two had never returned to quite the same footing as formerly.

Grace was, indeed, the picture of a beautiful gipsy girl who in romance turns out not to be a gipsy at all, but a princess stolen in her youth. She wore a skirt of red trimmed in black and yellow, a full white blouse and a little black velvet bolero. Around her waist she had tied a gayly colored sash, while on her head was a gipsy headdress bordered with gold fringe.

"Hippy," commanded Grace, "will you please take this gong and announce that the auction is about to begin!"

"Certainly, certainly," answered Hippy. "Anything to oblige the ladies."

He mounted a chair and beat on the Japanese gong.

"This way, ladies and gentlemen. Come right this way! The 'Mystery Auction' will now commence. It is a sale of surprises. You never know what you are going to draw, but it's sure to be something nice. Everybody step this way, please. These interesting and mysterious packages are to be sold each to the highest bidder. But no man knoweth what he draweth. It is the way of life, ladies, but that's where the fun comes in, and it's sportsmanlike to take your chances, gentlemen."

By this time Hippy had drawn a crowd of curious people about the booth devoted to that purpose, in which were piled dozens of packages of various shapes and sizes, all done up in white tissue paper and tied with red ribbons.

Hippy picked up the first bundle.

"Is there anyone here who will make a bid on this interesting package?" he cried. "It may contain treasure. Who knows? It may contain fruits from the tropics, or the spices of Araby, or—"

"I'll bid ten cents," called a voice.

"Ten cents!" exclaimed Hippy in mock horror. "I ask you, dear friend, can our gymnasium be builded upon ten cents? Is there no one here who is thinking of our late, lamented gymnasium? Have we already forgotten that dear, departed hall of youthful pleasures, cut down in the flower of its youth so tragically?"

Hippy's voice rang out like an old-time orator's, and some one bid twenty-five cents. But the bidding ended there, and Farmer Benson got the package, which on being opened, was found to

contain a beautiful little lacquer box. This was a lucky beginning. If the packages all held such treasures they were well worth bidding on. Then the fun grew fast and furious. Everybody began bidding, and a pound of sugar actually went for five dollars, to old Mr. McDonald, who had obstinately refused to give up to his opponent, Mr. Barber, in the bidding contest. Mr. Harlowe paid heavily for a cook book, while David Nesbit, for fifty cents, drew a splendid big fruit cake.

"It is so fortunate that that fruit cake fell into the hands of one of my friends," remarked Hippy, as David was about to walk off, his prize under his arm. "I adore fruit cake."

"That's no sign that you will ever get a chance at this one," replied David calmly.

"I shall, I know I shall," retorted Hippy, "You wouldn't betray my young confidence and dispel my fond hopes by eating it all yourself. You deserve an awful case of indigestion if you do."

"Children, children, stop squabbling," laughed Anne who, looking like a very demure little gypsy, had slipped up unnoticed. "Don't worry, Hippy, I'll see that you are remembered when the famous cake is cut."

"I feel relieved," said Hippy, giving her one of his Cheshire Cat grins. "I propose that you leave your treasure with this gypsy maid, David, for the time is flying and we have a great and glorious surprise to spring."

"See you later, Anne," said David, looking at his watch. Then taking Hippy by the arm the two young men hurried out of the hall, leaving Anne to wonder what the surprise might be.

Turning slowly she was making her way toward the gypsy camp when a voice called, "O Anne, wait a minute," and Marian Barber fluttered up accompanied by a tall, dark young man.

"Miss Pierson, allow me to present Mr. Hammond," she said.

The young man bowed rather too elaborately Anne thought, and a wave of dislike swept over her as she rather coldly acknowledged the introduction.

"Mr. Hammond has just come to Oakdale," Marian said eagerly. "He knows very few people as yet."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Hammond, with a smile that was intended to be fascinating. "I am, indeed, a stranger. Miss Barber has kindly volunteered to introduce me to some of her charming friends, therefore I trust that in time they will be mine also."

Anne murmured some polite reply, and excusing herself walked away. "Horrid thing," she thought. "How cruel he looks when he smiles. I wonder where Marian met him. She seems to be delighted with him."

"Where have you been, Anne?" asked Grace, as Anne entered the tent where she and Miriam sat resting preparatory to beginning their dance, when enough people should gather outside to form a paying audience.

"Talking to Marian Barber and a young man who is trailing about with her."

"Did she introduce that man to you?" exclaimed Grace.

"Yes," replied Anne. "Did you meet him?"

"I did," was the answer. "Isn't he horrid?"

"That is precisely what I said," replied Anne. "There is something about his suave, silky manner that gives me the creeps."

"I hope Marian isn't seriously impressed with him," said Grace. "For there is something positively sinister about him."

Just then Hippy's voice was heard again above the crowd, and the three girls hurried to the opening in the tent.

CHAPTER VII

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Hippy. "We have a noble animal for sale here. He is tame and gentle. A lady could ride him without fear. He sees equally well out of both eyes and is neither lame nor spavined. If you will just stand back a little we will let you see his paces."

The crowd drew back on either side of the lane between the rows of tents and booths and from somewhere in the back there was heard a great pawing and trampling, with cries of "Whoa, there! Whoa, there, Lightning!"

Then down the aisle there dashed the most absurd comic animal that had ever been seen in Oakdale. A dilapidated old horse, with crooked legs and sunken sides through which its ribs

protruded. He had widely distended nostrils and his mouth drawn back over huge teeth. One ear lay flat, while the other stood up straight and wiggled, and his glazed eyes stared wildly. On his wobbly back sat David, dressed like a jockey and flourishing a whip.

"Gentlemen," went on Hippy, "you here behold an animal of splendid parts. He is pasture-fed and as gentle as a lamb, never kicks—"

The strange animal here kicked out one of his hind legs so wildly that David was obliged to hold on with both arms to keep from falling off.

"He has a happy, sunny nature, ladies. Is there any one present who would like to try his gait? Ten cents a ride."

The horse crossed his front legs and sat down on his haunches with an air of patient endurance. There were roars of laughter and no one enjoyed the fun more than Miss Thompson.

"I declare, Hippy, I should like to have a ride on the back of that animal!" she exclaimed, producing ten cents.

David leaped to the ground and gallantly assisted the principal to mount, while Hippy whispered something into the ear of the horse.

The animal trotted gently up to one end of the room and back, depositing Miss Thompson safely on her feet.

Miriam Nesbit then took a trial ride and no bucking bronco ever exhibited such traits of character as did that battered-looking quadruped. Miriam was obliged to jump down amid the cheers of the company. Many people rode that night, and rides went up to twenty-five and even fifty cents, until finally the poor, tired animal lay flat on the floor in an attitude of complete exhaustion. Then Hippy undid several hooks and eyes along the imaginary line which divided Lightning in half, and there came forth, very warm and fatigued, Tom Gray and Reddy Brooks.

On the whole the bazaar was proving an unqualified success. People entered into the spirit of the thing and spent their money without a murmur.

Eleanor's confetti proved a drawing card, and young people and old wandered about, bestowing handfuls of it upon their friends whenever a good opportunity presented itself.

Long before the fair was over Grace and Anne retired to one end of the gypsy encampment to begin counting the proceeds of their labors. The girls in charge of the various booths turned in their money almost as rapidly as they made it, and by the time the crowd had begun to thin the girls had arrived at a tolerably correct estimate of what the bazaar had netted them.

"Is it possible that I have counted correctly, Anne!" exclaimed Grace to her friend, who was helping to sort small silver into various piles.

"I don't know," said Anne, "it looks like a lot of money. How much does it all come to?"

"Roughly speaking, nearly five hundred dollars. Just think of that."

"Splendid!" cried Anne, clasping her hands joyfully. "But what shall we put it in?"

"I shall put it in this iron box of father's. You see, it has a combination lock and he loaned it to me to-night just for this purpose. As soon as the rest of the money is in I'll lock it and he will take charge of it. Will you go and find him?"

Anne departed and Grace began to deposit the money in the box, smiling to herself at the success of their undertaking.

The few remaining people who were now taking leave of each other had concentrated in one spot. There was a loud buzz of conversation and laughter, when suddenly, without a moment's warning, the electric lights went out. The gasoline torches had burned down by now and the place was in utter darkness.

Somewhere in the hall there was a cry, the sound of scuffling and then absolute silence.

Many of the men began to strike matches and peer into the darkness, and at last David groped his way over to a corner of the hall where he remembered he had seen the switch. As he felt for the electric button his hand encountered another hand, that grasped his with an iron grip, gave his wrist a vicious twist, pushed him violently away and was gone. David gave an involuntary cry of pain as he felt for the switch again. In another moment he had found it and the hall was again flooded with light. Instantly he looked about for the vicious person who had twisted his wrist, but he was alone in that part of the hall.

The excitements of that evening, however, were not yet at an end. People began running toward the last booth. There were cries and exclamations, and David, who had followed quickly after them, arrived there just in time to meet Mr. Harlowe carrying the limp figure of his daughter Grace in his arms. He deposited her on four chairs placed in a row, a bottle of smelling salts was put to her nose, while Hippy and Reddy ran for water.

Grace opened her eyes almost immediately and sat up.

"I'm not hurt," she said. "I was only stunned. Some one hit me on the head from behind, but my

cap softened the blow. They were trying to get the box of money. Oh, is it gone?" she cried anxiously.

David and Tom examined the booth.

The money was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

MARIAN ASSERTS HER INDEPENDENCE

There was not the slightest clue to the thief who had stolen the iron box containing a little over five hundred dollars, for which the girls had worked so hard, but the loss was made good by Judge Putnam who, though on the bench at the state capital at the time the robbery occurred, had promptly sent Grace his check for the amount when Grace wrote him an account of it. For which generous act he became the idol of Oakdale High School.

"As for the thief," observed Mr. Harlowe, several mornings later at the breakfast table, after Grace had opened the letter and joyfully exhibited the check to her mother and father; "he'll have some trouble opening that box. It was the strongest box I have ever seen of the kind, made of iron reinforced with steel bands, with a combination lock that would baffle even your friend, Richards, Grace, who appeared to be a pretty sharp crook."

"How will the thief get at the money, then, father?" asked Grace.

"I can't imagine," answered Mr. Harlowe. "If he tries to blow up the box he runs the chance of blowing up all the money at the same time, and I don't believe there is an instrument made that would pry it open. He can't melt it and he can't knock a hole in it. Therefore, I don't just see what he can do, unless he finds some way to work the combination."

"It would be the irony of fate if the thief couldn't spend the money after all his trouble," observed Mrs. Harlowe.

"I hope he never, never can," cried Grace. "I hope he'll bruise all his knuckles and break all his finger nails trying to open the box, and still not make the slightest impression!"

"He certainly will if he tries to open the box with his finger nails and knuckles," replied her father, as he bestowed two kisses upon his wife and daughter, respectively, and departed to his business.

"Who is to be custodian of the fund, Grace? Are you to have charge of it?" asked Mrs. Harlowe.

"No, mother; Marian Barber was formally elected class treasurer last year. She likes to keep books and add up accounts and all those things. So I shall just turn the check over to her to put in the bank until we give our next entertainment. Then, when we have about a thousand dollars, we'll give it all to Miss Thompson as our contribution toward rebuilding the gymnasium. I hear that the juniors are going to give a dance, but I don't think they will make any large amount like this, because they will have to pay for music and refreshments."

Grace could not help feeling proud of the success of the bazaar now that the judge's check had arrived, although at first she had demurred about accepting it. However, as the judge absolutely refused to take it back, it was therefore duly presented to Marian Barber, who, with a feeling of extreme importance at handling so much money in her own name, deposited it in the Upton Bank, and was the recipient, for the first time in her life, of a small, neat-looking check book. Later she showed it with great glee to the Phi Sigma Tau, who were drinking hot chocolate in the Harlowe's sitting room, the day after school began.

"I feel just like a millionaire," she exclaimed, "even though the money isn't mine. I'd just like to write one check to see how my name would look signed at the bottom here."

"It does seem like a lot of money," observed Anne thoughtfully, "but I'm afraid the check book won't be of much use to you, Marian, as you will probably draw it all out in a lump when the time comes to hand it over to Miss Thompson."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Marian, "we may have to give a few checks for expenses and things, the next entertainment we get up, and then I'll have an opportunity."

The girls laughed good-naturedly at Marian's evident eagerness to draw a check.

"We'll certainly have to incur some kind of expense for the express purpose of allowing Marian to draw a check," said Nora. "By the way, Grace, which booth made the most money, outside the auction, of course?"

"Eleanor Savelli's," replied Grace promptly. "They made most of it on confetti, too, although they sold quantities of flowers. They turned in seventy-five dollars."

"Eleanor certainly did work," observed Anne. "One feels as though one could forgive her all her sins after the success she made of her booth. It is a shame that so much ability and cleverness is

choked and crowded out by wilfulness and temper."

"Did you hear about the quarrel that she and Edna Wright had, after she attacked us?" asked Eva Allen.

"Yes," answered Grace. "I understand, too, that it has completely broken up their sorority. They carried their part of the bazaar through together and then Eleanor told Edna that she was practically done with her."

"You don't mean it! I hadn't heard that! Who told you so?" were the exclamations that followed this information.

"Daisy Culver told Ruth Deane, and Ruth told me," said Grace. "Ruth says that Edna feels dreadfully over it. She was really fond of Eleanor."

"Now I suppose that Miss Eleanor Vendetta de Savelli will be more impossible than ever," giggled Nora.

"Perhaps not," said Anne quietly. "I think it a very good thing that Edna and Eleanor have separated, for Eleanor Savelli is a far better girl at heart than Edna Wright. Eleanor is better off without her."

"I believe you are right, Anne," said Grace with conviction. "Although Eleanor's reformation is not for us. We've had experience."

"Never too late to mend," quoted Jessica.

"True," retorted Nora, "but for my part I think the Phi Sigma Tau have done their share toward the mending process."

"Marian Barber!" exclaimed Grace. "Where in the world did you unearth that man you introduced us to, at the bazaar?"

"Yes, I should say so," echoed Nora. "I didn't like him one bit."

A flush overspread Marian Barber's plain face. She frowned, then said very stiffly:

"Really, girls, I can't see why any one should dislike Mr. Hammond. I think he is a remarkably nice young man. Father and mother like him, too. He has called to see me twice since the bazaar, and I am going to the theatre with him to-morrow night. I like him very much better than any of these silly Oakdale schoolboys," she added a trifle maliciously.

The girls listened, thunderstruck. Was this good-natured, easy going Marian Barber who had spoken? To their knowledge Marian had never before received attentions from even "silly schoolboys." She was well liked among girls, but had always fought shy of young men.

"Forgive me, Marian," cried Nora impulsively. "I didn't dream that you were interested in Mr. Hammond."

"I am not half as much interested in him as he is interested in me," retorted Marian, bridling. "He prefers me to any Oakdale girl he has met."

The girls exchanged astonished glances at Marian's complacent statement.

"Where did you first meet him, Marian?" asked Anne gently.

"At the bazaar," replied Marian promptly.

"Who introduced him to you?" asked Grace curiously.

Marian hesitated a moment, then burst forth defiantly. "I suppose you girls will think it perfectly dreadful when I tell you that he introduced himself. He came up and asked me to tell him about some of the features of the bazaar. I did, then he went away, and after a while he came back and talked to me a long time. He is in the real estate business, and is going to have an office here in Oakdale. He was very much interested in the things I said to him, and when I told him about our Phi Sigma Tau he asked to be introduced to you girls. I never supposed you'd take such a dislike to him. I think he is perfectly splendid," she added with emphasis.

"Well, I don't agree with you," said hot-headed Nora. "And I don't think you should have noticed him, beyond being merely civil, without an introduction. Do you, Grace?"

"I don't know," said Grace slowly. "That is a question that no one save Marian can settle. I don't wish to seem hateful, Marian, but to tell you the truth, I wasn't favorably impressed with Mr. Hammond. Besides, he is ever so much older than you are. He must be at least twenty-five years old."

"He is twenty-nine," replied Marian coldly. "And I am glad that he isn't as young and foolish as most of the boys I have met."

"Does your mother know how you happened to meet him?" asked Jessica unthinkingly.

But this was a little too much. Marian rose to her feet, her voice choking with anger. "I don't blame Eleanor Savelli for calling you busy-bodies," she said. "And I shall be infinitely obliged to you if you will in future look to your own affairs and stop criticizing me."

With these words she rushed from the room, seized her wraps and was out on the street before any of the remaining girls had fully comprehended what had happened.

CHAPTER IX

THE JUDGE'S HOUSE PARTY

"There is nothing like congenial company when one travels," remarked Hippy Wingate, favoring his friends with a patronizing smile. "Now, when I came home from college I was obliged to consort with such grouches as David Nesbit and Reddy Brooks, who made me keep quiet when I wished to speak, and speak when I fain would have slept. But, observe the difference, all these fresh and charming damsels—"

"Charming we are, beyond a doubt," interrupted Nora O'Malley, "but fresh—never. The only fresh person aboard is named Wingate."

"If you two are going to disagree we'll bundle you both into the baggage car and let you fight it out," warned David. "Hippy ought to be exiled to that particular spot for having reviled Reddy and me."

"Keep quiet, Nora," said Hippy in a stage whisper. "We are in the hands of desperadoes."

It was a merry party who were speeding along their way to the state capital, for a wonderful visit was to be paid and the Phi Sigma Tau and their friends were to pay it. In short, Judge Putnam had invited them to spend Christmas at his beautiful home in the capital city, and for eight happy days they were to be his guests.

It was in reality Grace's party. The judge had written her, asking her to select as many guests as she chose. She had also received a prettily worded note from his sister, who had chaperoned them the previous summer in the Adirondacks, and who had taken charge of the judge's home in the capital for years.

Grace had at once invited the Phi Sigma Tau, and dispatched special delivery letters to Hippy, David and Reddy, not forgetting Tom Gray and Arnold Evans.

In order to make an even number of boys and girls, Grace had invited James Gardiner, an Oakdale boy, and last of all, very reluctantly, had sent a note to Mr. Henry Hammond.

This she had done solely to appease Marian Barber's wounded pride. For a week after the day that Marian had rushed angrily out of Grace's house, she had refused to go near her sorority. But one afternoon the six girls, headed by Grace, waylaid her as she was leaving the school and after much coaxing Marian allowed herself to be brought to a more reasonable frame of mind.

Then Grace, who honestly regretted having hurt Marian's feelings, had made an extra effort to treat Mr. Hammond cordially when they chanced to meet, and her friends had followed her example.

In spite of their feeling of dislike for him, they were forced to acknowledge that he seemed well-bred, was a young man of apparently good habits and that Oakdale people were rapidly taking him up. Grace privately thought Marian entirely too young to receive the attentions of a man so much older than herself, but Marian's father and mother permitted it, therefore Grace felt that she had no right to judge or object.

The longest journey seems brief when beguiled by gay companions, and the time slipped by like magic. It was with genuine surprise that the little party heard their station called. There was a great scurrying about for their various belongings, and well laden with suit cases and traveling bags the party hustled out of the train and were met on the platform by the judge's chauffeur, who conducted them to two waiting automobiles.

Off they whirled and in an incredibly short time the two machines drew up before the judge's stately home, where lights gleamed from every window. The guests alighted with much laughter and noise, and in a twinkling the massive front door opened and Judge Putnam appeared.

"Welcome, welcome!" he cried. "Now I am sure to have a Merry Christmas. I don't see how your fathers and mothers could spare you, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. Come in, come in. Here, Mary, are your children again."

The judge's sister came forward and greeted the young people warmly, kissing each girl in turn and shaking hands with the boys. Mr. Hammond and James Gardiner were duly presented to the judge and his sister, and then the boys were shown to their rooms by one of the servants, while Miss Putnam herself conducted the girls to theirs.

"We usually dine between seven and seven-thirty, my dears," said Miss Putnam, as they ascended. "I will send my maid, Annette, to you. Will you have separate rooms, or do you wish to do as you did last summer?"

"Oh, let two of us room together," said Grace eagerly. "But still, that isn't fair, for it will leave an

odd one. You know we had Mabel with us last summer."

"Dear little Mabel," said Miss Putnam. "I am sure you must miss her greatly. Her finding of her mother was very wonderful. I received a letter from her last week. She says she is very happy, but that she misses her Oakdale friends, particularly Jessica."

"She is coming east for commencement," said Jessica with a wistful smile. "No one knows how much I miss her."

"Let us settle the question of rooms at once," interposed Grace, who knew that whenever the conversation turned to Mabel, Jessica invariably was attacked with the blues. "Who is willing to room alone?"

"I am," replied Miriam Nesbit, "only I stipulate that I be allowed to pay nocturnal visits to the rest of you whenever I get too bored with my own society."

"Very well, then," replied Grace. "How shall we arrange it?"

"You and Anne take one room, then," said Nora rather impatiently, "Jessica and I another and that leaves Marian and Eva together. Do hurry up about it, for I want to get the soot off my face, and the cinders out of my eyes."

The question of roommates being thus settled, the girls trooped into the rooms assigned them and began to dress for dinner. The matter of gowns had been discussed by the girls when the judge's invitation had first arrived. As they were to remain for a week, they would need trunks, but for the first dinner, in case the trunks did not arrive on time, it had been agreed that they each carry one simple gown in their suit cases.

Grace and Anne had both chosen white, Jessica a dainty flowered organdie, and Nora a pale pink dimity. Eva Allen also had selected white. Marian Barber alone refused to give her friends any satisfaction as to what she intended to wear. "Wait and see," she had answered. "I want my gown to be a complete surprise to all of you."

"How funny Marian acted about her gown," remarked Grace to Anne, as she fastened the last button on the latter's waist. The maid sent by Miss Putnam had offered her services, but the girls, wishing to be alone, had not required them.

"Yes," responded Anne. "I don't understand her at all of late. She has changed a great deal, and I believe it is due to the influence of that horrid Henry Hammond. I simply can't like that man."

"Nor I," said Grace. "It requires an effort on my part to be civil to him. I think, too, that the boys are not favorably impressed with him, although they are too polite to say so."

"I believe in first impressions," remarked Anne. "I think that nine times out of ten they are correct. I may be doing the man an injustice, but I can't help it. Every time that I talk with him I feel that he is playing a part, that underneath his polish he has a cruel, relentless nature."

"Are you girls ready!" called Nora's voice just outside their door.

"In a minute," answered Grace, and with a last glance at the mirror she and Anne stepped into the hall, where Nora, Jessica and Eva Allen stood waiting.

"Where's Marian?" asked Grace, noticing her absence.

"Don't ask me," said Eva, in a tone bordering on disgust. "She won't be out for some time."

"Shall we wait for her?" inquired Anne.

"No," replied Eva shortly. "Let us go, and don't ask me anything about her. When she does finally appear you'll understand."

"This sounds very mysterious," said Miriam Nesbit, who in a white dotted Swiss, with a sprig of holly in her black braids, looked particularly handsome. "Come on, girls, shall we go down?"

The six girls descended to the drawing room, looking the very incarnation of youth and charming girlhood, and the judge's eyes brightened at sight of them.

"A rosebud garden of girls," he cried gallantly, "but I seem to miss some one. Where is the seventh rosebud?"

"Marian will be here directly," said Grace, as they gathered about the big fireplace until dinner should be announced.

But ten minutes went by, and Marian still lingered.

"Dinner is served," announced the old butler.

The girls exchanged furtive glances, the judge looked rather uncomfortable, while Mr. Henry Hammond frowned openly.

Then there was another ten minutes' wait, that the girls tried to cover with conversation. Then—a rustle of silken skirts and a figure appeared in the archway that caused those assembled to stare in sheer amazement.

Was this fashionably attired person plain every-day Marian Barber? Her hair was drawn high

upon her head, and topped with a huge cluster of false puffs, which made her look several years older than she had appeared in the afternoon, while her gown of blue satin was cut rather too low for a young girl, and had mere excuses in the way of sleeves. To cap the climax, however, it had a real train that persisted in getting in her way every time she attempted to move.

For a full minute no one spoke. Grace had an almost irrepressible desire to laugh aloud, as she caught the varied expressions on the faces of her friends. Mr. Hammond alone appeared unmoved. Grace fancied that she even detected a gleam of approval in his eyes as he glanced toward Marian.

"Shall we dine!" asked the judge, offering his arm to Grace, while Tom Gray escorted Miss Putnam, the other young men following with their friends.

The dinner passed off smoothly, although there was a curious constraint fell upon the young people that nothing could dispel.

Marian's gown had indeed proved a surprise to her young friends, and they could not shake off a certain sense of mortification at her lack of good taste.

"How could Marian Barber be so ridiculous, and why did her mother ever allow her to dress herself like that?" thought Grace as she glanced at Marian, who was simpering at some remark that Mr. Henry Hammond was making to her in a voice too low for the others to hear.

Then Grace suddenly remembered that Marian's mother had left Oakdale three weeks before on a three months' visit to a sister in a distant city.

"That deceitful old Henry Hammond is at the bottom of this," Grace decided. "He has probably put those ideas of dressing up into Marian's head. She needs some one to look after her. I'll ask mother if she can stay with me until her mother returns, that is if I can persuade her to come."

"Come out of your brown study, Grace," called Hippy. "I want you to settle an argument that has arisen between Miss O'Malley and myself. Never before have we had an argument. Timid, gentle creature that she is, she has always deferred to my superior intellect, but now—"

"Yes," retorted Nora scornfully, "now, he has been routed with slaughter, and so he has to call upon other people to rescue him from the fruits of his own folly."

"I am not asking aid," averred Hippy with dignity. "I plead for simple justice."

"Simple, indeed," interrupted David with a twinkle in his eye.

"I see very plainly," announced Hippy, "that I shall have to drop this O'Malley affair and defend myself against later unkind attacks. But first I shall eat my dessert, then I shall have greater strength to renew the fray."

"Then my services as a settler of arguments are not required," laughed Grace.

"Postponed, merely postponed," assured Hippy, and devoted himself assiduously to his dessert, refusing to be beguiled into further conversation.

Dinner over, the entire party repaired once more to the drawing room, where the young people performed for the judge's especial benefit the stunts for which they were already famous.

Much to Grace's annoyance, Henry Hammond attached himself to her, and try as she might she could not entirely rid herself of his attentions without absolute rudeness. Tom Gray looked a trifle surprised at this, and Marian Barber seemed openly displeased. Grace felt thoroughly out of patience, when toward the close of the evening, he approached her as she stood looking at a Japanese curio, and said:

"I wish to thank you, Miss Harlowe, for inviting me to become a member of this house party. I appreciate your invitation more than I can say."

"I hope you will enjoy yourself, Mr. Hammond," replied Grace rather coldly.

"There is little doubt of that," was the ready answer. "How well Marian is looking to-night. I am surprised at the difference a really grown-up gown makes in her."

Grace glanced at Marian, who in her eyes looked anything but well.

"Mr. Hammond," she said slowly, looking straight at him. "I do not in the least agree with you. Marian is not yet eighteen, and to-night she looks like anything but the school-girl that she did this afternoon. If her mother were at home I am sure that she would never allow Marian to have such a gown made, and I cannot fully understand what mischievous influence prompted her to make herself appear so utterly ridiculous to-night."

"Miss Harlowe," said the young man, his face darkening ominously, "your tone is decidedly offensive. Do I understand you to insinuate that I have in any way influenced Miss Barber as to her manner of dress?"

"I insinuate nothing," replied Grace, rather contemptuously. "If the coat fits you wear it."

"Miss Harlowe," answered the young man almost savagely, "I cannot understand why, after having included me in this house party, you deliberately insult me; but I advise you to be more

careful in the future as to your remarks or I shall be tempted to forget the courtesy due a young woman, and repay you in your own coin."

"Mr. Hammond," replied Grace with cold scorn, "I acknowledge that my last remark to you was exceedingly rude, but nothing can palliate the offense of your reply. As a matter of interest, let me state that I am not in the least alarmed at your threat, for only a coward would ever attempt to bully a girl."

With these words Grace moved quickly away, leaving Mr. Henry Hammond to digest her answer as best he might.

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS WITH JUDGE

It was Christmas Eve, and the great soft flakes of snow that fell continuously gave every indication of a white Christmas. The north wind howled and blustered through the tree tops, making the judge and his young guests congratulate themselves on being safely sheltered from the storm.

The day had been clear and cold, and the entire party had driven on bob-sleds to the strip of woods just outside the town, where the boys had cut down a Christmas tree, and had brought it triumphantly home, while the girls had piled the sleds with evergreens and ground pine. On the return a stop had been made at the market, and great quantities of holly had been bought. Even the sprig of mistletoe for the chandelier in the hall had not been forgotten.

"We'll hurry up and get everything ready before the judge comes in," planned Grace. "We'll put this mistletoe right here, and Nora, you must see to it that you lead him over until he stands directly under it. Then we will all surround him. Miriam, will you tell Miss Putnam? We want her to be in it, too."

The young folks worked untiringly and a little before five the last trail of ground pine was in place, and the decorators stood back and reviewed their work with pride.

The great hall and drawing room had been transformed into a veritable corner of the forest, and the red holly berries peeping out from the green looked like little flame-colored heralds of Christmas. Here and there a poinsettia made a gorgeous blot of color, while on an old-fashioned mahogany what-not stood an immense bowl of deep-red roses, the joint contribution of the Phi Sigma Tau.

"It looks beautiful," sighed Jessica, "we really ought to feel proud of ourselves."

The entire party was grouped about the big drawing room.

"I am always proud of myself," asserted Hippy. "In the first place there is a great deal of me to be proud of; and in the second place I don't believe in hiding my light under a bushel."

"Now Jessica, you have started him," said David with a groan. "He'll talk about himself for an hour unless Reddy and I lead him out."

"I dare you to lead me out," defied Hippy.

"I never take a dare," replied David calmly, making a lunge for Hippy. "Come on, Reddy."

Reddy sprang forward and Hippy was hustled out, chanting as he went:

"Now children do not blame me, for I have so
much to say,
That from myself I really cannot tear myself
away,"

and remained outside for the space of two minutes, when he suddenly reappeared wearing Grace's coat and Miriam Nesbit's plumed hat and performed a wild dance down the middle of the room that made his friends shriek with laughter.

"Hippy, when will you be good?" inquired Miriam, as she rescued her hat, and smoothed its ruffled plumes.

"Never, I hope," replied Hippy promptly.

"That's the judge's ring," cried Grace as the sound of the bell echoed through the big room, and the guests flocked into the hall to welcome their host.

"This is what I call a warm reception," laughed Judge Putnam, as he stood surrounded by laughing faces.

"I claim the privilege of escorting Judge Putnam down the hall," cried Nora, and she conducted him directly to where the mistletoe hung.

"I must be an object of envy to you young men," chuckled the judge, as he walked unsuspectingly to his fate.

"The mistletoe! The mistletoe! You're standing under the mistletoe!" was the cry and the seven girls and Miss Putnam joined hands and circled around the judge. Then each girl in turn stepped up and imprinted a kiss on the good old judge's cheek.



The Girls Circled Around the Judge.

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The Girls Circled Around the Judge

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the old gentleman, but there were tears in his blue eyes and his voice trembled as he said to his sister, who was the last to salute him, "It takes me back over the years, Mary."

It was a merry party that ran upstairs to dress for dinner that night, and the spirit of Christmas seemed to have settled down upon the judge's borrowed household.

The only thing that had dimmed Grace Harlowe's pleasure in the least was the passage at arms that had occurred between herself and Henry Hammond. Grace's conscience smote her. She felt that she should not have spoken to him as she had, even though she disliked him. To be sure, his remark about Marian's gown had caused her inwardly to accuse him of influencing Marian to make herself ridiculous in the eyes of her friends, but she could not forgive herself for having unthinkingly spoken as she had done.

After due reflection Grace decided that she had acted unwisely, and made up her mind that she would try to make amends for her unkind retort. She decided, however, to see if she could not persuade Marian to go back to her usual style of dress.

Grace hurried through her dressing, and looking very sweet and wholesome in her dainty blue organdie, knocked at the door of the room occupied by Marian and Eva Allen.

"Come in," cried Eva's voice, and Grace entered, to find Eva completely dressed in a pretty white pongee, eyeing with great disfavor the tight-fitting princess gown of black silk that the maid was struggling to hook Marian into.

"Marian!" exclaimed Grace. "What ever made you have a black evening gown? It makes you look years older than you are."

"That's exactly what I told her," said Eva Allen, "but she won't believe it."

Marian looked sulky, then said rather sullenly: "I really can't see what difference it makes to you girls what I wear. I haven't interfered with you in the matter of your gowns, have I?"

"No," replied Grace truthfully, "but Marian, I think the judge likes to see us in the simple evening dresses we have been accustomed to wearing, and as we are his guests we ought to try and please him. Besides, you would look so much better in your white embroidered dress, or your pink silk, that you wore to commencement last year."

"I don't agree with, you at all," replied Marian so stiffly that the maid smiled openly, as she put the final touches to Marian's hair preparatory to adjusting the cluster of puffs that had completed her astonishing coiffure the night before. "Furthermore, I have been assured by persons of extreme good taste that my new gowns give me a distinct individuality I have never before possessed."

"That person of extreme good taste is named Hammond," thought Grace. "That remark about 'individuality' sounds just like him. I'll make one more appeal to her."

Going over to where Marian stood viewing herself with satisfaction in the long mirror, Grace slipped her arm around her old friend.

"Listen, dear," she coaxed, "we mustn't quarrel on Christmas Eve. You know we are all Phi Sigma Taus and it seems so strange to see you looking so stately and grown up. Put on your white dress to-night, just to please me."

But Marian drew away from her, frowning angrily. "Really, Grace," she exclaimed, "you are too provoking for any use, and I wish you would mind your own business and let me wear what I choose."

"Please pardon me, Marian," said Grace, turning toward the door. "I am sorry to have troubled you," and was gone like a flash.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Marian Barber!" burst forth Eva. "The idea of telling Grace to mind her own business! You haven't been a bit like yourself lately, and I know that it's all on account of that Henry Hammond, the old snake."

"You will oblige me greatly, Eva, by referring more respectfully to my friend, Mr. Hammond," said Marian with offended dignity. Then she sailed out of the room, her train dragging half a yard behind her, while Eva turned to the mirror with a contemptuous sniff and powdered her little freckled nose almost savagely before following her irate roommate down stairs.

CHAPTER XI

SANTA CLAUS VISITS THE JUDGE

The moment that dinner was over the judge was hustled into the library by Nora and Miriam, and informed by them that they constituted a committee of two to amuse him until eleven o'clock. He was their prisoner and they dared him to try to escape.

Next to Grace, Nora, with her rosy cheeks and ready Irish wit was perhaps the judge's favorite, while he had a profound admiration for stately Miriam; so he was well satisfied with his captors, who triumphantly conducted him to the drawing room, where Miriam played and Nora sang Irish ballads with a delicious brogue that completely captivated the old gentleman.

At eleven o'clock there was a great jingling of bells and into the room dashed Santa Claus, looking as fat and jolly as a story-book Kris Kringle.

"Merry Christmas," he cried in a high squeaky voice. "It's a little early to wish you Merry Christmas, judge, but I've an engagement in China at midnight so I thought I'd drop in here a trifle early, leave a few toys for you and your little playmates and be gone. I always make it a point to remember good little boys. So hurry up, everybody, and follow me, for I haven't long to stay."

With these words Kris Kringle dashed through the hall followed by the judge who, entering fully into the spirit of the affair, seized Nora and Miriam by the hand and the three raced after their strange visitor at full speed, catching up with him at the door of the dining room which was closed. Here Santa Claus paused and gave three knocks on the oak door.

"Who is there?" demanded a voice, that sounded like David Nesbit's.

"Kris Kringle and three good children."

"Enter into the realm of Christmas," answered the voice, and the door was flung open.

The sight that greeted them was sufficiently brilliant to dazzle their eyes for a moment. In one corner of the dining room stood the great tree, radiant with gilt and silver ornaments. At the top was a huge silver star, while the branches were wound with glittering tinsel, and heavily laden with beribboned bundles of all shapes and sizes, while the space around the base of the tree was completely filled with presents.

At one side of the tree stood a graceful figure clad in a white robe that glittered and sparkled as though covered with diamonds. She wore a gilt crown on her head and carried a scepter, while over her shoulder trailed a long garland of holly fastened with scarlet ribbons. It was Grace Harlowe in a robe made of cotton wadding thickly sprinkled with diamond dust, gotten up to represent the spirit of Christmas.

On the other side of the tree lay old Father Time, apparently fast asleep, his sickle by his side.

His long white cotton beard flowed realistically down to his waist, and in his folded hands was a placard bearing these words, "Gone to sleep for the next hundred years," while in the opposite corner his sister and the rest of the guests had grouped themselves, and as the old gentleman stepped over the threshold, a chorus of laughing voices rang out:

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!"

Then Grace glided forward and escorted the judge to a sort of double throne that had been improvised from two easy chairs raised to a small platform constructed by the boys, and draped with the piano cover, and a couple of silken curtains, while Santa Claus performed the same office for Miss Putnam.

After they had been established with great pomp and ceremony, Santa Claus awoke Father Time by shaking him vigorously, apologizing to the company between each shake for doing so, and promising to put him to sleep the moment the festivities were over.

Then the fun of distributing the presents began, and for the next hour a great unwrapping and rattling of papers ensued, mingled with constant exclamations of surprise and delight from all present, as they opened and admired their gifts.

The judge was particularly pleased with the little personal gifts that the girls themselves had made for him, and exclaimed with the delight of a schoolboy as he opened each one. At last nothing remained save one rather imposing package.

"This must be something very remarkable," said the judge, as he untied the bow of scarlet ribbon and unwrapped the folds of tissue paper, disclosing a cut glass inkstand, with a heavy silver top, on which were engraved his initials in block letters.

There was a general murmur of admiration from all.

"Very fine, very fine," said the judge, picking up the card which read, "Merry Christmas, from Miss Barber."

"Miss Barber?" he repeated questioningly. Then it dawned upon him that this expensive gift was from one of his guests.

"Pardon me, my dear," he said turning to Marian, who looked half complacent, half embarrassed. "I am an old man and don't always remember names as well as I should. The beauty of your gift quite overcame me. Allow me to thank you and express my appreciation of it."

Marian smiled affectedly at the judge's words, in a manner so foreign to her former, blunt, good-natured self, that the girl chums watched her in silent amazement.

But the judge's inkstand was merely the fore-runner of surprises. A sudden cry from Grace attracted the attention of the others.

"Why, Marian Barber, what made you do it?"

Then other exclamations followed in quick succession as the Phi Sigma Taus rushed over to her in a body, each carrying a jeweler's box.

"You shouldn't have been so generous, Marian," said Grace. "I never dreamed of receiving this beautiful gold chain."

"Just look at my bracelet!" cried Jessica.

"And my lovely ring!" put in Nora.

"Not half so fine as my silver purse," commented Anne.

Miriam Nesbit was the recipient of a cut glass powder box with a silver top, while Eva Allen was in raptures over a gold chatelaine pin, that more than once she had vainly sighed for.

Even the boys had been so well remembered that they felt rather embarrassed when they compared their simple gifts to Marian with those she had given them. As for Mr. Henry Hammond, he had received a complete toilet set mounted in silver that was truly a magnificent affair, while Marian proudly exhibited a gold chain and locket set with small diamonds, which she had received from him.

When the last package had been opened, Santa Claus removed his huge white beard, slipped out of his scarlet bath robe bordered with cotton and stood forth as Hippy Wingate; while Father Time set his sickle carefully up in one corner, divested himself of his flowing beard and locks, took off David's gray dressing gown and appeared as Tom Gray.

It was long after midnight before the guests sought their rooms, their arms piled with gifts.

"Come into my room for an after-gathering," said Miriam to the girls, as they stood in a group at the head of the stairs.

"Wait until we deposit our spoils and get comfy," said Grace.

Fifteen minutes later the Phi Sigma Taus, with the exception of Marian Barber, wrapped in kimonos, were monopolizing the floor space around the big open fireplace in Miriam's room.

"Where's Marian?" asked Grace.

"Gone to bed," answered Eva laconically. "She said she didn't propose to stay up half the night to gossip."

"The very idea!" exclaimed Jessica. "We never do gossip, but I think she has furnished plenty of material so far for a gossiping match."

"And it looks as though we were in a fair way to start one, now," said Anne slyly.

"Anne, you rascal," said Jessica laughing. "I'll acknowledge my sins and change the subject."

"My presents were all beautiful!" said Miriam Nesbit, who, clad in a kimono of cream-colored silk bordered with red poppies, her long black braids hanging far below her waist, looked like a princess of the Orient.

"And mine," echoed Grace. "The chain Marian gave me is a dear."

She stopped abruptly. A sudden silence had fallen upon the group at her words. Grace instantly divined that in the minds of her friends there lurked a secret disapproval of Marian's extravagance in the matter of gifts.

CHAPTER XII

THE MISTLETOE BOUGH

After breakfast the next morning the judge proposed a sleigh ride, and soon the entire party were skimming over the ground in two big old-fashioned sleighs. Though the day was fairly cold, the guests were too warmly wrapped to pay any attention to the weather, and keenly enjoyed every moment of the ride.

After lunch a mysterious council took place in the library, and directly after a visit was made to the attic, Grace having received permission to rummage there. Later Reddy and Tom Gray were seen staggering down the stairs under the weight of a huge cedar chest, and later still the girls hurried down, their arms piled high with costumes of an earlier period.

Christmas dinner was to be a grand affair, and the judge had invited half a dozen friends of his own age to share "his borrowed children."

The girls had saved their prettiest gowns for the occasion, and the boys had put on evening dress. The judge viewed them with unmistakable pride as they stood grouped about the drawing room, awaiting the announcement of dinner. An almost imperceptible frown gathered between his brows, however, as his eyes rested upon Marian Barber, who was wearing a fearfully and wonderfully made gown of gold-colored silk, covered with spangles, that gave her a serpentine effect, and made her look ten years older than the other girls.

On going upstairs to dress, Marian had asked Eva Allen if she objected to dressing with Miriam Nesbit, and Eva had obligingly taken her belongings into Miriam's room after obtaining the latter's permission to do so. Marian had engaged the attention of Miss Putnam's maid for the greater part of an hour, and when she did appear the varied expressions upon the faces of her friends plainly showed that she had succeeded in creating a sensation.

"For goodness sake, what ails Marian!" growled Reddy Brooks in an undertone to David. "Can't the girls make her see that she looks like a fright beside them?"

"Anne told me that Grace and Eva have both talked to her," replied David in guarded tones. "Grace thinks Hammond has put this grown-up idea into her head."

"Humph!" growled Reddy in disgust. "She used to be a mighty pleasant, sensible girl, but lately she acts like a different person. I don't think much of that fellow Hammond. He's too good to be true."

"What have we here?" whispered Hippy to Nora under cover of general conversation. "I never before saw so many spingles and spangles collected in one spot."

"Sh-h-h!" pleaded Nora. "Don't make me laugh, Hippy. Marian is looking this way, and she'll be awfully cross if she thinks we are making sport of her."

"She reminds me of a song I once heard in a show which went something like this," and Hippy naughtily sang under his breath:

"My well-beloved circus queen,
My human snake, my Angeline!"

There was a queer choking sound from Nora and she walked quickly down to the other end of the drawing room and earnestly fixed her gaze upon a portrait of one of the judge's ancestors, until she could gain control of her risibles.

The dinner was a memorable one to both the judge and his guests, and it was after nine o'clock before the last toast had been drunk in fruit punch. Then every one repaired again to the drawing room.

Shortly after, Grace, Anne, Nora, Jessica, Eva and Miriam, accompanied by David, Tom, Hippy and Reddy disappeared, closing the massive doors between the drawing room and the wide hall. Half an hour later Arnold Evans announced that all those wishing to attend the pantomime, "The Mistletoe Bough," could obtain front seats in the hall.

There was a general rush for the hall where the spectators found rows of chairs arranged at one end.

Hardly had they seated themselves when the first notes of that quaint old ballad, "The Mistletoe Bough," sounded from the piano in the drawing room, Nora O'Malley appeared in the archway, and in her clear, sweet voice sang the first verse of the song.

As she finished, the strains of a wedding march were heard, and from the room at the opposite side of the hall came a wedding procession.

Anne, as the bride, was attired in an old-time, short-waisted gown of white satin with a long lace veil, yellow with age, while David in a square-cut costume with powdered wig, enacted the part of the bridegroom. Arnold Evans was the clergyman, Grace and Tom the parents of the bride, while Reddy, Jessica, Hippy and Eva were the wedding guests.

All were garbed in the fashion of "ye olden time," the boys in wigs and square cuts, the girls in short-waisted, low-necked gowns, with hair combed high and powdered.

Then the ceremony was performed in pantomime and the bride and groom received the congratulations of their friends. The groom bowed low over the bride's hand and led her to the center of the hall. The other couples formed in line behind them and a stately minuet was danced.

While the minuet was in progress the bride suddenly stopped in the midst of the figure and professing weariness of the dance, ran out of the room, after signifying to her husband and guests that she would hide, and after a brief interval they should seek for her.

Entering into her fun, the young husband and guests smilingly lingered a moment after her departure, and then ran eagerly off to find her. This closed the scene, and Nora again appeared and sang the next verse.

The cedar chest, brought from the attic by the boys, had been set on the broad landing at the turn of the open staircase, and in the next scene Anne appeared, alone, and discovering the chest climbed gleefully into it and drew the lid down.

Then followed the vain search for her and the deep despair of the young husband at the failure to find his bride, with the final departure of the wedding guests, their joy changed to sorrow over the bride's mysterious disappearance.

There was a brief wait until the next scene, during which another verse of the ballad was sung. Then the husband, grown old, appeared and in pantomime reviewed the story of the strange vanishing of his beautiful bride on her wedding night so many years before. In the next scene two servants appeared with orders to clean out and remove the old chest from the landing. Hippy and Jessica, as the two mischievous prying servants, enacted their part to perfection. Hippy carrying a broom and dust pan, did one of the eccentric dances, for which he was famous, while Jessica, armed with a huge duster, tried to drive him to work.

Finally both lay hold of the old chest, the rusted lock broke and the lid flew open. After one look both servants ran away in terror, and beckoned to the forsaken husband who had appeared in the meantime, seating himself on the oak settee in the lower hall. With eager gestures they motioned him to the landing where the old chest stood. The final tableau, depicted the stricken husband on his knees beside the chest with a portion of the wedding veil in his shaking hands, while the servants, ignorant of the story of the lost bride, looked on in wonder.

During the last tableau Nora softly sang the closing verse and the refrain. Even after the last note had died away the spectators sat perfectly still for a moment. Then the applause burst forth and David bowing in acknowledgment, turned and helped Anne out of the chest, where she had lain quietly after hiding.

The chest had been set with the side that opened toward the wall. While planning for the pantomime the boys had arranged the lid so that it did not close, yet the opening was not perceptible to those seated below. Thus there had been no danger of Anne meeting the fate of the ill-starred Ginevra, the heroine of the ballad.

"You clever children," cried the old judge. "How did you ever get up anything like that on such short notice? It was beautifully done. I have always been very fond of 'The Mistletoe Bough.' My sister used to sing it for me."

"Grace thought of it," said Anne. "We found all those costumes up in the garret in the old cedar chest. We knew the story by heart, and we knew the minuet. We danced it at an entertainment in Oakdale last winter. We had a very short rehearsal this afternoon in the garret and that's all."

"Anne arranged the scenes and coached David in his part of the pantomime," said Grace. "She

did more than I."

The judge's guests, also, added their tribute of admiration to that of the judge.

"It was all so real. I could scarcely refrain from telling that poor young husband where his bride had hidden herself," laughed one old gentleman.

"Why don't you children have a little dance?" asked the judge. "This hall ought to make a good ball room, and you can take turns at the piano."

"Oh, may we, Judge?" cried Grace in delight. "I am simply dying to have a good waltz on this floor."

"I'll play for you for a while," volunteered Miriam, "then Eva and Jessica can take my place."

Five minutes later the young folks were gliding about the big hall to the strains of a Strauss' waltz, while the judge and his friends looked on, taking an almost melancholy pleasure in the gay scene of youthful enjoyment.

"Will you dance the next waltz with me, Miss Harlowe!" said Henry Hammond to Grace, as she sat resting after a two-step.

After a second's hesitation Grace replied in the affirmative. Despite her resolve to make peace with him, up to that moment Grace had been unable to bring herself to the point of speaking pleasantly to him.

The waltz began, and as they glided around the room she was obliged to acknowledge herself that Henry Hammond's dancing left nothing to be desired.

"Perhaps my impressions of him are unjust, after all," thought Grace. "I suppose I have no right to criticize him so severely, even though he was rude to me the other night. I was rude, too. Perhaps he will turn out—"

But Grace's reflections were cut short by her partner, who had stopped in the center of the hall.

"Miss Harlowe," he said with a disagreeable smile, "you are standing directly under the mistletoe. I suppose you know the penalty."

Grace looked at him with flashing eyes. "Mr. Hammond," she replied, flushing angrily, "you purposely halted under the mistletoe, and if for one minute you think that you can take advantage of a foolish tradition by so doing you are mistaken. When we girls coaxed Judge Putnam under the mistletoe the other night, it was merely with the view of offering a pretty courtesy to an elderly gentleman. None of our boys would think of being so silly, and I want you to distinctly understand that not one of our crowd is given to demonstrations of that sort."

"Miss Harlowe," replied Henry Hammond between his teeth, "you are an insolent, ill-bred young woman, and it is plain to be seen that you are determined to misconstrue my every action and incur my enmity. So be it, but let me warn you that my hatred is no light matter."

"Your friendship or your enmity are a matter of equal indifference to me, Mr. Hammond," answered Grace, and with a cool nod she crossed the room and joined Nora and Hippy, who were sitting on the stairs playing cats' cradle with the long silver chain of Nora's fan.

CHAPTER XIII

TOM AND GRACE SCENT TROUBLE

The time passed all too rapidly, and with many expressions of regret on both sides the judge and his youthful guests parted, two days before the New Year.

On account of the house party the Phi Sigma Tau had been obliged to postpone until New Year's Day entertaining as they had done the previous year the stray High School girls who were far from home. Therefore, the moment they arrived in Oakdale they found their hands full.

Mrs. Gray had been in California with her brother since September, and the girls greatly missed the sprightly old lady. It was the first Christmas since they had entered High School that she had not been with them, and they were looking forward with great eagerness to her return in February.

Julia Crosby, who was at Smith College, had accepted an invitation from her roommate to spend the holidays in Boston, much to Grace's disappointment, who had reckoned on Julia as one of the judge's house party.

New Year's Day the Phi Sigma Tau nobly lived up to their reputation as entertainers of those girls who they had originally pledged themselves to look out for, but New Year's Night the four girl chums had reserved for a special gathering which included the "eight originals" only. It was Miriam who had made this possible by inviting Eva Allen, James Gardiner, Arnold Evans, Marian Barber, and much against her will, Henry Hammond, to a dinner.

"Don't feel slighted at being left off my dinner list," she said to Grace, then added slyly, "Why don't the eight originals hold forth at Nora's?"

"You're a positive dear, Miriam," Grace replied. "We have been wanting to have an old-time frolic, but didn't wish to seem selfish and clannish."

"Opportunity is knocking at your gate, get busy," was Miriam's advice, which Grace was not slow to follow.

"At last there are signs of that spread that I was promised at the bazaar," proclaimed Hippy Wingate cheerfully, as attired in a long gingham apron belonging to Nora's elder sister, he energetically stirred fudge in a chafing dish and insisted every other minute that Nora should try it to see if it were done.

"You'll have to stir it a lot, yet," Nora informed him.

"But I'm so tired," protested Hippy. "I think Tom or Reddy might change jobs with me."

"Not so you could notice it," was the united reply from these two young men who sat with a basket of English walnuts between them and did great execution with nut crackers, while Anne and David separated the kernels from their shells.

The eight originals had repaired to the O'Malley kitchen immediately after their arrival, and were deep in the preparation of the spread, long deferred.

Grace stood by the gas range watching the chocolate she was making, while Nora and Jessica sat at a table making tiny sandwiches of white and brown bread with fancy fillings.

"This spread will taste much better because we've all had a hand in it," remarked David, as he handed Nora a dish of nut kernels, which she dropped into the mixture over which Hippy labored.

"I never fully realized my own cleverness until to-night," said Hippy modestly. "My powers as a fudge maker are simply marvelous."

"Humph!" jeered David, "you haven't done anything except stir it, and you tried to quit doing that."

"But no one paid any attention to my complaints, so I turned out successfully without aid," retorted Hippy, waving his spoon in triumph.

"Stop talking," ordered Nora, "and pour that fudge into this pan before it hardens."

"At your service," said Hippy, with a flourish of the chafing dish that almost resulted in sending its contents to the floor, and elicited Nora's stern disapproval.

"How fast the time has gone," remarked David to Anne. "Just to think that it's back to the college for us to-morrow."

"It will seem a long time until Easter," replied Anne rather sadly.

"And still longer to us," was David's answer.

"Oh, I don't know about that," put in Grace, who had heard the conversation. "I think it is always more lonely for those who are left behind. Oakdale will seem awfully dull and sleepy. We can't play basketball any more this year on account of the loss of the gym., and we seniors are going to give a concert instead of a play. So there are no exciting prospects ahead. There will be no class dances as we have no place to dance, unless we hire a hall, and we never have money enough for that."

"How about the five hundred dollars the judge sent?" asked Reddy.

"Oh, we have decided not to touch that. The money we take in at the concert will be added to it," said Nora. "That will be two entertainments for the seniors, and we think that is enough. We want the other classes to have a chance to make some money, too."

"If we only had the bazaar money that was stolen," said Anne regretfully.

"Strange that no trace of the thief was ever found," remarked David. "I know that my wrist was lame for a week from the twist that rascal gave it."

"I have always had a curious conviction that the man who took that money had been traveling around in the hall all evening," said Anne thoughtfully. "Whoever it was, he must have seen Grace deposit the money in the box, and he also knew the exact location of the switch."

"One would imagine the box too heavy to have been spirited away so easily," said Tom Gray. "The weight of all that silver must have been considerable."

"Yes, it did weigh heavily," replied Grace. "Still, we had a great many bills, too. In spite of the weight the thief did make a successful get away, and we owe Judge Putnam a heavy debt of gratitude for making good our loss."

"Look not mournfully into the past," quoted Hippy, "but rather turn your attention to the important matter of refreshing the inner man."

"You fixed your attention on that matter years ago, Hippopotamus," said Reddy, "and since then

you've never turned it in any other direction."

"Which proves me to be a person of excellent judgment and unqualified good taste," answered Hippy with a broad grin.

"More taste than judgment, I should say," remarked David.

"This conversation is becoming too personal," complained Hippy. "Excuse me, Nora, use that Irish wit of yours and lay these slanderers low."

"I am neither a life preserver nor a repairer of reputations," replied Nora cruelly. "Fight your own battles."

"All right, here goes," said Hippy. "Now Reddy Brooks and David Nesbit, I said, that what you said, and formerly have said to have said, was said, because you happened to have said something that I formerly was said to have said that never should have been said. What I really said—"

But what Hippy really did say was never revealed, for David and Reddy laid violent hands upon their garrulous friend and, escorting him to the kitchen door, shoved him outside and calmly locking the door, left him to meditate in the back yard, until Nora suddenly remembering that she had set the fudge on the steps to cool, opened the door in a hurry to find Hippy seated upon the lower step, a piece of fudge in either hand, looking the picture of content.



Hippy Sat With a Piece of Fudge in Either Hand.

Hippy Sat With A Piece of Fudge in Either Hand

The party broke up at eleven o'clock, and the hard task of saying good-bye began. The boys were to leave early the next morning, so the girls would not see them again until Easter.

"Don't forget to write," called Nora after Hippy, as he hurried down the steps after the others, who had reached the gate.

"You'll hear from me as soon as we hit the knowledge shop," was the reassuring answer.

At the corner the little party separated, Hippy, Reddy and Jessica going in one direction, Anne and David in another, leaving Tom and Grace to pursue their homeward way alone. As they turned into Putnam Square, Grace gave a little exclamation, and seizing Tom by the arm, drew him behind a statue of Israel Putnam at the entrance of the square.

"Marian Barber is coming this way with that horrid Henry Hammond," she whispered. "I don't care to meet them. I have not spoken to him since the house party, and Marian will be so angry if I cut him deliberately when he is with her. I am sure they have not seen us. They were invited to Miriam's to-night. We'll stand here until they pass."

The two young people stood in the shadow quietly waiting, unseen by the approaching couple, who were completely absorbed in conversation.

"I tell you I can't do it," Grace heard Marian say impatiently. "It doesn't belong to me, and I have no right to touch it."

Hammond's reply was inaudible, but it was evident that Marian's remark had angered him, for he grasped her by the arm so savagely that she cried out: "Don't hold my arm so tightly, Henry, you are hurting me. I am not foolish to refuse to give it to you. Suppose you should lose it all—"

They had passed the statue by this time, and Grace and Tom heard no more of their conversation. There was a brief silence between them, then Grace spoke.

"Tom, what do you suppose that means?"

"I don't know, Grace," was the answer. "It didn't sound very promising."

"I should say not," said Grace decidedly. "I feel sure that Henry Hammond is a thoroughly unscrupulous person, and I shall not rest until I find out what the conversation we overheard leads to."

"I believe you are right," said Tom, "and I'm only sorry I can't be here to help ferret the thing out."

"I'll write and keep you posted as to my progress," promised Grace, as she said good-bye to Tom at the Harlowe's door, a little later.

"Good-bye, Tom. Best wishes to Arnold. I'm sorry I didn't see him again."

"Good-night, Grace, and good-bye," said Tom, and with a hearty handshake they parted.

As Grace prepared for bed that night she turned Marian's words over and over in her mind, but could arrive at no logical conclusion, and finally dropped to sleep with the riddle still unsolved.

CHAPTER XIV

GRACE AND ANNE PLAN A STUDY CAMPAIGN

With the delights of the past holiday season still fresh in their memories, the pupils of Oakdale High School went back to their studies on the fourth of January, and in the course of a few days everything was again in smooth running order.

Semi-annual examinations were but three weeks away, and that meant a general brushing up in studies on the part of every pupil.

The senior class had, perhaps, less to do in the way of study than the three lower classes. A few of the seniors already had enough credits to insure graduation, although the majority expected the results of the January examinations to place them securely among the number to be graduated.

The members of the Phi Sigma Tau, with the exception of Anne, were among the latter, and had settled down to a three weeks' grind, from which no form of pleasure could beguile them.

As for Anne, she had carried five studies the entire time she had been in High School and had never failed in even one examination. She might have graduated a year earlier had she been so disposed.

Away down in her heart Anne cherished a faint hope that the way for a college career would yet be opened to her. She had made up her mind to try for a scholarship, and she prayed earnestly that before the close of her senior year she might hit upon some plan that would furnish the money for her support during her freshman year in college.

Grace was optimistic in regard to Anne's college career.

"You'll have some opportunity to earn money before the year is out, just see if you don't," she said to Anne one day at recess, when the latter had developed an unusual case of the blues. "If you just keep wishing hard enough for a thing you are pretty sure to get it. That is, if it's something that's good for you to have."

"I've been wishing for the same thing ever since I came to Oakdale, and I haven't got it yet," replied Anne rather mournfully. "I've been unusually short of money this year, too, because Mrs. Gray has been away, and the money I received from her work was a great help."

"Poor little Anne," said Grace sympathetically. "I wish you didn't have to worry over money. However, Mrs. Gray will be home in February, and you'll have her work until June."

"But even so, I can't have the use of it myself," was Anne's response. "I shall have to use it at home. We need every cent of it."

"Oh, dear," sighed Grace. "Why doesn't some one appear all of a sudden and offer you a fine position at about fifty dollars a week."

"Yes," said Anne, laughing in spite of her blues. "That is what really ought to happen, only the day for miracles is past."

"At any rate, I have always felt that you and I were going to college together, and I believe we shall," predicted Grace.

"I hope so, but I doubt it," replied Anne wistfully. "By the way, Grace, do you recite in any of Marian Barber's classes?"

"No," said Grace, "not this term. Why?"

"She is in my section in astronomy," answered Anne, "and lately she fails every day in recitation. You know it's a one-term study, and she will have to try an exam in it before long. I don't believe she'll pass, and she told Nora at the beginning of the year that if she failed in one study this year she wouldn't have enough credits to get through and graduate."

"Oh, she'll pull through, I think," said Grace. "She is really brilliant in mathematics, and always has kept up in other things."

"I know," persisted Anne, "but she has finished her mathematics' group, and her studies this year are things she doesn't care for, and consequently left them until the last. We wouldn't want a Phi Sigma Tau to fail, you know."

"I should say not," was Grace's emphatic response. "What shall we do about it?"

Anne pondered for a little. "We might take turns coaching her. We have all passed in astronomy. I don't know how she is in her other studies," she said. "Do you suppose she'd be angry if we proposed it to her?"

"I don't know," said Grace doubtfully. "She hasn't been to the last two Phi Sigma Tau meetings, and she is awfully cool to me. That's because I don't approve of Henry Hammond. To tell you the truth, I believe he absorbs her attention so completely that she doesn't have time for her studies."

"It's a pity her mother is away just at the time when Marian needs her most," Anne remarked.

"Yes," said Grace. "You know I asked her to come and stay with me, when we came back from the judge's, but she refused rather sharply, and practically told me that she was able to take care of herself."

Just then the gong sounded, and the girls had no further opportunity to discuss the subject until school closed for the day, then while waiting in the locker-room for Nora and Jessica, the talk was again renewed, and after swearing Anne to secrecy, Grace imparted to her the conversation between Marian and Henry Hammond that she and Tom had overheard on New Year's Night.

"I was so uneasy about it that I went all around town the next day to see what I could find out about him. I didn't get much satisfaction, however. He claims to be a real estate agent, and Mr. Furlow in the First National Bank says that he has interested a number of Oakdale citizens in land in the west. He is well liked, and it's surprising the way the business men have taken him up," concluded Grace.

"Perhaps what you heard him say to Marian was nothing of importance after all," said Anne.

But Grace shook her head obstinately. "No, Anne," she answered, "my intuitions never fail me. Henry Hammond is a rascal, and some day I shall prove it. As for Marian we'd better have a meeting of the Phi Sigma Tau to-morrow night and especially request her to be present. Then we'll all turn in and offer to help her get ready for the exams. Here come the girls now."

Nora, Jessica, Miriam and Eva Allen entered the senior locker-room together.

"Where's Marian?" asked Grace.

"You'd never guess if we told you," exclaimed Nora. "I never was more surprised in my life."

"Why? What's the matter?" asked Anne and Grace together.

"Who is the last person you'd expect to see her with?" asked Jessica.

"I don't know," said Grace. "Edna Wright?"

"Worse," was Nora's answer. "She's up in the study hall with Eleanor Savelli."

"Eleanor Savelli?" echoed Grace. "Why she is Marian's pet aversion."

"Past history," said Miriam Nesbit. "They appear to be thicker than thieves."

"I don't at all understand what ails her, but listen, girls, while I tell you my idea," and Grace rapidly narrated her plan of action.

"I foresee trouble, but I'll be on hand," said Miriam.

"We'll all be there!" was the chorus.

"Remember, Eva," were Grace's parting words, "I rely on you to coax Marian over to your house, then we'll surround her and make her accept our services."

"All right," responded Eva. "I'll do my best. Be careful what you say about Henry Hammond, or your mission may be in vain."

CHAPTER XV

THE PHI SIGMA TAUS MEET WITH A LOSS

After considerable coaxing, Eva finally wrung from Marian a promise to visit her that evening. She arrived about eight o'clock, and Eva tactfully producing a box of nut chocolates, a confection of which Marian was very fond, the two girls seated themselves in the Allen's cozy sitting room, with the box on a taboret between them.

Marian became more like her old self again, and the two girls were laughing merrily over the antics of Eva's Angora kitten when the doorbell rang, and Eva, looking rather conscious, went to the door.

At the sound of girlish voices, Marian rose, a look of intense annoyance on her face, which deepened as the Phi Sigma Tau trooped into the room, and laughingly surrounded her.

"How are you, Marian?" they cried. "You wouldn't come to us, so we planned a little surprise."

"So I see," replied Marian stiffly. "I am sorry, but I really must go, Eva. You should have told me that the girls were coming."

"Why, Marian Barber, what are you talking about?" asked Nora O'Malley in pretended surprise. "Why should you run away from the members of your own sorority?"

Marian did not answer, but half tried to free herself from the detaining hands of her friends. For a moment her expression softened, then she tossed her head and said, "Let me go, please."

"Marian," said Grace bluntly, "you have been acting very strangely toward us since we came back from the house party, and we don't understand it. You have stayed away from two sorority meetings and have deliberately avoided all of us, with the exception of Eva. We feel badly over it, because we have always liked you, and because you are a Phi Sigma Tau."

"Yes, Marian," interrupted Jessica, "have you forgotten the solemn initiation rites that were conducted at my house last year?"

"No," Marian admitted, smiling a little.

"Then listen, while Anne, who speaks more impressive English than the rest of us, tells you why we have thus entrapped you and used Eva for a bait. Speechify, Anne, and we will put in the applause at the proper intervals."

"Marian," began Anne, "Grace has already told you how kindly our feeling is for you, and the reason that we tried to see you to-night is because of something that I spoke of to Grace yesterday. I had noticed that you were having trouble in your astronomy recitations, and, of course, we all know that you must pass in all your subjects, both now and in June, in order to graduate; so I suggested that as the other girls have all passed in astronomy, we might take turns in coaching you. An hour or so of review every night from now until the exams, would put you in good condition."

"Yes, Marian," interrupted Nora. "Anne and Jessica did that for me last year in ancient history, and I never should have passed if they hadn't helped me."

Marian stood silently looking from one girl to the other, then she said with a mixture of hurt pride, anger and obstinacy in her voice:

"I don't need your help. In fact, I think the less we see of each other in future the better it will be for us all. The past three months have caused me to have an entirely different opinion than I used to have of you girls. You are all very nice as long as things go your way, but if one happens to make a friend or hold an opinion contrary to your views, then the Phi Sigma Taus feel bound to step in and interfere."

"Here is my sorority pin, and I sincerely hope you will elect another girl to my place. She is welcome to both the pin and your friendship. I am thankful that this is my last year in High School."

"You are a foolish girl, Marian Barber," cried Nora, "and you'll wake up some morning and find yourself awfully sorry for what you've just said. You are the last person I should have suspected of being so ridiculous. Why we've all played together since we were kiddies."

Marian tried to look dignified and unrelenting, but for an instant her lip quivered suspiciously.

Anne seeing that Marian showed signs of wavering, crossed over to her side, and slipping her arm around the obstinate girl, said gently:

"Better think it over before you do any thing rash, dear. We are not trying in the least to interfere

in your affairs. You know the primary object of the Phi Sigma Tau is to help one another. We thought that you would be glad to have us coach you in astronomy. You know how thankful Grace was for your help in trigonometry last year."

Marian hesitated as though at loss for an answer to this direct appeal to her common sense. The girls watched her anxiously, hoping that Anne's words had bridged the difficulty.

"Come on, Marian," said Nora O'Malley briskly. "Here's your sorority pin. Put it on and forget that you ever took it off. You are too sensible to nurse an imaginary grievance. Don't behave as Eleanor Savelli did. You know—"

But Nora was not allowed to finish the sentence, for Marian whirled upon her with flashing eyes, her temporary softness disappearing entirely.

"I don't wish to hear one word against Eleanor Savelli," she cried wrathfully. "She is my friend, and I shall stand up for her."

"Your friend?" was the united exclamation.

"Yes, my friend," reiterated Marian stormily, "and she is a true friend, too. Last year she was initiated into your sorority, and then deliberately slighted and left out of all your plans until in justice to herself she resigned.

"This year you are behaving in the same way with me. You began it by criticizing my friend, Henry Hammond, and invited him to the judge's house party for the express purpose of humiliating and insulting him. The boys of your crowd gave him the cold shoulder when he tried to be friendly and Grace was insufferably rude to him on two different occasions.

"Then you criticized my gowns and made fun of me behind my back, when in reality I was the only one of you who was properly dressed. You left Mr. Hammond and I both out of the pantomime, and made us last in everything.

"I tried to forgive and forget it all, and be just the same to you, but the first thing that Nora did when we reached Oakdale was to invite part of the crowd to her house and leave the rest of us out, and I am surprised that neither Miriam nor Eva resented the slight."

Here Grace and Miriam could not refrain from exchanging amused glances, but to Marian, who intercepted their glances, this was the last straw.

Dashing the sorority pin which Nora had previously shoved into her hand to the floor, with a sob of mingled anger and chagrin she exclaimed:

"How dare you ridicule me to my very face! I never want to speak to any of you again, and I shall not stay here to be laughed at."

With these words she fairly ran out of the room, and before any one could expostulate with her, she had for the second time in three months rushed out of the house and away from her real friends.

"She is hopeless," sighed Grace, as they heard the outer door of the hall close noisily.

"Can you blame her?" said Anne earnestly. "She has been influenced all along by that Henry Hammond, and now she has fallen into Eleanor's hands. We know Eleanor's state of mind toward us, but why Henry Hammond should encourage Marian to break with her sorority is harder to understand. Yet he has undoubtedly used his influence against us for some purpose of his own. Marian's accusations are foolish and unjust. You all know that she was so engrossed with that miserable old trouble maker that she repeatedly refused to take part in the different things we planned."

"Of course, we know that," agreed Grace. "I don't even feel hurt at her outburst to-night. I wouldn't think of accepting her resignation from the Phi Sigma Tau, either. We won't try to make up with her, but we'll all keep a starboard eye upon her, and see that she doesn't come to grief."

"I had almost reduced her to reason," remarked Anne, with a rueful smile, "when Nora unfortunately mentioned Eleanor."

"Wasn't I an idiot, though?" asked Nora. "I forgot for the moment about having seen them together."

"I am going to turn detective," announced Grace.

"Are you going to detect or deduct?" asked Nora solemnly.

"Both," replied Grace confidently. "I am going to become a combination of Nick Carter and Sherlock Holmes, and my first efforts will be directed toward finding out who and what Mr. Henry Hammond really is."

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

Grace lost no time in putting her resolution into practice, and left no stone unturned regarding the object of her distrust. But her efforts met with no better success than the first time she had instituted inquiry.

"Why are you so bitter against that young man, daughter?" asked her father rather curiously when she interviewed him as to the best means of finding out something of Henry Hammond's past. "He seems to be a good straight-forward young fellow."

"He's a villain, I know he is," asserted Grace, "but he's too sharp for me."

"Nonsense," laughed her father. "Having no basketball this winter you are bound to devote that surplus energy of yours to something. Are you making Hammond your victim?"

"You may tease me if you like," replied Grace with dignity, "but some day you'll acknowledge that I was right."

"All right, girlie," smiled her father. "Shall I say so, now?"

"You're a dear," laughed Grace, rubbing her soft cheek against his. "Only you will tease."

Since the evening that Marian Barber had repudiated her sorority, none of the members had spoken to her. She had studiously avoided going within speaking distance of them and had divided her time after school equally between Eleanor Savelli and Henry Hammond.

Eleanor had kept her word in reference to Edna Wright, and the two girls exchanged only the barest civilities whenever they chanced to meet. Eleanor had, however, gained considerable popularity with a number of the senior class, and wielded a tremendous influence over them. She had dropped her annoying tactics toward the teachers, and her conduct during the year had been irreproachable.

Anne Pierson's assertion that Eleanor would be better off away from Edna had proved true, and unconsciously the spoiled, temperamental girl was receiving great benefit from her High School associations. She stood next to Anne Pierson in her classes, and her aptitude for study and brilliant recitations evoked the admiration of the entire class.

But despite these changes for the better, Eleanor still nursed her grudge against the Phi Sigma Tau, and held to her unrelenting resolve to be revenged upon them, individually or collectively, whenever the opportunity should arise.

In cautioning her friends the previous year against placing themselves in a position liable to put them at a disadvantage with Eleanor, Grace had unwittingly divined the former's intentions.

Now that Marian had strayed away from the Phi Sigma Tau and straight to their common enemy, Grace felt uneasy as to the result.

"I don't know what to think about Marian's sudden intimacy with Eleanor," she confided to Anne, one day at the beginning of the new term.

"So far nothing startling has happened," replied Anne. "Really, Eleanor happened along at a good time for Marian."

"Why did she?" asked Grace quickly.

"Because I understand that she coached Marian in astronomy and just simply made her cut out Henry Hammond for her books. It's due to Eleanor that she passed," answered Anne.

"I hadn't heard that," said Grace. "Isn't Eleanor a wonder in her studies? It's a pleasure to hear her recite."

"I do admire her ability," agreed Anne. "Perhaps she will see through Henry Hammond and persuade Marian to drop him."

"I don't know about that," said Grace dubiously. "I saw him with Eleanor in the run-about the other day. He was at the wheel, and they seemed to be having a very interesting session without Marian."

"He never did give me the impression of being a very constant swain," laughed Anne.

"I'm so glad that mid-year exams are over," sighed Grace. "I'm a sure enough graduate now, unless something serious happens."

"So am I," replied Anne. "If I could get clerical work to do this term I'd recite in the morning only and give my afternoons to earning a little money. It seems as though everything is against me. Did you know that Mrs. Gray has postponed coming home until March?"

"Yes," answered Grace. She understood Anne's growing despair as time went on, and the prospect of earning enough money to defray her college expenses grew less.

"I'm afraid I'll have to give it all up for next year at least, Grace," Anne's voice trembled a little. "But perhaps I can enter the year after. I can't give up the idea of being in the same college with you."

"Don't give up yet, dear," Grace pressed Anne's hand. "Maybe the unexpected will happen."

The girls separated at the corner and went their separate ways, Anne with the conviction that there was no use in wishing for the impossible and Grace deploring the fact that Anne was too proud to accept any help from her friends.

As Grace was about to curl herself up in a big chair before the fire that night with "Richard Carvel" in one hand and a box of peanut brittle in the other, she was startled by a loud ringing of the bell. Going to the door she beheld Anne who was fairly wriggling with excitement. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark eyes were like stars.

"Oh, Grace," she cried. "The unexpected has happened!"

"What are you talking about, Anne?" exclaimed Grace laughing. "Stop dancing up and down out there. Come in and explain yourself. That is if you can stand still long enough to do it."

"I have had the surprise of my life to-night, Grace," said Anne, as she entered the hall, while Grace unfastened her fur collar and pulled the pins from her hat. "I just couldn't wait until tomorrow to tell you about it. It's so wonderful I can't believe that it has happened to insignificant me."

"I know just as much now as I did at first, and perhaps a trifle less," said Grace.

Then taking Anne by the shoulders she marched her into the sitting room, shoved her into the easy-chair opposite her own and said, "Now, begin at the beginning, and don't leave out any details."

"Well," said Anne, drawing a long breath, "when I reached home after leaving you, I found a letter for me postmarked New York City. For an instant I thought it was from my father, but the hand writing was not his. I opened it, and who do you suppose it was from?"

"I don't know, and I'm a poor guesser, so tell me," responded Grace.

"It was from Mr. Everett Southard."

"No! Really?" cried Grace. "How nice of him to write to you."

"But I haven't told you the nicest part," continued Anne. "He wants me to go to New York to play a six-weeks' engagement in his company."

"Anne Pierson, you don't mean it," ejaculated Grace in intense astonishment.

"Grace Harlowe, I do mean it," retorted Anne. "Why it's the very opportunity that I've been yearning for, but never expected to get. Let me read you his letter."

Unfolding the letter that she had been holding in one hand, Anne read:

"MY DEAR MISS PIERSON:

"Remembering your exceptionally fine work as 'Rosalind' in the production of 'As You Like It,' given at your High School last year, I now write to offer you the same part in a six weeks' revival of the same play about to be presented in New York. Your acceptance will be a source of gratification to me, as it is very hard to engage actors who are particularly adapted to Shakespearian roles. The salary will be one hundred dollars per week with all traveling expenses paid.

"My sister extends a cordial invitation to you to make our home yours during your stay in New York, and will write you at once. I have already written Miss Tebbs regarding my offer. Hoping to receive an affirmative answer by return mail, with best wishes, I remain

"Yours sincerely,

"EVERETT SOUTHARD."

"Well, I should say the unexpected had happened," said Grace, as Anne finished reading. "One hundred dollars a week for six weeks! Why, Anne, think of it! You will have six hundred dollars for six weeks' work. I had no idea they paid such salaries."

"They pay more than that in companies like Mr. Southard's," replied Anne. "If I had acquired fame I could command twice that sum. I can't imagine why he ever chose me. Suppose I should fail entirely."

"Nonsense," retorted Grace. "You couldn't fail if you tried. The only thing that I am afraid of is that you'll be so carried away with the stage that you'll forget to come back to us again."

"Don't say that, Grace," said Anne quickly. "I never shall. I am wild to play this engagement, because it means that I am sure of at least two years in college, and I think if I can get tutoring to do, I can pull through the whole four. Aside from that, the stage is the last career in the world that I should choose. You know my views on that subject."

"I was only jesting, dear," Grace assured her, seeing the look of anxiety that crept into Anne's eyes. "I know you'll come back. We couldn't graduate without you. When shall you write to Mr. Southard?"

"I have already written," replied Anne gravely. "I knew that nothing could induce me to refuse, so I settled the matter at once."

"Confess, you bad child," said Grace, rising and putting one finger under Anne's chin. "Look me straight in the face and tell the truth. You thought I'd be shocked."

Anne colored, laughed a little and then said frankly, "Yes, I was afraid you wouldn't look at the matter in the same light. Now, I must go, because it is after nine and sister worries if I stay out late."

"Wait, I'll go to the corner with you," said Grace.

Slipping into her coat, and throwing a silk scarf over her head. Grace accompanied Anne into the street.

"Come as far as the next corner," begged Anne, and the two girls walked slowly on.

"Now I must go back," said Grace, as they neared the corner.

Just then Anne exclaimed very softly, "Look, Grace, isn't that Marian and her cavalier?"

"Where!" asked Grace, turning quickly.

"Across the street, coming in this direction. I do believe Marian is crying, too. They are crossing now, and will pass us. I don't think they've seen us yet."

Completely absorbed in their own affairs the approaching couple had not noticed either Grace or Anne.

"How could I have been so foolish!" the two girls heard Marian say tearfully.

"Don't be an idiot," her companion answered in rough tones. "You may win yet. I had inside information that it was safe to put the money on it. You act like a baby." Then he muttered something that was inaudible to the listeners.

"You are very unkind, Henry," wailed Marian.

But in the next instant Henry Hammond had seen the two girls. With a savage "cut it out, can't you! Don't let every one know your business," his scowling expression changed to the polite smiling mask that he habitually wore.

But Grace, who in spite of her former disagreement with him, had for Marian's sake favored him with a cool bow when he happened to cross her path even after Marian had stopped speaking, was up in arms at his display of rudeness to the girl who had cut herself off from her dearest friends to please him.

Marian averted her face as they passed opposite the chums, but her companion, who was preparing to bow, became suddenly disconcerted by the steady, scornful gaze of two pairs of eyes, that looked their full measure of contempt, and hastily turning his attention to Marian passed by without speaking.

"Contemptible coward!" raged Grace. "Did you hear what he said, Anne?"

"I should have cut his acquaintance on the spot."

"There is something queer about all this," mused Grace. "This is the second conversation of the sort that has taken place between those two that I have overheard. I wonder if he has persuaded Marian to put money into his real estate schemes, for I believe they are nothing but schemes."

"But Marian has no money of her own," protested Anne. "Don't you remember how delighted she was when she deposited the judge's check and received her first check book?"

"I wonder—"

Grace paused. A sudden suspicion entered her mind, that she instantly dismissed.

"You don't believe—" began Anne, but Grace stopped her.

"No, dear," she answered firmly. "We mustn't ever allow ourselves to entertain such a thought. Marian may have foolishly risked money of her own that we know nothing of, but as for anything else—Marian is still a member of our sorority and the honor of the Phi Sigma Tau is above reproach."

CHAPTER XVII

ANNE BECOMES FAMOUS

That Anne Pierson was to play a six weeks' engagement in New York under the management of the great Southard was a nine days' matter of wonder in Oakdale.

In spite of the fact that Anne tried to keep the news within her immediate circle of friends, it

spread like wildfire.

"You'll just have to let me tell it, Anne," laughed Nora O'Malley. "I can't keep it to myself."

Rather to Anne's surprise, there was little disapproval expressed in regard to her coming engagement. Those who had seen her enact "Rosalind" in the High School production of "As You Like It," fully described in "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," had been then convinced that her ability was little short of genius. But the interest of the thing deepened when the story crept about that this engagement meant a college career for her, and Anne became the idol of the hour.

"The whole town has gone mad over Anne," replied Jessica. "I expect to see a howling populace at the station when she leaves for New York to-morrow."

The three chums were seated upon the single bed in Anne's little room at the Pierson cottage, while Anne sat on the floor before an open trunk, busily engaged in packing.

"What shall we do without you!" lamented Grace. "Positively I have sorrowfully accompanied departing friends to the station so many times since school began that it's becoming second nature to me."

"Good-bye, forever; good-bye, forever," hummed Nora.

"Stop it instantly, Nora," commanded Grace. "Don't harrow my feelings until the time comes."

"Anne, you must write to us often," stipulated Jessica.

"Of course I shall," replied Anne. "Remember you are all coming down to see me, the very first Saturday that you can. I do hope the boys can make arrangements to be there at the same time."

"How lovely it was of Mrs. Gibson to suggest a theatre party and offer to chaperon us," said Nora.

"Everyone has been too sweet for anything," replied Anne, looking up from her task with a fond smile at the three eager faces of her friends.

"You didn't have the least bit of trouble about getting away from school, did you?" asked Jessica.

"No," replied Anne. "You see, I have enough counts to graduate now. I'm not depending on any of my June exams. I can easily make up the time when I come back."

"I imagine Marian Barber wishes that she hadn't been quite so hasty," said Nora. "She is going to miss an awfully nice trip."

"Perhaps we ought to send her an invitation," suggested Jessica.

"No, Jessica," said Grace gravely. "Marian must be the one to make advances. If she comes back to us, it must be of her own free will. We have done our part."

"Can we do anything to help you, Anne?" asked Grace.

"Yes," replied Anne, looking ruefully at the overflowing trunk. "You can all come over and sit upon this trunk. I never shall get the lid down any other way."

This having been successfully accomplished, the three girls took leave of Anne, who promised to be on hand for a final session that night at Grace's.

Before eight o'clock the next morning Anne departed for New York, laden with flowers, magazines and candy, bestowed upon her by the Phi Sigma Tau, who had risen before daybreak in order to be in time to see her off. She had purposely chosen an early train, as she wished to arrive in New York before the darkness of the winter evening closed in.

Mr. Southard and his sister were to meet her at the Jersey station, but careful little soul that she was, Anne decided that in case anything unforeseen arose to prevent their coming, she would have less difficulty in finding her way about in daylight.

"Take good care of yourself, Anne," commanded Nora, patting Anne on the shoulder.

"You do the same," replied Anne. "Don't forget that theatre party, either."

"We'll be there," Grace assured her, as she followed Anne up the aisle with her suit case. "By the way, Anne, here's my sweater. I thought you might need it during rehearsals. The stage is likely to be draughty."

"Grace Harlowe, you are too good to me," murmured Anne, as she reluctantly took the package that Grace thrust into her unwilling hands.

"All aboard," shouted the brakeman, and with a hasty kiss Grace hurried down the steps to join her friends, who stood on the station platform waving their farewells to the brown-eyed girl who was to separate from them for the first time since the beginning of their High School career.

The days slipped quickly away, and the girl chums heard frequently from Anne, who had arrived at her destination in safety, was met by the Southards and carried off to their comfortable home. She was enjoying every minute of her stay, she wrote them, and every one was very kind to her. Miss Southard was a dear, and she was looking forward to the visit of the Phi Sigma Tau with almost as much enthusiasm as Anne herself.

The boys had been duly informed of Anne's good fortune, and the Saturday of the third week of Anne's engagement had been the date fixed upon for the theatre party. Tom Gray would bring Arnold Evans. Hippy, David and Reddy would join them in New York. Then the five boys would repair to the hotel where the girls were to stop, accompanied by Mrs. Gibson and James Gardiner, who was again invited to make the number even.

Intense excitement prevailed in school when it was learned that the Phi Sigma Tau were to go to New York to see Anne as "Rosalind," and the five girls were carried upon the top wave of popularity.

Marian and Eleanor alone remained aloof, evincing no outward interest in the news, although both thought rather enviously of the good time in New York that awaited the girls they had repudiated.

The eventful Saturday came at last, and the five girls, chaperoned by Mrs. Gibson, with James Gardiner for a bodyguard, boarded the same express that had carried Anne off and were whirled away to the metropolis.

As soon as they arrived in New York they were conveyed by taxicabs to their hotel and on entering the reception room were hailed with delight by the boys, who had arrived only half an hour before. While they were busily engaged in exchanging news, Anne hurried in from a rehearsal, was seized by Grace, then passed from one to the other until, freeing herself, she said, laughing:

"Do let me stand still for a second. I haven't had a really good look at any of you yet."

"What do you mean by becoming a Shakespearian star without consulting me first!" demanded David, with mock severity, although there was a rather wistful look in his eyes as they looked into Anne's. David preferred to keep Anne the little High School girl he had known for the past three years. Theatrical stars were somewhat out of his firmament.

"Don't worry," Anne assured him. "It's only for three more weeks. I'll be back in Oakdale in plenty of time to finish up my senior year with the girls."

"Anne, you haven't any idea of how much we have missed you," cried Nora. "We can't get used to being without you."

"I've missed you, too," responded Anne who stood with Grace's arm around her, smiling lovingly at her little circle of friends.

"Of course I have had a good many rehearsals—one every day, and sometimes two—so the time has fairly raced by; but when the play is over and I am on the way home at night, then I think of all of you, and it seems as though I must take the next train back to Oakdale."

"Do let me talk," interposed Hippy, who had hitherto been devoting his attention to Nora. "No one knows how I long to be back in Oakdale, fair village of my birth, home of the chafing dish and the cheerful chocolate cream. 'Tis there that the friends of my youth flourish, and the grass green banner of O'Malley waves. Take me back; oh, take me—"

"You will be taken away back and set down with a jar in about two seconds if you are seized with another of those spells," promised Tom Gray, turning a withering glance upon Hippy.

"What sort of jar," asked Hippy, with an interested grin. "A cooky jar or merely a glass candy jar? Be sure you make it a full one."

"It will be a full one," replied Tom with emphasis, "and will last you for a long time."

"I don't believe I'll take up with your proposition," said Hippy hastily. "There is something about the tone of your voice that makes my spinal column vibrate with nervous apprehension. I think I had better confine my conversation strictly to Nora. She is sympathetic and also skilled in argument."

With this, he took Nora by the arm and would have marched her out of the group had she not protested so vigorously that he turned from her in disgust and began questioning James Gardiner as to how he managed to survive the journey and what methods he had used to insure good behavior on the part of his charges, much to the embarrassment of that youth, who was anything but a "ladies' man."

"My dear young people," finally said Mrs. Gibson, laughingly, "this impromptu reception is liable to last all night unless it is checked by a stern hand. It is almost five o'clock, and we haven't even seen our rooms yet. Besides, Anne will have to leave before long for the theatre. Let us hurry with our dressing, order an early dinner and keep Anne here for it. Shall you be able to stay?" she asked, turning to Anne.

"I think so," replied Anne. "I do not have to be in the theatre until after seven. But I am not dressed for dinner," she added, looking doubtfully at her street costume. "You see, I came straight from rehearsal."

"Never mind, Anne," interposed Grace, "you are a star, and stars have the privilege of doing as they choose. At least that's what the Sunday papers say. Miriam and I are going to room together. Come up with us."

Mrs. Gibson had engaged rooms ahead for her party, and the girls soon found themselves in very luxurious quarters, with a trim maid on hand to attend to their wants.

The boys had engaged rooms on the floor above that occupied by Mrs. Gibson and the Phi Sigma Tau. James Gardiner heaved a sigh of relief as he deposited his suit case beside Tom's in the room to which they had been assigned.

"Girls are an awful responsibility," he remarked gloomily, with a care-worn expression that made Tom shout with laughter. "I like them all right enough, but not in bunches."

By making a special effort, the party was ready by six o'clock to descend to dinner, which was served to them in a private dining room, Mrs. Gibson having thoughtfully made this arrangement, in order to give the young folks as much time together as possible.

They made a pretty picture as they sat at the round table, the delicate finery of the girls gaining in effect from the sombre evening coats of the boys. Mrs. Gibson, gowned in white silk with an overdress of black chiffon, sat at the head of the table and did the honors of the occasion.

"I feel frightfully out of place in this company of chivalry and beauty," Anne remarked, looking fondly about her at the friends whose presence told more plainly than words could have done the place she occupied in their hearts.

"Think how we shall fade into insignificance to-night when you hold forth with the great Southard," retorted Nora. "I shall consider myself honored by even a mere bow from you, after you have taken curtain calls before a New York audience."

"When I was with Edwin Booth," began Hippy reminiscently, "he often said to me, 'Hippy, my boy, my acting is nothing compared to yours. You are—'"

"A first cousin to Ananias and Sapphira," finished David derisively.

"Never heard of them," replied Hippy unabashed. "Not branches of our family tree. As I was saying—"

"Never mind what you were saying," said Nora in cutting tones. "Listen to me. It is seven o'clock. Anne must go, and in a taxicab, at that."

"Where shall we see you after the performance, dear?" asked Grace.

"Mr. Southard has obtained special permission for all of you to go behind the scenes after the play."

"How lovely!" cried the girls.

"My curiosity will at last be satisfied. I have always wanted to go behind the scenes of a New York theatre," remarked Mrs. Gibson.

"I have the dearest dressing room," said Anne, with enthusiasm. "Mr. and Miss Southard are going to carry you off to their house after the performance to-night. I almost forgot to tell you. So don't make any other plans."

"We are in the hands of our friends," said Hippy, with an exaggerated bow.

"You'll be in the hands of the law if you don't mend your ways," prophesied Reddy. "If we get you safely into the theatre without official assistance it will surprise me very much."

"Reddy, you amaze me," responded Hippy reproachfully. "I may make mistakes, but I am far from lawless. Neither do I flaunt the flame colored signal of anarchy every time I remove my hat."

There was a burst of good-natured laughter at Reddy's expense. His red hair was as common a subject of joke as was Hippy's behavior.

"That was a fair exchange of compliments," said Tom Gray. "Now forget it, both of you."

"Good-bye, every one, until eleven o'clock," cried Anne, who, knowing that she would be obliged to hurry away, had brought her wraps to the dining room with her.

David accompanied Anne to the entrance of the hotel, put her in a taxicab and walked into the hotel, hardly knowing whether he were glad or sorry that Anne had had greatness thrust upon her.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE THEATRE PARTY

It was a very merry party that took possession of the box that Mr. Southard had placed at their disposal and waited with ill-concealed impatience for the rise of the curtain.

Anne's friends had thought her the ideal "Rosalind" in the High School production of the piece, but her powers as an actress under the constant instruction of Everett Southard had increased

tenfold. His own marvelous work was a source of inspiration to Anne, and from the instant that she set foot upon the stage until the final fall of the curtain she became and was "Rosalind."

Thrilling with pride as she eagerly watched Anne's triumph, Grace was in a maze of delight, and every round of applause that Anne received was as music to her ears. David, too, was more deeply moved than he liked to admit even to himself. In his own heart he had a distinct fear that in spite of her assertions to the contrary, Anne might after all yield to the call of her talent and seek a stage career. During the evening he became so unusually grave and silent that Grace, having an inkling of what was passing in his mind, leaned over and said:

"Don't worry, David, she won't. I am sure of it. Her mind is fixed upon college."

David drew a long breath of almost relief. "I believe it if you say so, Grace; it has worried me a lot, however. She is such a wonderful little actress."

"Nevertheless, take my word for it, she won't," was the assuring answer.

After the play was over, the visit behind the scenes being next on the programme, Mrs. Gibson and her charges were conducted through a long passage to the back of the house. The boys were taken to Mr. Southard's dressing room, and Mrs. Gibson and the five girls to Anne's.

There were many exclamations over the cosy dressing room which Anne occupied. As is the case in most of the recently built theatres, the star's dressing room had been comfortably furnished and was in direct comparison to the cheerless, barn-like rooms that make life on the road a terror to professional people.

"You see, I have had you right with me," smiled Anne, who was seated at a dressing table taking off her make-up with cold cream. She pointed to a photograph that the Phi Sigma Tau had had taken the previous summer.

"Only one face missing to-night," said Grace in low tones as she drew her chair close to Anne's.

"Have you found out anything else?" asked Anne in the same guarded tones.

"Nothing very important," replied Grace. "Marian and Henry Hammond have had some sort of quarrel. Nora saw them pass the other day without speaking."

"That's a step in the right direction", said Anne. "Once she has dropped him for good and all, she'll begin to see her own folly. Then she'll come back and be her old self again."

"I hope so," sighed Grace.

Then the conversation became general and the two girls had no further opportunity for discussion of the subject.

Just as Anne had completed her dressing, a knock sounded on the door, and Mr. Southard's deep voice called out:

"All aboard for the actors' retreat."

"Come in, Mr. Southard," said Anne, and the door opened to admit the eminent actor, who looked bigger and handsomer than ever in his long coat and soft black hat.

Then Anne presented him to Mrs. Gibson, and a general handshaking ensued.

For the third time that night they were handed into the "uncomplaining but over-worked taxicab," according to Nora's version, and set out for the Southard home.

The entire party promptly fell in love with Miss Southard, who was the counterpart of her brother, except that she was considerably older, and she apparently returned their liking from the moment of meeting.

"I know every one of you," she said. "Anne talks of no one else to me. Your fame has already preceded you."

The Southards proved to be hospitable entertainers, and exerted every effort in behalf of their young guests. The time slipped by on wings, and it was well after one o'clock before any one thought of returning to the hotel.

"I am not a very reliable chaperon," laughed Mrs. Gibson, "to allow my charges to keep such late hours as this."

"It's only once in a life time," remarked Nora.

"How very cruel," said Mr. Southard solemnly. "I had hoped that you would all honor us again with your society."

"I didn't mean that," she cried, laughing a little. "I only meant that this was a red-letter night for us. We are basking in the light of greatness."

"Very pretty, indeed," was the actor's reply, and he gave Nora one of his rare, beautiful smiles that caused her to afterwards aver that he was truly the handsomest man in the whole world.

With many expressions of pleasure for the delightful hours they had passed, the revelers bade the Southards good night and good-bye.

"I am going to give a special party to the Phi Sigma Tau and these young men, when my season closes," announced the actor as they stood in the wide hall for a moment before leaving. "I trust that you may be able to again assume the role of chaperon," he added to Mrs. Gibson.

"I shall need no second invitation," replied Mrs. Gibson. "But may I not hope to see your sister and yourself at Hawks' Nest, in the near future?"

"You are indeed kind," responded Mr. Southard. "It would be a distinct pleasure and perhaps I may be able to arrange it. My season is to be a short one."

"Get your things and come with us, Anne," teased Grace. "We've loads of things to talk of, and you can breakfast with us, and go to the train, too. Please don't say no, because you won't see us again for three whole weeks."

"I give you my official permission to carry her off, this one time, Grace," laughed Mr. Southard.

"Better wear your long coat, dear. It is very cold," called Miss Southard as Anne ran upstairs after her wraps.

Then the final good-byes were said and the party were driven back to their hotel.

Mrs. Gibson invited Miriam to share her apartment, thus Grace and Anne were left to themselves, and indulged in one of their old heart-to-heart talks.

Breakfast the next morning was a late affair. After breakfast, the entire party went for a drive, and after a one-o'clock luncheon repaired to the station.

Mrs. Gibson, James Gardiner and the Phi Sigma Tau were to take the 2.30 train for Oakdale. The boys would leave at five o'clock. Tom and Arnold were to travel part of the journey with David, Hippy and Reddy. Then their ways diverged.

The girls kissed and embraced Anne tenderly, then there was a rush for the ferry. They stood on the deck waving to her until they could scarcely see the flutter of her handkerchief. After agreeing to meet the boys at the ferry, David escorted Anne back to the Southard's and spent a brief half hour with her.

"Promise me, Anne," said David earnestly, as he was leaving, "that you won't accept any engagement that you may receive an offer of."

"Of course not, you foolish David," replied Anne. "Notwithstanding the fact that you won't believe me, I solemnly promise to run from prospective managers, as I would from small-pox, and there's my hand upon it."

"I am satisfied," answered David, grasping her out-stretched hand. "I know you will keep your word."

CHAPTER XIX

GRACE MEETS WITH A REBUFF

During the journey to Oakdale, Anne and the Southards formed the chief topic of conversation. It was jointly agreed that Anne had been fortunate indeed in winning the friendship of the great actor and his charming sister.

"They treat her as though she were their own sister," remarked Eva Allen. "They will miss her sadly when she leaves them."

"Every one misses Anne," said Miriam Nesbit. "She is so sweet and lovable that she simply draws one's affection to her. I am frightfully jealous of Grace."

"Yes, Grace is Anne's favorite," said Jessica. "Anne would give her life for Grace if it were necessary."

"And Mabel Allison feels the same way toward you, Jessica," interposed Grace.

"How I wish Mabel had been with us," sighed Jessica.

"I received a letter from Mrs. Allison, just before leaving Oakdale," said Mrs. Gibson. "She expects to come east in June. Mabel has set her heart upon being here for commencement week. I shall invite the Southards, too, and perhaps your people will lend you to me for the week following graduation."

"We should love to go," said Grace, and her friends echoed her answer.

Before their journey ended night closed in around them. They had dinner in the dining car, and after dinner the girls began to feel a trifle tired and sleepy.

James Gardiner had discovered a boy friend on the train and had been graciously granted permission by the Phi Sigma Tau to go over and cultivate his society.

"You have been an angel, James," said Nora, "and have proved yourself worthy of a little recreation. Don't forget to be on hand when the train stops, however. I never saw your equal as a luggage carrier."

One by one the five girls leaned against the comfortable backs of their seats and closed their eyes. Mrs. Gibson became absorbed in the pages of a new book.

Grace dozed for a brief space and then opening her eyes gazed idly about her. The seat on which she sat had been reversed in order that she and Nora might face Mrs. Gibson and Miriam. Their seats being near to the middle of the car, she could obtain a good view of a number of the other passengers. She noticed that the car was very full, every seat being occupied.

Her eye rested for a second upon a portly, well-dressed old gentleman in the last seat of the car, who was leaning back with closed eyes, then traveled on to the man who shared the seat.

"What a remarkable face that man has," she thought. "He looks like a combination of a snake and a fox. I never before saw such tricky eyes. He is rather good looking, but there is something about him that frightens one."

Grace found herself watching, with a kind of fascination, every move that the stranger made. Once her eyes met his and she shuddered slightly, there was a world of refined cruelty in their depths. She looked out of the window as the train rushed on through the darkness, then almost against her will turned her eyes again in the direction of the repellent stranger.

But what she saw this time caused her to stare in amazement. The stranger under cover of a newspaper was bent on extracting the handsome watch and chain that the elderly gentleman's open coat displayed. Although the paper hid the movement of his hands, Grace divined by the expression of the man's face what was taking place behind the paper screen.

Like a flash she was out of her seat and down the aisle. But quick as had been her movement, the thief was quicker. He straightened up, coolly turned to his paper, looking up at her with an air of bored inquiry as she paused before him.

Ignoring him completely, she touched the old man on the shoulder and said in a low tone, "Please pardon me, but if you value your watch you had better look to it. I just saw this man attempting to steal it."

The old gentleman bounded up like a rubber ball, saying excitedly, "What do you mean, young woman?"

"Just what I say," replied Grace.

The thief gave Grace a contemptuous look, then without stirring, said lazily, "The young lady is entirely mistaken. She must have been dreaming."

"I repeat my accusation," said Grace firmly. "I have been watching you for some time, and I saw you attempt it."

The old gentleman put his hand to his vest and drew out a particularly fine old-fashioned gold watch.

"My watch is safe enough," he growled testily, "and so is my chain. Any one who steals from me will have to be pretty smart. I guess if this man had laid hands on my watch I'd have known it. Can't fool me."

"Certainly not," responded the tricky stranger. "If I were a thief you would be the last person I should attempt to practice upon."

"I should say so," grumbled the old gentleman. "Young woman, you have let your imagination run away with you. Be careful in the future or you may get yourself into serious trouble. This gentleman has taken your nonsense very good-naturedly."

As the two men were occupying the seat nearest the door, save for the old gentleman's first bounce, the little scene had been so quietly enacted that the other passengers were paying little attention to the trio.

"You had better go back to your friends," said the man whom Grace had accused, looking at her with cold hatred in his eyes. "That is, unless you wish to make yourself ridiculous."

Grace turned away without speaking. There were tears of mortification in her eyes. She had attempted to render a service and had been rudely rebuffed. She slipped into her place beside Nora, who was dozing, and had not missed her. Mrs. Gibson, too, had not marked her absence.

"Where were you, Grace?" said Miriam curiously. "I opened my eyes and you were gone. What's the matter? You look ready to cry."

"I am," replied Grace. "I could cry with sheer vexation." Then she briefly recounted what had occurred.

"What a crusty old man," sympathized Miriam. "It would serve him right if he did lose his old watch. Where are they sitting?"

"Down the aisle on the other side at the end," directed Grace.

Miriam turned around in her seat. "He looks capable of most anything," she remarked after a prolonged stare at the stranger, who was apparently absorbed in his paper. "Are you sure, however, that you were not mistaken, Grace? You can't always judge a man by his looks."

"You can this man," asserted Grace. "He is a polite villain of the deepest dye, and I know it."

It was after eleven o'clock when the train pulled into Oakdale. Mrs. Gibson's chauffeur awaited them with the big touring car, in which there was ample room for all of them.

"Keep a sharp lookout for that man," whispered Grace to Miriam. "I want to see if Oakdale is his destination."

The two girls lagged behind the others, eagerly scanning the platform.

"I think he must have gone on," said Miriam. "I don't see him. Don't worry any more about him, Grace."

Then she walked on ahead.

But Grace lingered. "That looks like him now," she thought. "He is just leaving the train. He seems to be waiting for some one."

She stood in the shadow of the station watching the man. Then she saw another man rapidly approaching. The newcomer walked straight up to the stranger and shook hands with him. Then the two men turned and she obtained a full-face view of them both.

Grace gave a little gasp of surprise, for the newcomer who had shaken the hand of the crook was Henry Hammond.

CHAPTER XX

MARIAN'S CONFESSION

Grace reached home that night with her head in a whirl. She could think of nothing save the fact that she had seen Henry Hammond warmly welcome a man whom she knew in her heart to be a professional crook. It formed the first link in the chain of evidence she hoped to forge against him. She had become so strongly imbued with the idea that Hammond was an impostor that the incident at the station only served to confirm her belief.

The Phi Sigma Tau were besieged with questions the next day, and at recess the five members held forth separately to groups of eager and admiring girls on the glories of the visit.

"Where is Marian Barber?" asked Grace of Ruth Deane, as they were leaving the senior locker-room at the close of the noon recess.

"She hasn't been in school to-day," replied Ruth. "I suppose what happened Friday was too much for her."

"What happened Friday?" repeated Grace. "Well, what did happen?"

"Oh, Eleanor Savelli and Marian had a quarrel in the locker-room. I was the only one who heard it, and I shouldn't have stayed but I know Eleanor of old, and I made up my mind that I had better stay and see that Marian had fair play. But I might as well have stayed away, for I wasn't of any use to either side. In fact, I doubt if either one realized I was there, they were so absorbed in their own troubles."

"It's a wonder that I wasn't around," remarked Grace. "I am really glad, however, that I wasn't. The Phi Sigma Tau were all in Miss Tebbs' classroom at recess last Friday. Miss Tebbs is a dear friend of the Southards, you know. She was invited to go with us, but had made a previous engagement that she could not break. We were talking things over with her. After school we all went straight home and I saw neither Eleanor nor Marian. Have you any idea what it was about?"

"I don't know," returned Ruth bluntly. "Marian and Eleanor came into the locker-room together. I heard Marian say something about telling Eleanor what she had in confidence. Then Eleanor just laughed scornfully and told Marian that she had told her secrets to the wrong person. Marian grew very angry, and called Eleanor treacherous and revengeful, and Eleanor said that Marian's opinion was a matter of indifference to her."

"Then she told Marian that she intended to call a class meeting for Thursday of this week and entertain them with the very interesting little story that Marian had told her the previous week."

"Marian wilted at that and cried like a baby, but Eleanor kept on laughing at her, and said that she would know better another time, and perhaps would think twice before she spoke once. She said that no one could trample upon her with impunity."

"Oh, pshaw," exclaimed Grace impatiently. "She always says that when she is angry. She said that last year."

"Well, Marian cried some more," continued Ruth, "and Eleanor made a number of other spiteful

remarks and walked out with a perfectly hateful look of triumph on her face."

"And what about Marian?" asked Grace.

"She didn't go back to the study hall. She told Miss Thompson that she was ill and went home."

"Poor Marian," said Grace. "She certainly has been very foolish to leave her real friends and put her faith in people like Eleanor and that Henry Hammond. I have been afraid all along that she would be bitterly disillusioned. I think I'd better go to see her to-night."

"Why, I thought she wasn't on speaking terms with the Phi Sigma Tau!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Speaking terms or not, I'm going to find out what the trouble is and straighten it out if I can. Please don't tell that to any one, Ruth. I don't imagine it's anything serious. Eleanor always goes to extremes."

"Trust me, Grace, not to say a word," was the response.

"I wish Anne were here," mused Grace, as she took her seat and drew out her text-book on second year French. Then for the time being she dismissed Marian from her mind, and turned her attention to the lesson on hand.

By the time school closed that afternoon Grace had made up her mind to go to see Marian before going home. Leaving Nora and Jessica at the usual corner, she walked on for a block, then turned into the street where the Barbers lived.

Grace pulled the bell rather strenuously by way of expressing her feelings, and waited.

"Is Marian in?" she inquired of Alice, the old servant.

"Yes, Miss Grace," answered the woman, "She's in the sittin' room, walk right in there. It's a long time since I seen you here, Miss Grace."

"Yes, it is, Alice," replied Grace with a smile, then walked on into the room.

Over in one corner, huddled up on the wide leather couch, was Marian. Her eyes were swollen and red, and she looked ill and miserable.

"Marian," began Grace, "Ruth Deane told me you were ill, and so I came to see you."

"Go away," muttered Marian. "I don't wish to see you."

"I am not so sure of that," answered Grace. "I understand you have been having some trouble with Eleanor, and that she has threatened revenge."

"Who told you?" cried Marian, sitting up and looking angrily at Grace. "I can manage my own affairs, without any of your help."

"Very well," replied Grace quietly. "Then I had better go. I thought when I came that I might be able to help you. You look both ill and unhappy. I see I have been mistaken."

"You can't help me," replied Marian, her chin beginning to quiver. "Nobody can help me. I'm the most miserable girl—" her voice ended in a wail, and she rocked to and fro upon the couch, sobbing wildly.

"Listen to me, Marian," commanded Grace firmly. "You must stop crying and tell me every single thing about this trouble of yours. I have crossed swords with Eleanor before this, and I think I can bring her to reason."

"How can I tell you?" sobbed Marian. "Grace, I am a thief and may have to go to prison."

"A thief!" echoed Grace. "Nonsense, Marian. I don't believe you would steal a penny."

"But I am," persisted Marian tearfully. "I stole the class money, and it's all gone."

She began to sob again.

Grace let Marian finish her cry before interrogating her further. She wanted time to think. Her mind hastily reviewed the two conversations she had overheard between Marian and Henry Hammond. This, then, was the meaning of it all. The brief suspicion that had flashed into her mind and Anne's on the night that Marian and Henry Hammond had passed them, had been only too well founded. Marian had drawn the money from the bank and given it to him.

"Marian," asked Grace, "did you give the money the judge sent us to Henry Hammond?"

Marian nodded, too overcome as yet to speak.

"Can't you tell me about it?" continued Grace patiently.

Marian struggled for self-control, then began in a shaking voice.

"I have been a perfect idiot over that miserable Henry Hammond, and I deserve everything. I was not satisfied with being a school-girl, but thought it very smart to put up my hair and make a general goose of myself.

"It all began the night of the bazaar. I had no business to pay any attention to that man. He is

really very clever, for before I realized what I had said I had told him all about our sorority and about being class treasurer, and a lot of things that were none of his business.

"After the bazaar I saw him often and told him about the judge's check.

"One day he asked me if I had any friends who had money that they would like to double. I had fifty dollars of my own that I had been saving for ever so long, and told him about it. He said that he manipulated stocks a little (whatever that is) in connection with his real estate business. He asked me to give him the money and let him prove to me how easily he could double it. I did, and he brought me back one hundred dollars.

"Of course, I was delighted. Then mother sent me fifty dollars for Christmas, and I bought all those presents. It took every cent I had, and I was awfully silly, for no one cared as much for them as if they'd been pretty little gifts that I made myself. That was my first folly.

"The next was those three gowns. They haven't been paid for yet. I haven't dared give father the bills, and I can never face mother. She would never have allowed me to order anything like them. Well, you know how badly I behaved at the house party, and how nice you all were to me, even when I was so hateful.

"On New Year's Night, when we were coming from Nesbits, Henry Hammond asked me for the class money. He said he had a chance to treble it, and that it was too good an opportunity to be lost.

"I refused point blank at first, and then he talked and talked in that smooth way of his until I began to think what a fine thing it would be to walk into the class and say, 'Girls, here are fifteen hundred dollars instead of five hundred.' I was feeling awfully cross at you girls just then, because he made me believe that you were slighting me and leaving me out of things. Besides, all of you had warned me against him, and I wanted to show you that I knew more than you did.

"I didn't promise to give it to him that night, but the more I thought of it the more I inclined toward his views, and the upshot of the matter was that I drew it out of the bank and let him have it."

Marian paused and looked piteously at Grace. Then she said brokenly:

"He lost it, Grace, every cent of it. The week after I gave it to him he told me that luck had been against him, and that it was all gone. When I asked him what he intended to do about it he promised that he would sell some real estate of his and turn the money over to me to give back to the class. He said it was his fault for persuading me to do it, and that I shouldn't suffer for it. But he never kept his word.

"Last week I asked him for the last time if he would refund the money, and he laughed at me and said that I had risked it and ought to accept my losses with good grace. I threatened to expose him, and he said if I did I should only succeed in making more trouble for myself than for him. He had only speculated with what I had given him. Where I obtained the money was none of his business, and as long as I had appropriated it I would have to abide by the consequences.

"Of course, I was desperate and didn't know what to do. I had no money of my own, and I didn't dare ask my father for it. I had to tell some one, so I told Eleanor."

"Eleanor!" exclaimed Grace aghast. "Oh, Marian, why did you tell her of all people."

"I thought she was my friend," declared Marian, "but I soon found out that she wasn't. As soon as I had told her, she changed entirely. She told me last Friday that she had been watching for a long time in the hope of revenging herself upon the Phi Sigma Tau for their insults, and that at last she had the means to do so.

"Her friendship for me was merely a pretense. She said that when I separated from my sorority she knew I was sure to do something foolish, so she decided to make advances to me and see what she could find out.

"She is going to call a class meeting for next Thursday after school, and she is going to expose me. She says that it is right that the class should know just what sort of material the Phi Sigma Tau is made up of, and that one of its members is a sneak and a thief."

"This is serious, and no mistake," replied Grace soberly. "Don't you remember, Marian, that back in our junior year, when Eleanor tried to get Anne's part in the play, I cautioned the girls to never put themselves in a position where Eleanor might injure them."

"Yes, I remember, now," Marian faltered, "but it is too late."

"I might try to checkmate her at her own game by threatening to tell the story of the missing costumes," reflected Grace aloud. "I'll try it at any rate. But even if we do succeed in silencing Eleanor, where are we to get the money to pay back the class fund? We can't arrest that miserable Henry Hammond without making the affair public, and this simply must remain a private matter. It is the hardest problem that I have ever been called upon to contend with.

"You must brace up, Marian, and go back to school to-morrow," directed Grace. "If you keep on this way it will serve to create suspicion. You have done a very foolish and really criminal act, but your own remorse has punished you severely enough. None of us are infallible. The thing to do now, is to find a way to make up this money."

Marian wiped her eyes, and, leaving the lounge, walked over to Grace, and, putting her arms about Grace's neck, said, with agonized earnestness:

"Grace, can you and the girls ever forgive me for being so hateful?"

"Why, of course, we can. There is nothing to forgive. We have never stopped thinking of you as a member of our sorority. We wouldn't ask any one else to take your place."

An expression of intense relief shone in Marian's face.

"I am so glad," she said. "I can't help being happy, even with this cloud hanging over me."

"Cheer up, Marian," said Grace hopefully. "I have an idea that I shall straighten out this tangle yet. I must go now. Keep up your courage and whatever you do, don't tell any one else what you have told me. There are too many in the secret now."

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE HAUNTED HOUSE

The moment that Grace left Marian, she set her active brain at work for some solution of the problem she had taken upon her own shoulders. She had no money, and the members of her sorority had none. Besides, Grace inwardly resolved not to tell the other girls were it possible to avoid doing so.

Mrs. Gray would be home before long, and Grace knew that the gentle old lady would gladly advance the money rather than see Marian disgraced. But Eleanor had planned to denounce Marian on Thursday, and it was now Monday.

There was but one course to pursue, and that was to go to Eleanor and beg her to renounce her scheme of vengeance. Grace felt very dubious as to the outcome of such an interview. Eleanor had in the past proved anything but tractable.

"I'll go to-night," decided Grace. "I'm not afraid of the dark. If mother objects, I'll take Bridget along for protection, although she's the greatest coward in the world."

Grace giggled a little as she thought of Bridget in the role of protector.

That night she hurried through her supper, and, barely tasting her dessert, said abruptly:

"Mother, may I go to Eleanor Savelli's this evening?"

"Away out to 'Heartsease,' Grace? Who is going with you?"

"No one," replied Grace truthfully. "Mother, please don't say no. I simply must see Eleanor at once."

"But I thought that you were not friendly with Eleanor," persisted Mrs. Harlowe.

"That is true," Grace answered, "but just now that is the very thing I want to be. It's this way, mother. Eleanor is going to try to make some trouble for Marian Barber in the class, and I must act at once if it is to be prevented."

"More school-girl difficulties," commented Mrs. Harlowe, with a smile. "But how does it happen that you always seem to be in the thick of the fight, Grace?"

"I don't know, mother," sighed Grace. "No one dislikes quarrels more than I do. May I go?"

"Yes," assented her mother, "but you must take Bridget with you. I'll see her at once and tell her to get ready."

It had been a raw, disagreeable day, and towards evening a cold rain had set in that was practically half snow. It was anything but an enviable night for a walk, and Bridget grumbled roundly under her breath as she wrapped herself in the voluminous folds of a water-proof cape and took down a huge, dark-green cotton umbrella from its accustomed nail behind the kitchen door.

"Miss Grace do be crazy to be goin' out this night. It's rheumatics I shall have to-morrow in all me bones," she growled.

She plodded along at Grace's side with such an injured expression that Grace felt like laughing outright at the picture of offended dignity that she presented.

Grace chatted gayly as they proceeded and Bridget answered her sallies with grunts and monosyllables. When they reached the turn of the road Grace said:

"Bridget, let's take the short cut. The walking is good and we'll save ten minutes' time by doing it."

"Phast that haunted house?" gasped Bridget. "Niver! May the saints presarve us from hants."

"Nonsense," laughed Grace. "There are no such things as ghosts, and you know it. If you're afraid you can go back and wait at your cousin's for me. She lives near here, doesn't she?"

"I will that," replied Bridget fervently, "but don't ye be too long gone, Miss Grace."

"I won't stay long," promised Grace, and hurried down the road, leaving Bridget to proceed with much grumbling to her cousin's house.

The house that Bridget had so flatly refused to pass was a two-story affair of brick that set well back from the highway. There were rumors afloat that a murder had once been committed there, and that the apparition of the victim, an old man, walked about at night moaning in true ghost fashion.

To be sure no one had as yet been found who had really seen the spectre old man, nevertheless the place kept its ghost reputation and was generally avoided.

Grace, who was nothing if not daring, never lost an opportunity to pass the old house, and jeered openly when any one talked seriously of the "ghost."

Now, she smiled to herself as she rapidly neared the house, at Bridget's evident fear of the supernatural.

"What a goose Bridget is," she murmured. "Just as though there were——" She stopped abruptly and stared in wonder at the old house. On the side away from the road was a small wing, and through one of the windows of this wing gleamed a tiny point of light.

"A light," she said aloud in surprise. "How strange. The ghost must be at home. Perhaps I was mistaken. No, there it is again. Ghost or no ghost, I'm going to see what it is."

Suiting the action to the words, Grace stole softly up the deserted walk and crouched under the window from whence the light had come. Clinging to the window ledge, she cautiously raised herself until her head was on a level with the glass. What she saw caused her to hold her breath with astonishment. Was she awake or did she dream? At one side of the room stood a small table, and on the table, in full view of her incredulous eyes, stood the strong box which had held the bazaar money that had been spirited away on Thanksgiving night. Bending over it, the light from his dark lantern shining full on the lock, was the man whom she had accused on the train.



Grace Held Her Breath in Astonishment.

Grace Held Her Breath in Astonishment

Thrilled for the moment by her discovery, Grace forgot everything except what was going on inside the room. The man was making vain efforts to hit upon the combination. How long he had been there Grace had no idea. She could not take her eyes from the box which contained their hard-earned money.

Minutes went by, but still she watched in a fever of apprehension for fear he might accidentally discover the combination. Unsuccessful in his attempts, he finally straightened up with an exclamation of anger and disgust. Going over to a small cupboard built in the wall, he opened it,

and, stooping, pressed his finger against some hidden spring. Then the wall opened and the light from the lantern disclosed an inside recess. Lifting the box, he carried it over and deposited it in the opening, and at his touch the panel slid back into place. Quickly locking the cupboard, he placed the key in his pocket, and, extinguishing the lantern, strode towards the door.

Once outside, he passed so close to Grace that by stretching out her hand she might easily have touched him, as she lay flat on the rain-soaked ground, scarcely daring to breathe.

The stranger paused to lock the door, and Grace heard him mutter: "Nice night to send a pal out in, and on a still hunt, too. Nothing short of soup'll open up that claim. If the rest of the jobs he's goin' to pull off are like this hand out, me to shake this rube joint."

The echo of his footsteps died away and Grace ventured to raise herself from her uncomfortable position. She peered into the blackness of the night, but could see nothing. Rising to her feet, she stealthily circled the house and set off at her best speed for "Heartsease."

"There'll be plenty of work for Eleanor and me to do this night," she thought. "If only she will help me now, and she must. She can't refuse. It's for the honor of the senior class."

Giving the old-fashioned knocker a vigorous pull, Grace waited impatiently for admittance.

"Is Miss Savelli at home?" asked Grace eagerly, the moment the maid opened the door.

"No, ma'am," answered the girl. "She and her aunt are in Oakdale to-night. We expect them any minute now."

Grace groaned inwardly.

"What shall I do?" she asked herself. "I must get that money away from there to-night. To-morrow may be too late, and besides I feel sure that that dreadful man won't return to-night. This is our opportunity and we mustn't neglect it."

The maid eyed her curiously. "You are Miss Harlowe, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," said Grace. "May I wait here for Miss Savelli?"

"Certainly, miss. Let me take your rain coat and cap. It's a terrible night, isn't it?"

Before Grace had time to answer the click of a latchkey was heard, and the maid said, "There they are."

Eleanor stepped part way into the hall before she became aware of Grace's presence. A look of surprise, followed by one of extreme dislike crossed her face. Drawing herself up, she was about to speak, when Grace exclaimed: "Don't say a word, Eleanor, until you hear what I have to say. I came here to-night to discuss a very personal matter with you, but something so strange has happened that I must defer what I had to say until another time and ask you if you will help me to-night."

"I don't understand," said Eleanor coldly. "Please explain yourself."

"Eleanor," Miss Nevin interposed, "Miss Harlowe is evidently very much agitated over something, therefore do not waste time over useless formality. I knew you, my dear, from the picture I saw of you at Mrs. Gray's," she added, turning to Grace, with a winning smile, that caused the young girl to love her immediately.

"Eleanor," said Grace quickly, "I have found the bazaar money that was stolen Thanksgiving night."

"Found it!" exclaimed Eleanor incredulously. "Where?"

"At the old haunted house," replied Grace.

Then she rapidly narrated the story of her walk, her curiosity as to the light, and the sight that it had revealed to her.

Eleanor and her aunt listened without interrupting.

"When I saw him put the money away and leave the house, I felt that he wouldn't try it again until daylight, so I came straight here," Grace continued. "If you will take your run-about down to the road where it runs near to the house, you and I can easily get the box and carry it to the machine. It will take two of us, because it's very heavy. I know I can find the secret of the panel, but we shall have to break open the door of the cupboard. I am not afraid, and, somehow, Eleanor, I felt that you would have plenty of the right brand of courage."

"I am not afraid," responded Eleanor, flushing at Grace's words, "but I know I should never have displayed the courage that you have. I should never have dared dashing up to a haunted house to investigate uncanny lights."

"My dear child," exclaimed Miss Nevin, "do you suppose that I would allow you two slips of girls to prowl around that old house alone, on a night like this?"

"Miss Nevin," Grace's voice rose in its earnestness, "we must get that money to-night, even if I have to go back there alone. It belongs to us, and we simply can't let it slip through our fingers."

"And so you shall get it," was the answer, "but with John, the coachman, for a bodyguard."

"May we go this minute?" chorused both girls.

"Yes," nodded Miss Nevin. "I'll send word to John to get out the run-about and take you at once."

Ten minutes later John, the coachman, and the two girls had squeezed into the run-about and were making as good time to the haunted house as the darkness would permit. The heavy outside door was found to be securely padlocked, and the windows were locked. With two blows of the small axe that he had brought with him, John shattered the glass of the very window through which Grace had peered, and, climbing in, helped the two girls in after him.

By the light of the two lanterns they had brought, the cupboard was easily located and opened and a diligent search was made for the hidden spring.

"Shall I smash in the paneling, miss?" asked the coachman.

"Perhaps you'd better," assented Grace. "I don't seem to be able to find the key to the riddle." She endeavored to step out of John's way, and as she did so, struck her foot smartly against the back wall of the cupboard near to the floor. There was a curious grating sound and the panel slid back, revealing the welcome sight of the strong box reposing in the recess.

Unwittingly Grace had touched the secret spring. Both girls cried out in triumph. Then, hurrying to the window, they climbed out, ready to receive the box. John set it on the window-sill, and, though very heavy, Grace and Eleanor combined forces and lowered it to the ground. Leaping over the sill, the coachman picked it up, and the three set off at full speed down the path.

The ride back to "Heartsease" was a memorable one to at least two of the occupants of the machine. But few remarks were exchanged. Each girl was busy with her own thoughts. The circumstances that had brought them together seemed too remarkable for mere words.

"To the victors belong the spoils," called Grace as she hopped out of the run-about before John could assist her, with Eleanor at her heels, while the coachman followed more slowly, bearing the box.

The rain was still falling, but it was doubtful whether either girl was sensible to the fact that her hair was heavy with dampness and her clothing and shoes were wet.

"My dear, you had better allow Eleanor to provide you with dry clothing and remain with her to-night," suggested Miss Nevin as they entered the hall. Then ringing for the maid, she ordered hot chocolate.

"I wish you would stay with me, Grace," said Eleanor rather shyly. "I have a great deal to say to you."

"And I to you, Eleanor," Grace responded.

For a moment they stood facing one another. What they saw seemed to satisfy them. Their hands reached out simultaneously and met in a firm clasp.

"Will you kiss me, Grace?" was what Eleanor said.

"With all my heart," was the answer. And with that kiss all resentment and hard feeling died out forever.

"You are surely going to stay with me to-night," coaxed Eleanor. "We will send word to your mother."

But with Eleanor's remark the remembrance of her promise to her mother came back with a rush.

"Good gracious, Eleanor! I promised mother that I'd be home at nine o'clock. What time is it now?"

"It's half past ten," replied Eleanor, consulting her watch.

"Poor Bridget," mourned Grace. "She will be sure to think that the ghosts have spirited me away. I must go this minute, before search parties are sent out for me. But I'll see you to-morrow Eleanor, for I need your help."

Just then Miss Nevin, who had left the room, returned with a tray on which were tiny sandwiches and a pot of chocolate.

"You must have some refreshment, Grace," she said. "Eleanor, do the honors."

Grace was made to eat and drink, then, placing herself under John's protection, she returned to Oakdale in Eleanor's run-about, stopping on her way home at the house of Bridget's cousin, where she found the faithful though irate Bridget awaiting her in a state of anxiety bordering upon frenzy.

"Don't fuss, Bridget," consoled Grace. "The banshees didn't get me, and you're going to ride home in an automobile. That ought to make you feel better."

The prospect of the ride completely mollified Bridget, and by the time they reached home she

fairly radiated good nature.

"Your ideas of time are somewhat peculiar, Grace," remarked her mother as Grace entered the living room, where her mother and father sat reading. "If Bridget had not been with you I should have been most uneasy."

But Grace was too full of her news to make other answer than cry out:

"Oh, mother, we found it! We did, truly!"

"What is the child talking about?" asked her father. And then Grace launched forth with an account of her night's doings.

"Well, I never!" was all Mr. Harlowe could find words for when his daughter had finished.

"What shall I do with you, Grace?" said her mother in despair. "You will be injured or killed yet, in some of your mad excursions."

"Trust to me to land right side up with care," answered Grace cheerfully.

"I'll call at the police station early to-morrow morning and have the chief send some one up to that old house," said Mr. Harlowe. "From what you heard the thief say, he must have a confederate. Perhaps the chief's men will get both of them."

"Perhaps so," replied Grace, but she had a shrewd idea as to who the confederate might be, and felt that if her suppositions were correct there was not much chance of his incriminating himself.

CHAPTER XXII

GRACE AND ELEANOR MAKE A FORMAL CALL

Before recess the next day the news that Grace Harlowe and Eleanor Savelli had been seen in earnest conversation together traveled like wild fire around the study hall. The members of the Phi Sigma Tau could scarcely believe their eyes, and when at recess they sought for enlightenment, Grace would give them no satisfaction save that she and Eleanor had really become friendly again.

"I love you all dearly, but I can't tell you about it yet, so please don't ask me. When I do tell you, you'll understand and be as glad as I am," she informed them affectionately, and with this they were obliged to content themselves.

At one o'clock that afternoon Grace was summoned from the study hall, and her friends' curiosity went up to the highest pitch and did not in the least abate when Eleanor Savelli was also excused and hurriedly followed Grace out.

"This must mean that they have caught him," said Eleanor, as she and Grace turned their steps in the direction of the police station.

Grace nodded silently. Her mind was busy with Marian's problem. She must get back the money that Henry Hammond had wheedled Marian into giving him. If the stranger had been apprehended and if Hammond were really his confederate, then the stranger might, under cross-examination, betray Hammond, who would at once be arrested.

Now that Eleanor had become her friend, Grace knew that she would never expose Marian in class meeting, but even with this menace removed, still nothing could disguise the fact that the judge's gift could not be honestly accounted for.

Grace believed that Henry Hammond had appropriated the money for his own use. She did not place any dependence in his story of having lost it through speculation. She therefore resolved that he should return it if she could devise any means of making him do so, without subjecting him to public exposure.

For Marian's sake, she would refrain from carrying the matter into court, and she reluctantly decided to say nothing about the meeting between Hammond and the prisoner that she had witnessed at the station on the night of her return from New York.

Eleanor's surmise proved to be correct. At the door of the station house, Grace's father awaited them, and they were conducted into the court room, where the first thing that caught Grace's attention was the eyes of the prisoner, that glared ferociously at her.

"So you're the fresh kid that got me juggled, are you!" he snarled with a menacing gesture. "I'd like to get my hands on you for a couple of minutes."

"Silence!" roared Chief Burroughs.

Then the examination began. The strong box had been turned over to the police that morning by Miss Nevin, to be held as proof against the thief.

Grace identified the man as the one she had seen tampering with the lock the previous night,

repeating what she had heard him say as he left the old house. She then told her story of the removal of the box, which was corroborated by Eleanor and John, the coachman.

"This is not the first time this man and I have met," declared Grace at the conclusion of her testimony. Then she related the incident of the train to the chief, while the prisoner glowered at her as though he would enjoy tearing her in pieces.

When examined, he gave his name as Jones, denied ever having seen Grace before, but under rigid cross-examination finally admitted the truth of her story, and that he had been in Oakdale on the previous Thanksgiving and had assisted in the theft of the strong box. He had left for New York the following morning, supposing that his confederate would have no trouble in unlocking the box.

"Why did you leave Oakdale?" questioned Chief Burroughs.

"Robbing kids was too small business for me," growled the man. "We heard this was a rich town, but when we got here I sized it up, and it didn't look good to me. So I beat it for New York the next day."

But no amount of grilling could induce him to reveal the identity of his partner.

"He's too good a pal to squeal on. Nothing doing in that line," was the unvarying answer.

When questioned as to his second visit to Oakdale, he said that his partner had been unable to open the strong box, and after looking about for some safe hiding place, had accidentally discovered the secret recess in the cupboard, while prowling about the haunted house.

This had seemed an ideal place of concealment, and he had secretly conveyed the box there until the prisoner, who was an expert cracksman, should be on hand to open it.

"And was that your sole object in coming to Oakdale?" was the chief's sharp query.

"Of course," replied the prisoner.

But the chief shook his head. "There is a good deal more back of this. You have not answered truthfully. Your real motive for coming here was robbery."

Grace and Eleanor were not detained throughout the entire examination. After giving their testimony, they were allowed to go. Once they were fairly outside the police station, Grace took Eleanor by the arm and said:

"Eleanor, I have a call to make, and I wish you to go with me. We haven't a moment to spare, for the First National Bank closes at three, and it's a quarter after two now."

"I am very glad to hear that useful and interesting fact about the First National Bank. Are you going to deposit money there!" asked Eleanor, laughing.

"No," answered Grace mysteriously. "I am going to draw money from there after I have called upon a certain person."

"But what have I to do with it!" questioned Eleanor.

"Come with me and see," Grace replied. "After we have succeeded in our undertaking, I'll answer any questions you may ask. I warn you, however, that the call I am about to make is not a friendly one. Are you willing to stand by me through what may be a rather disagreeable scene?"

"I certainly am," replied Eleanor emphatically. "You ought to know from past experiences that disagreeable scenes are my forte."

"I know that I'd rather have you with me on this expedition than any one else I know," responded Grace. "You are not easily intimidated."

The two girls by this time had left Main Street and turned into Putnam Square.

"Grace," said Eleanor suddenly. "I believe I can guess the place you are headed for. You are going to Henry Hammond's office, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Grace, surprised at the accuracy of Eleanor's guess, "I am."

"And you are going there about the money that he stole from Marian. Am I right?"

"You are," answered Grace truthfully. "But how did you know?"

"Because," said Eleanor quietly, "I intended going there myself."

"Then you think that——" began Grace.

"I think that Henry Hammond is a thief and an impostor," finished Eleanor. "He tried to interest Aunt Margaret in some real estate, and called at 'Heartsease' on two different occasions. She is a very shrewd business woman and he couldn't fool her in the least. Both times he called he kept looking about him all the time, as though he were trying to see whether we had any valuables. He raved over the house, and hinted to be shown through it, but we weren't so foolish."

"When Chief Burroughs was questioning the prisoner to-day about his confederate, it suddenly flashed across me that it might be this man Hammond. He appeared here for the first time on the

night of the bazaar and—"

"Eleanor," exclaimed Grace, "you've missed your vocation. You should have been a detective. I believe what you say to be the truth and have thought so for some time. We can hardly denounce Henry Hammond upon suspicion, but we can scare him and make him give back the class money. Perhaps we are defeating the ends of justice by not telling what we suspect, but if we have him arrested on suspicion, then the only way we can get back our money is to publicly charge him with extorting it from Marian. Think what a disgrace that would be for her in her graduating year, too," Grace added. "She would feel too ashamed to ever again face her best friends."

"I have thought of all that, too, and now that we are both of the same mind, let's on to victory," said Eleanor.

The two girls paused and shook hands as they entered the building in which Henry Hammond had his office, then mounted the stairs with the full determination of winning in their cause.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hammond," called Eleanor, as she opened the door and walked serenely in, followed by Grace.

Henry Hammond started nervously up from his desk at the sound of her voice. The bland smile with which he greeted her changed to a frown as his eyes rested upon Grace, and he saluted her coldly.

"I am, indeed, honored, this afternoon," he said with sarcasm. "Miss Harlowe has never before visited my office."

"We had a few minutes to spare and thought we'd run in and tell you the news," replied Grace sweetly. "We have just come from the police station."

"Rather a peculiar place for two High School girls to visit, isn't it!" asked the man with a suspicion of a sneer.

"Yes, but we were the heroines in an adventure last night," replied Grace evenly. "We found the bazaar money that was stolen last Thanksgiving."

"What!" exploded Hammond. Then trying to conceal his agitation, he said with affected carelessness, "I believe I do remember something about that robbery."

"I was sure that you would," returned Grace, looking squarely at him. "That was the night of the day you came to Oakdale, was it not?"

"I really can't recollect the exact date," murmured Hammond.

"One of the thieves was caught to-day, at the old haunted house, where he had hidden the box," volunteered Eleanor.

A grayish pallor overspread Hammond's face. With a desperate effort at self-control, he said:

"Ah, there was more than one, then!"

"Oh, yes," declared Grace cheerfully. "There were two in it. The other will probably be apprehended soon. The prisoner hasn't revealed his identity, as yet. The funny thing is that I had seen the prisoner before. On the train that we took from New York, after seeing Anne Pierson in the play, I saw this same man try to steal a watch and chain from an old gentleman, who would not believe me when I warned him of his danger."

"When we finally reached Oakdale," continued Grace, "I watched to see if he got off the train, and he did. We saw a man meet him at the station, who—"

Henry Hammond sprang up and seizing his hat, said harshly, "I hope you young ladies will excuse me, what you have told me is so interesting that I believe I shall go over to the station house and get all the details. Will you remain until I return?" He fumbled in a drawer of his desk, and both girls saw him take out a bankbook.

"Thank you," said Grace politely. "We can't stay, but before we go we should like to have you write us a check for the five hundred dollars that Marian Barber foolishly loaned you. You see she had no right to do so. Besides, she is still a minor. If you do it at once we can cash it to-day. It is now fifteen minutes of three. I'll call the bank and tell them that I am coming. But first I must send a message to my father."

With these words, Grace walked to the telephone without giving Hammond time to answer. "Give me Main 268a, please," she said. With a bound he sprang to the door, but it closed in his face, and he heard the turn of the key in the lock, just as Grace calmly called, "Hello, is this Chief Burroughs? Is my father there?" Then she answered, "You say he is there? Well, this is his daughter, Grace. Please tell him that Miss Savelli and I are just about to leave Mr. Hammond's office, and wish him to meet us outside."

Hammond sprang toward Grace, but instantly realizing that it would be folly to molest her, drew back, scowling savagely.

Grace hung up the receiver and rang again. This time she called the bank, asking for the president. "Is this Mr. Furlow?" she said. "This is Grace Harlowe. I am at the office of Mr. Henry Hammond, who is about to write my father a check for five hundred dollars, which he wishes to

cash before the bank closes. It is now ten minutes of three. He will be there inside of seven minutes. Thank you. Good-bye."

"Now," she commanded, turning to Hammond, the expression of whose face was a combination of baffled rage, disappointment and fear, "write the check."

With a muttered imprecation he went to his desk, jerked out a checkbook and wrote the desired check.

"To whom shall I make it payable?" he muttered.

"To Thomas G. Harlowe," replied Grace composedly.

Inserting her father's name, he fairly flung the check in her face, and strode to the door.

"Open this door," he commanded.

There was no response.

"You may open the door, Eleanor," called Grace. "Mr. Hammond is ready to go now."

The key turned in the lock. With a savage jerk, Henry Hammond flung open the door, and brushing Eleanor aside, bolted for the stairway.

Five seconds later the two girls reached the sidewalk and found Mr. Harlowe waiting for them.

"Father, dear," exclaimed Grace. "Here is a check for five hundred dollars, made payable to you by Mr. Henry Hammond. You have five minutes in which to cash it, before the bank closes. I'll tell you the story of it later. I haven't time now."

The First National Bank was just around the corner, and three minutes later Mr. Harlowe walked in, accompanied by Grace and Eleanor, and cashed the check without any trouble.

"Tom Harlowe must have made money on some deal with Hammond," thought the cashier, as he closed the window. "He is about the only one who has that I know of."

"And now, daughter, whose money is this, and what is it all about?" asked her father gravely, as they left the bank.

"I can have no better confidant than my father," declared Grace, and she thereupon told him the whole story.

Mr. Harlowe heard her story with mingled emotions of pride and disapproval.

"Never take such a risk again, Grace," he said sternly. "Suppose this man had carried a revolver. He might easily have turned the tables."

"I never stopped to think what he might do, father," said Grace ruefully. "The honor of the senior class was at stake, and I knew that I had to get that money somehow. Besides, I had notified Chief Burroughs as to my whereabouts, and sent word for you to wait for me, so he was really cornered, that's why Eleanor locked the door."

"Grace, you are incorrigible," sighed her father, "but if ever again you find yourself in a snarl over the rashness of your friends, then remember that I am the wisest person to consult. It may save you considerable worry, and will be at least a safer method."

Nevertheless, he could not refrain from smiling a little as he added, "What do you propose to do with this money?"

"Deposit it in Upton Bank, to-morrow," was Grace's prompt reply.

"And in whose name?" asked her father.

"In Marian Barber's father," said Grace steadily. "This time it will be safe, for she has learned her lesson."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MESSAGE OF THE VIOLIN

The news of the finding of the lost money in the haunted house came out in the evening paper, and set the whole town of Oakdale agog with excitement.

The sensational robbery at the close of the Thanksgiving bazaar was too bold to have been forgotten, and the news of the recovery of the hard-earned money was a matter of delight to the public-spirited citizens of the little northern city.

The haunted house soon lost its ghost reputation, and was ransacked by small boys on the hunt for sliding panels and hidden treasure until the owner of the place, who had been absent from Oakdale, took a hand in things and threatened severe penalties for trespassing, which greatly cooled the ardor of the youthful treasure-seekers.

As for Grace Harlowe and Eleanor Savelli, they were the bright and shining lights of the town and the darlings of the senior class.

The two girls had become firm friends. After the excitement of the finding of the money had worn off, they had had a long talk and had cleared up all misunderstandings. Eleanor had confessed to Grace that long before they had been brought together she had secretly tired of the old grudge and had longed for peace.

"After Edna Wright and I quarreled, I began to see things in a different light," Eleanor had confided to Grace, "and the longing for the companionship of your kind of girls took hold of me so strongly it made me miserable at times.

"How I did envy you when you all went to the house party at Christmas, and I was wild to go to New York and see Anne, although I suppose I am the last person she would care to see.

"It wasn't just the good times, either, that I coveted, it was that sense of comradeship that existed among you girls that I didn't at all understand last year."

"But, Eleanor," Grace had said, "if you felt that way, why were you so determined to expose poor Marian Barber!"

"When Marian told me what she had done I felt the utmost contempt for her," Eleanor had replied. "My old idea of vengeance came to the front, and I thought of how completely I could humiliate you all through her. The day I quarreled with her in school I fully intended to expose her, but the more I thought about it, the less I liked the idea of it. I don't really believe that I could ever have stood up before those girls and betrayed her."

While Grace had listened to Eleanor, she had realized that the old whimsical, temperamental Eleanor was passing, and an entirely different girl was endeavoring to take her place. Grace exulted in her heart and dreamed great things for the Phi Sigma Tau when it should be restored to its original number of members.

Eleanor had announced herself ready and eager to take her old place in the sorority, while Marian Barber had, with tears in her eyes, humbly petitioned Grace for her old place in the Phi Sigma Tau.

"Silly girl," was Grace's answer. "You can't go back to what you never left, can you?"

No one save Grace, Eleanor and Mr. Harlowe knew of how near Marian had come to being discredited in the eyes of her class and friends, and they could be trusted with the secret.

Henry Hammond had left Oakdale the morning after he had been interviewed by Grace and Eleanor, and it was afterwards discovered that the land in which he had persuaded certain guileless citizens to invest money had proved worthless. The swindled ones joined forces and put the matter in the hands of a detective, but to no purpose, for no clue was found to his whereabouts.

The strong box was turned over to the girls and the money, which amounted to five hundred and ten dollars, was deposited in Upton Bank with the five hundred that had caused Marian Barber such anxiety and sorrow.

The thief whom Grace had assisted in capturing was found to be a noted crook, known to the police as "Larry the Locksmith," on account of his ability to pick locks. He was tried and sentenced to a number of years in the penitentiary, and departed from Oakdale stolidly refusing to furnish the police with the identity of his "pal."

Easter was drawing near, and Grace was radiantly happy. Anne, whose engagement had stretched into the eighth week, would be home the following day. Mrs. Gray was looked for hourly and the boys were coming from college on Monday.

"We certainly will have a reunion," Nora O'Malley exclaimed joyously, as she banged her books on the window sill of the senior locker-room to emphasize her remark.

"It seems good to have Grace with us once in a while," declared Jessica. "Her police court duties have kept her so busy that she has deserted her little playmates. Have you been asked to join the force yet, Grace!" she asked, trying to look innocent.

"That isn't fair, Jessica," retorted Grace, laughing. "I appeal to you girls," turning to the other members of the Phi Sigma Tau, who had one by one dropped into the locker-room. "Can you imagine me in the garb of an Oakdale policeman?"

"Not in our wildest nightmares," Miriam Nesbit gravely assured her.

"Anne will be home to-morrow," cried Eva Allen. "I'm so glad it's Saturday. We can celebrate. Will you come to my house?"

"We will," was the united answer.

"We'll all go to the train to meet Anne," planned Grace. "Then we'll give her about one hour to get acquainted with her family. After that we'll rush her off to Eva's, back to my house for supper (mother expects all of you), and then up to Mrs. Gray's."

"Poor Anne," said Marian Barber, "I can see her being carried home on a stretcher."

"We will meet at the station," directed Grace, as she left them. "Be there at 8.15. Don't one of you fail to be there."

As Anne Pierson stepped off the 8.15 train the next morning after an all-night ride, she was surrounded by seven laughing girls and marched in triumph to David Nesbit's big car, which Miriam used at her own pleasure during her brother's absence.

The eight girls managed to squeeze into it, and drove to the Pierson cottage with all speed. Here Anne was set down, told to make the most of her hour with her family and to be prepared upon their return to say good-bye to home for the rest of the day.

The programme outlined by Grace was carried out to the letter. The joy of Mrs. Gray at again seeing her adopted children was well worth witnessing.

"I don't know how I ever managed to stay away from you so long!" she exclaimed, as she looked fondly about her at the smiling, girlish faces. "How I wish you might all have been with me. I should have returned sooner, but dreaded the winter here. I do not thrive here—during these long, cold Oakdale winters. It is because I—"

Grace placed a soft hand upon Mrs. Gray's lips. "I can't allow you to finish that sentence," she laughed. "You are sixty-two years young, and you must always remember it."

The old lady laughed happily at Grace's remark, then under cover of general conversation said to her, "I am greatly surprised to see Eleanor here. How did it all come about? You never mentioned it in your letters."

"I know it," replied Grace, "I wanted to save it until you came home. I have been out to 'Heartsease' several times, too, and am quite in love with Miss Nevin. May Anne and I come tomorrow and have a good long gossip? You must hear all about Anne's triumphs in New York."

"Come and have dinner with me," replied Mrs. Gray.

"That will be fine," returned Grace. "We two are the only ones in the crowd who don't happen to have previous engagements, so the girls won't feel hurt at not being included."

"We are so glad that you came home in time for the concert," said Miriam Nesbit. "It is the last entertainment the senior class will have a chance to give. We hope to make a nice sum of money to add to the thousand we already have."

"I have not added my mite to your fund yet," said Mrs. Gray. "But now that I'm home I shall busy myself immediately with my High School girls. When and where is the concert to be held?"

"A week from next Monday, in Assembly Hall," replied Miriam. "We wish to give it before the boys go back to school. They have only ten days at home, you know."

"How anxious I am to see the boys," cried Mrs. Gray. "I found a letter from Tom waiting for me. He expects to arrive on Monday or Tuesday, and will bring Arnold with him."

"I received a letter from Tom, too," said Grace. "We have also heard from the boys. David is bringing home a friend of his, Donald Earle, who, he writes, is the most popular man in the freshman class."

The evening seemed all too short to Mrs. Gray and the Phi Sigma Tau.

"Why, we've only begun to talk," said Jessica, "and here it is after eleven o'clock."

"To be continued in our next," said Nora with a grin. "Introducing new features and startling revelations."

Sunday afternoon found Anne and Grace strolling up Chapel Hill toward Mrs. Gray's. Rather to their surprise they found Miss Nevin with Mrs. Gray in the library. The two women were in earnest conversation, and as Grace and Anne were ushered in, Grace's quick intuition told her that Miss Nevin was strongly agitated over something.

"How are my own children to-day," asked Mrs. Gray, coming forward and kissing both of them warmly. Anne was then presented to Miss Nevin, who took occasion to congratulate her upon her recent success. "Your fame has preceded you," she said with a sweet smile.

"You must tell us all about your stay in New York, Anne," said Mrs. Gray. "You are very young to have been chosen for so responsible an engagement, and I feel great pride in your success."

"Anne had two offers of engagements while in New York," interposed Grace. "One from Farman, the big manager, and one from Rupert Manton, the Shakespearian actor."

"But I am still in Oakdale," replied Anne smiling, "and have come to-day to beg for my secretaryship again."

"You delightful child," cried Mrs. Gray. "I knew you would never desert me."

"Margaret," she said, turning to Miss Nevin, "would you care to tell my girls what you were telling me when they came in? I have already told them something of Eleanor's parentage. They know that Guido Savelli is her father. Perhaps they might be of assistance in helping you decide what is to be done. Grace is a famous suggester."

Miss Nevin flushed and looked hesitatingly at Anne and Grace, as though a trifle reluctant to speak.

"We shall consider anything you may choose to tell us strictly confidential, Miss Nevin," said Anne quietly.

"I am sure that you will," replied Miss Nevin. "What I have told Mrs. Gray is that I have received through my lawyers a letter from Eleanor's father. They inclosed his letter in one from them asking whether I were desirous of acquainting him with my whereabouts.

"He has written rather a sad letter. He seems to have awakened to a late remorse for having neglected my sister as he did. He asks for his child, and if he may see her. He has just finished a concert tour of America, and is at present in New York.

"Personally, I shall never forgive him, but have I the right to keep Eleanor from her father? He is both rich and famous, and she would adore him, for his music, if for nothing else. I have always said that when she became twenty-one years of age I should tell her of him, leaving to her the choice of claiming or ignoring him.

"But I never supposed for one instant that he would ever come forward and interest himself in her. A year ago I should not have considered her fit to choose, but she is greatly changed. The two years in which she has associated with girls of her own age have benefited her greatly. I feel as though I could not bear to give her up now. Moreover, this idea of claiming his child may be merely a whim on the part of her father. He is liable to forget her inside of six weeks."

Grace listened to Miss Nevin in breathless silence. It was all like a story-book romance.

Anne sat gazing off into space, thinking dreamily of the great virtuoso who had found after years of selfish pleasure and devotion to himself that blood was thicker than water. She fancied she could picture his pride when he beheld Eleanor and realized that she was his own child, and Eleanor's rapture when she knew that her father was master of the violin she worshipped.

Suddenly an idea popped into Anne's head that was a positive inspiration.

"Why not ask him to come down for our concert?" she said, amazed at her own audacity in suggesting such a thing. "Eleanor need not know about him at all. She is to play at the concert, you know. If he hears her play he will realize more fully that she is really his own flesh and blood, and if he has any real fatherly feeling for her it will come to the surface. That will be the psychological moment in which to bring them together."

"Anne, you're a genius!" cried Grace. "You ought to be appointed Chief Arbiter of Destiny."

"Margaret," exclaimed Mrs. Gray, "I believe that Anne's idea is logical. Shall you try it!"

"I shall write to Guido at once," said Miss Nevin, rising. "Knowing his disposition as I do, it seems that I could find no better way of rousing his interest in Eleanor. Her love of the violin is a direct inheritance from him, and she may reach his heart through her music. At any rate, it is worth trying."

After Miss Nevin's departure Anne and Grace entertained Mrs. Gray with the promised gossip, and it was well toward ten o'clock before they turned their steps toward home.

The following week was a busy one. Every spare moment outside school the senior class zealously devoted to the concert. The High School Glee Club was to sing, and the mandolin and guitar club was to give two numbers. Nora O'Malley was to sing two songs from a late musical success, and Jessica and Miriam were to play a duet. James Gardiner, who was extremely proficient on the violincello, was down for a solo, while Eleanor was to play twice. The crowning feature of the concert, however, was to be contributed by Anne and Eleanor. Anne was to recite Tennyson's "Enoch Arden," and Eleanor was to accompany her on the piano with the music that she had arranged for it.

The two girls had worked incessantly upon it, rehearsing almost every day. Grace was the only one who had been permitted to hear a rehearsal of it, and she was enraptured with what she heard.

The boys had all arrived, and the Phi Sigma Tau divided their time equally between concert rehearsals and social gatherings. David's friend, Donald Earle, was ably living up to his college reputation, and proved himself a source of unmitigated pleasure to the young people among whom he was thrown. It was soon discovered, however, that he was oftenest found in Eleanor's wake, and his eyes showed honest admiration for the beautiful girl every time he looked at her.

Hippy, who had established a reputation as a singer of humorous songs, was asked for his services.

"I have a number of new and choice ditties that I will render with pleasure, providing I am afterwards fed," he shrewdly declared, when interviewed on the subject.

"It will all depend upon how well you sing," stipulated Nora.

"Then I shan't warble at all," announced Hippy. "I am a man of few words, but when I say I must have food for my services as a soloist, I mean it. There must be no uncertainty. Do I feed or do I not?"

"You feed," laughed Nora.

The concert was to be held in Assembly Hall, and three days before every ticket issued had been sold. People who could not attend bought tickets and handed them back to be sold over again. The senior class, by reason of the popularity of the Phi Sigma Tau, was considered the class of classes.

"We'll have to put out a 'Standing Room Only' sign," declared Anne Pierson, as she viewed the packed house through a hole in the curtain.

The fateful night had arrived, and Anne, Eleanor and Grace stood in a group on the stage, while Anne industriously took note of the audience.

"Let me look for a minute, Anne," said Grace. "I don't believe there'll be standing room," she remarked, as she stepped aside to give Eleanor a chance to peer out.

"Come on, girls," called Nora O'Malley, as a burst of applause sounded from the other side of the curtain. "It's half past eight, and the curtain will go up in about two minutes."

The three girls scurried off the stage, the Glee Club filed on and arranged themselves, and the curtain rose.

Each number was applauded to the echo and in every instance the audience clamored for an encore.

As the time for Eleanor's first solo drew near, Anne and Grace felt their hearts beat a little faster. Nora was giving an encore to her first song. Eleanor was to follow her. As she stood in the wing her violin under her arm, Grace thought she had never appeared more beautiful.

Her gown was of some soft, white material and rather simply made. "I never like to wear fussy things when I play," she had confided to the girls.

Jessica stood directly behind her. She was to act as accompanist.

Nora O'Malley sang the concluding line of her song, favored the audience with a saucy little nod and made her exit.

"Come on, Eleanor," said Jessica. "It's our turn."

Well toward the back of the hall sat Miss Nevin, wearing a look of mingled anxiety and pain. Beside her sat a dark, distinguished man in the prime of life, who never took his eyes off the stage.

As one of the senior girls who had charge of the programme stepped forward and announced, "Solo, Miss Eleanor Savelli," he drew a deep breath, and such a look of longing crept into his eyes that Miss Nevin understood for the first time something of the loneliness of which he had written.

He covered his eyes with his hand as though reluctant to look. Then the full, soft notes of the violin were carried to his ears, and with a smothered cry of exultation he raised his eyes and saw for the first time his own child in her gown of white with the instrument he loved at her throat, while her slender hand drew the bow with the true skill of the artist.

Before Miss Nevin could stop him, he had risen in his seat, saying excitedly: "It is mia bella Edith. She has come again."

Then realizing what he had done, he sat down, and, burying his face in his hands, sobbed openly.

Persons around him, startled by his sudden cry, glared at him angrily for creating a commotion during Eleanor's exquisite number, then again turned their attention to the soloist.

"I must see her. I must see her," he muttered over and over again. "She is my child; mine."

"So you shall," whispered Miss Nevin soothingly, "but not until the concert is over. If we tell her now, Guido, it will upset her so that she can't appear again this evening, and she has two more numbers."

Unabashed by the emotion he had displayed, the virtuoso wiped his eyes, and sat waiting like one in a trance for his child to appear again.

Anne and Grace were alive with curiosity as to the outcome of Anne's suggestion. They had eagerly scanned the house before the concert began, but had failed to locate Miss Nevin and Eleanor's father.

"I'm going out in the audience and see if I can find them," Grace had whispered to Anne during Nora's song, as they stood in the wing on the opposite side from Jessica and Eleanor.

Anne had nodded silently, her attention focused upon Nora, whose singing always delighted her, and Grace, slipping quietly down to the door that led into the hall, made her way toward the back rows of seats just in time to witness Guido Savelli's emotion at first sight of his daughter.

Back to Anne she sped with her news, and the two friends held a quiet little jubilee of their own over the success of their plot.

There was a round of applause when "Enoch Arden" was announced. Eleanor took her place at

the piano while Anne stepped forward and began the pathetic tale to the subdued strains of the music that Eleanor had fitted to it.

Anne's beautiful voice rose and fell with wonderful expression, while the music served to accentuate every word that she uttered. Her audience sat practically spell bound, and when she uttered poor Enoch's death cry, "A sail! A sail! I am saved!" there were many wet eyes throughout the assemblage. She paused for a second before delivering the three concluding lines, and Eleanor ended on the piano with a throbbing minor chord.

There was absolute silence as the performers made their exit. Then a perfect storm of enthusiasm burst forth. Anne and Eleanor returned to bow again and again, but the audience refused to be satisfied, until Anne, in her clear, musical voice, made a little speech of appreciation, which was received with acclamation.

The concert drew to a triumphant close. After Eleanor's second solo, she repaired to the dressing room, where she was immediately surrounded by a group of admiring girls and kept so busy answering questions as to how long she had studied the violin and where, that she did not see Grace Harlowe enter the right wing with Miss Nevin and a tall, dark-haired stranger who glanced quickly about as though in search of some one. "Where is she?" he said. "Find her at once. But, no, wait a moment. She shall hear me play! I will win the heart of my child through the music she loves, I may add one little solo to your programme?" he turned questioningly to Grace.

"Well, I should rather think so," gasped Grace. "It is an honor of which we never dreamed. This concert will be recorded in Oakdale history."

"It is well," said the virtuoso. "Bring me the violin of my child. I will speak to her through it."

Grace flew to the dressing room, where Eleanor's violin lay in its open case upon a table near the door. Hastily securing both violin and bow, she flitted out of the room—without having been noticed by the girls at the further end.

"Here it is," she breathed, as she handed it to Eleanor's father. "I will arrange for you to play after the Glee Club, who are just going on now."

"I thank you," replied the great man. "I pray you do not announce me. I shall need no one to accompany me."

"It shall be as you wish," promised Grace.

There was a moment's wait after the Glee Club had filed off the stage, then Guido Savelli appeared, violin in hand.

A faint ripple of surprise stirred the audience. Who was this distinguished stranger! They could not identify him as belonging among Oakdale musicians.

The virtuoso made a comprehensive survey of the house, then placing the violin almost caressingly to his throat, began to play.

His hearers listened in growing astonishment to the exquisite sounds that he drew from the instrument. There was a plaintive, insistent appeal in his music that was like the pleading of a human voice. It was a pathetic cry wrung from a hungry heart.

The dressing-room door stood partly open, and as the full, sweet notes of the violin were carried to her ears, Eleanor gave a cry of rapture.

"Who is playing?" she cried. "I must see at once." She ran out of the room and into the wing, where she could command a full view of the stage, and looked upon her father for the first time.

She stood, statue like, until the last note died away. Her eyes were full of tears, which she made no attempt to hide. Then she turned to Anne, who had slipped quietly up and now stood beside her:

"Anne," she said almost reverently, "he is a master. His music overwhelms me. I felt when he played as though—he were trying to give me some message, as though he were speaking to me alone. I suppose every one in the audience felt the same. It is because he is a genius. Who is he, Anne, and where did he come from?"

"Eleanor," replied Anne, her voice trembling a little, "you must prepare yourself for the greatest surprise of your life. He was speaking to you when he played, and it was solely on your account that he played. He came here with your aunt to-night."

Eleanor paled a little.

"Anne, what does all this mean?" she said. "You and Grace have acted queerly all evening. What has this violinist to do with me!"

"That I cannot answer now," replied Anne, "but you will know within the next hour. Your aunt wishes you to get your wraps and meet her at once. She is outside in the carriage and he is with her."

"Are you and Grace coming with us?" questioned Eleanor.

"Not to-night," answered Anne, with a little smile. "You don't need either of us. Here's Grace,"

she added, as the latter hurried toward them.

"Eleanor," said Grace, "here is your cloak and your violin. Now, kiss both of us good night and trot along, for there's a big surprise waiting for you just around the corner, and it is the earnest wish of both Anne and I that it may prove a happy one."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

With the passing of the Easter holidays unbroken quiet settled down over Oakdale High School.

The boys went back to college and the girls to High School to finish the little that remained to them of their senior year.

The proceeds of the concert had amounted to four hundred and seventy dollars, and with a contribution of five hundred dollars more from Mrs. Gray, the members of the senior class were the proud possessors of a fund of nineteen hundred and eighty dollars, which was to be presented to Miss Thompson on graduation night as their contribution toward the gymnasium.

The three lower classes had also raised considerable money, but collectively it had not reached the amount earned by the seniors.

The playing of the great Savelli at the concert was still a matter of comment in Oakdale. There were several persons in the audience who had previously heard him play, and had at once recognized him. More remarkable still was the fact of his being the father of Eleanor Savelli, and all sorts of rumors sprang up regarding his advent in Oakdale, and his affairs in general. As for Eleanor, it was some time before she could accustom herself to the idea of having a living father, and a famous one at that. She had gone down to the carriage on the night of the concert wondering what was in store for her, and had scarcely stepped inside before she had been clasped in the arms of the virtuoso, and addressed as his child. Shaking herself free from his clasp, she had demanded an explanation from her aunt, who had told her the truth, which to her at the time had seemed unbelievable.

Her first feeling toward her father had been entirely one of pride. Her aunt had been all in all to her since babyhood, therefore she experienced little of the feeling of affection toward him that he manifested for her. The fact that her father was a great artist was a source of infinite satisfaction to her, but gradually as she grew better acquainted with him she began to experience a degree of affection for him that in time became positive worship.

He was to remain at "Heartsease" until after her graduation, then, accompanied by Miss Nevin, Eleanor was to sail for Italy with him, there to remain until he should begin a European concert tour in the fall. Then she would go to Leipsig and enter the very conservatory where her mother and father had met. She had resumed the final "i" so long dropped from her name, and now proudly signed herself Savelli.

The Phi Sigma Tau, particularly Anne and Grace, became prime favorites with the great violinist and were frequently invited to "Heartsease" to hear him play, an honor which was accorded to no one else in Oakdale.

The days hurried by altogether too swiftly to suit Grace and her three closest friends, who looked forward to commencement week with mingled emotions of joy and regret. Graduation was the goal they had been striving for four years to reach, but graduation meant also the parting of the ways, and as the four chums looked back over their High School life it seemed to them that they could never again have quite the good times that they had enjoyed in one another's society.

"We who are about to die salute you!" quoted Nora O'Malley, as the four girls strolled home from school on the Friday preceding commencement.

"What a cheerful remark," laughed Grace Harlowe.

"Well, that's the way I feel, at any rate," declared Nora. "I can't bear to think that next year we'll all be scattered to the four winds, or, rather, the two winds, because Jessica and I will be together, and so will you and Anne."

"Go to college with us, then," slyly tempted Grace.

"No," answered Nora decidedly. "I've set my heart on studying vocal music. I have always said that I should go to a conservatory, and since Eleanor's father has given me so much encouragement, I've made up my mind to become a concert singer if possible. I'll stay a year in the conservatory at least, and at the end of that time I'll know whether I am justified in going on studying."

"It's fortunate that I am going to study on the piano and that we can be at the same conservatory," said Jessica.

"And that Anne and I will be at the same college," added Grace, "if we ever make up our minds

what college we wish to enter."

"There is still plenty of time for that," said Anne. "I am glad that scholarship doesn't stipulate as to what particular college—that is, if I win it."

"You won't know that until a week from to-night," said Jessica. "What a night that will be. This year there will be an extra feature, the presentation of the gym. money."

"I am so proud of our class," exclaimed Grace, "but I do wish we had an even two thousand dollars to give. We lack only twenty dollars. I wonder if the class would care to make it up."

"Why couldn't the Phi Sigma Tau make it up as a parting gift to Oakdale High School!" asked Nora. "That would be two dollars and a half apiece. I am willing to do with that much less fuss on my graduating gown, if the rest of you are."

"I am," said Grace.

"So am I," replied Jessica and Anne together.

"I am sure the other four girls will be of the same mind," said Grace. "I'll see them to-morrow."

The four other members of the Phi Sigma Tau were duly interviewed and by Monday of commencement week the twenty dollars had been added to the fund deposited in Upton Bank.

The prophecy made by Jessica on class day at the end of their sophomore year was about to be fulfilled to the letter, for the four chums had been appointed to the very honors to which she had jestingly assigned them two years before. Anne was chosen as class poet, and Jessica had composed both the words and music of the class song. Grace was to prophesy the futures of her various classmates, while Nora had been detailed to write the class grinds.

"To-day is the day of days," exclaimed Grace to her mother on Tuesday, as she smoothed out a tiny wrinkle in her class-day gown, which she lovingly inspected for the fifth time before putting it on. It was a pale blue marquisette embroidered in tiny daisies, and Grace declared it to be far prettier than her graduating gown of white organdie trimmed with fine lace.

"Nora has the dearest little pale green marquisette, mother," cried Grace with enthusiasm, "and Jessica's gown is pink silk, while Anne has a white silk muslin with violets scattered all over it. I've seen them all, but I must say that I think mine is the nicest and you're a perfect dear, mother, for having embroidered it for me," and, giving her mother a tempestuous hug, Grace gathered her class-day finery in her arms and rushed upstairs to dress for the afternoon that the senior class looked forward to more than to graduation night itself.

The Phi Sigma Tau met in the senior locker-room for the last time and proceeded to Assembly Hall in a body.

"How strange it seems to be going to Assembly Hall instead of the gym. for class day," remarked Miriam Nesbit to Grace.

"Yes, doesn't it?" returned Grace. "But when we come back here next year as post-graduates, we'll have the satisfaction of knowing that we helped a whole lot in getting the good old gym. ready for the next class, even if we couldn't hold forth in it."

The regular class day programme was carried out with tremendous enthusiasm. The girl chums were applauded to the echo for their capable handling of the honors assigned them. Nora in particular rose to heights of fame, her clever grinds provoking wholesale mirth.

"She must have made notes all year," whispered Anne to Jessica under cover of a laugh which was occasioned by the story of one absentminded senior who pushed her glasses up over her forehead, searched diligently for them through the halls and locker-room, and, convinced that she had lost them on the street, inserted an advertisement in one of the Oakdale newspapers before going home that night.

"She did," replied Jessica. "She has always said that she wanted the job of writing the grinds."

At the close of the exercises Grace delivered a spirited senior charge which was ably answered by the junior president. The class song composed by Jessica was sung, then graduates and audience joined in singing "Auld Lang Syne." Then the air was rent with class yells, while the graduates received the congratulations of their friends and then repaired to their banquet.

Wednesday brought Hippy, Reddy and David and also Donald Earle to Oakdale, while Tom Gray and Arnold Evans appeared on Thursday afternoon, to the relief of their young friends.

"Better late than never," called Tom Gray as he and Arnold hurried off the train to where David and his three friends stood eagerly scanning the train for them.

"We thought it would be never," retorted Hippy. "We were about to postpone commencement until some time next week, and order the flags at half mast, but now things can proceed as usual."

"Hustle up, fellows," commanded David. "We're not the only ones who were anxious. The girls are all over at our house. There'll be a foregathering and a dinner there, and an after-gathering at your aunt's, Tom. So pile into my car and I'll take you up Chapel Hill on the double quick."

Inside of an hour the two young men were crossing the Nesbit's lawn and making for the broad veranda where a bevy of pretty girls stood ready to greet them.

"We are so glad you got here at last," cried Grace. "If you hadn't come on that train you wouldn't have seen us graduate. The next train from your part of the world doesn't get in until ten o'clock."

"We missed the early train and had to wait two hours," replied Tom, "but now that we are here, you'll find that you can't drive us away with a club."

"We shan't try to," said Nora. "Now, if you were Hippy—"

"Nothing could drive me from your presence," interrupted Hippy hastily, "so don't try it. Let's change the subject. That word club has an ugly sound. It makes me nervous."

"Never mind, Hippy," said Miriam. "Nora shall not tease you. I'll protect you."

"Nora, go away, I am protected!" exclaimed Hippy, and, getting behind Miriam, he peered forth at Nora with such a ludicrous expression that she laughed, and immediately declared a truce by allowing him to sit on the rustic seat beside her.

It was a memorable dinner. The girls in their dainty white graduating gowns, their eyes alight with the joy of youth, and the young men with their clean-cut, boyish faces made a picture that Mrs. Nesbit viewed with a feeling of pleasure that was akin to pain.

The start for Assembly Hall was made at a little after seven, as the girls were to join the senior class there, and proceed to the stage, where the class was to sit in a body. Nearly every member of the class carried flowers of some description that had been given to them by their families and friends.

Grace and her chums were supremely happy in that their little social world had turned out to do them honor. Mrs. Gray and Miss Nevin, accompanied by Eleanor's father, were seated near the front with Mrs. Gibson and the Southards, who had arrived at Hawk's Nest on the previous day. Grace's father and mother, Judge Putnam and his sister, Mrs. Nesbit, Nora's brothers and sister and Jessica's father were scattered about through the house.

When the graduates took their places upon the stage, there was tumultuous applause. To the citizens of Oakdale who had known the young women from babyhood, the present class seemed the finest Oakdale High School had yet turned out.

"Bless the dears," said Miss Thompson to Miss Tebbs, as the girls filed past them and on to the stage. "They are without exception the most brilliant lot of girls I have ever had charge of. But of them all there is no one of them quite equal to Grace. She is the ideal type of all that a High School girl should be, and when I say that I have paid her the highest compliment in my power."

The slight difficulty that had arisen between Grace and the principal during Grace's junior year had long since been adjusted by Eleanor, who had gone to Miss Thompson with a frank confession of her transgressions during her junior year. Miss Thompson had freely forgiven her and had fully appreciated the sense of honor that had prompted the deed.

As the class was large, fifteen girls from the entire number had been chosen to deliver essays and addresses. Among these were Anne, Eleanor, Grace, Miriam and Nora.

"I'm just as well satisfied that I was not chosen," Jessica whispered to Eva Allen, as Grace stepped forward to deliver the salutatory address.

"It's easy to see who is first in the hearts of Oakdale," returned Eva. "Grace won't be able to begin this evening if they don't stop it."

The moment that Grace had risen to deliver her address the commotion began, and it was not until Miss Thompson rose and smilingly held up her hand for silence that the noisy reception accorded Grace died away.

Anne, as valedictorian, was only a trifle less warmly received, and her eyes grew misty as she remembered how she had come to Oakdale poor and unknown, and entirely without friends, until Grace had so nobly championed her cause.

The bestowal of the freshman prize followed the graduates' addresses. Then came the announcement of the winners of the scholarships. There were two of these and every one of Anne's friends listened anxiously for her name. They were not disappointed, for Anne's name was the first called. She had won the Upton Scholarship of two hundred and fifty dollars a year, at whatever college she should decide to enter.

After the scholarships had been disposed of, a representative of each of the three lower classes in turn, beginning with the freshmen, presented the gymnasium money to Miss Thompson.

The freshmen had collected over three hundred dollars, the sophomores five hundred and the juniors six hundred and fifty dollars. Lastly, Grace rose from her place among her class and presented Miss Thompson with a check for the two thousand dollars, part of which had figured in the limelight of publicity. And there was one girl in the row of graduates whose heart beat uncomfortably faster for a moment as she thought of how differently it might have all ended for her had it not been for the fearless energy of Grace Harlowe.

It was over at last, the graduates received their diplomas and were admonished as to their future careers by the president of the Board of Education, whose speech concluded the exercises.

As they were leaving the stage, Jessica, whose eyes had been anxiously searching the audience from the beginning of the exercises, gave a little cry and hurrying down the steps, rushed straight into the arms of a brown-eyed girl in a traveling gown who stood waiting at the foot of the steps.

"Oh, you dear Mabel," cried Jessica joyously. "Where did you come from!"

"Mother and I didn't get in until almost nine o'clock, so we came here at once," replied Mabel Allison. "Mother is over there. Come and see her."

"I have been so disappointed," declared Jessica. "We hoped you would be here for class day, and when you didn't come to-day I gave up in despair."

"We intended to start last Friday, but mother was ill for a day or two, and that delayed us. You know it is quite a journey from Denver here."

Jessica and Mabel quickly made their way to Mrs. Allison, and a moment or two later were surrounded by the Phi Sigma Tau, and marched off in triumph to Mrs. Gray, who was in the midst of a group of her intimate friends.

After a great deal of handshaking and general greeting, the entire party of guests, young and old, set off for Mrs. Gray's beautiful home.

The young people had elected to walk and strolled along through the white moonlight, care free, the world before them.

The older members of the party who had ridden to the house were awaiting them on the veranda. Soon after they all repaired to the dining room, where a collation was served them at two long tables, at the close of which toasts were in order, and every one was "drunk down" in the fruit punch provided for the occasion.

When the gamut of toasting had been finally run, Mr. Harlowe arose and said:

"I have been appointed as spokesman by a committee composed of the fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters of the eight young women who are the cause of all this celebration. The committee of which I speak may not in any sense compare with that august body known as the Phi Sigma Tau, but nevertheless it can boast of at least having held several secret sessions, the result of those sessions being this:

"A long time ago I promised my daughter Grace that my graduation gift to her should be a trip to Europe. Knowing what an addition to the trip the society of her young friends would be, I interviewed those responsible for the welfare of the Phi Sigma Tau, and it was decided that her sorority should accompany her.

"As certain members of the aforesaid committee also feel entitled to vacations, it is quite probable that the Phi Sigma Tau will sail with at least a round dozen of chaperons. In fact, I have seriously considered chartering a liner. Now I have done my duty and any one who wishes may make remarks."

Then a perfect babble arose, and every one tried to express their opinion at once. As for the Phi Sigma Tau, they were in the seventh heaven of rapture.

Even Anne, who in spite of Mr. Harlowe's assurance, knew that for her the trip was practically impossible, rejoiced for her friends' sake.

"Come here, Anne," commanded Mrs. Gray from the head of the table.

"Anne is my own dear child," said the old lady. "In the past four years she has been not only my secretary, but a daughter as well. As her foster mother, I claim the privilege of sending her to Europe. It shall be my graduation gift to her."

"Three cheers for Mrs. Gray," proposed Hippy, rising, and they were given with a will.

"And are all of you boys going, too?" Grace asked delightedly of Tom Gray.

"Going? Well, I rather think so," he replied with emphasis.

"We are going all at once and with both feet foremost," declared Hippy. "First we shall all be sea sick. After that we shall prowl about Westminster Abbey and ruin our eyesight reading inscriptions on tombs. After that we shall be arrested in France for our Franco-American accent. We shall break our collar bones and bruise our shins doing strenuous Alpine stunts, and we shall turn a disapproving eye upon Russia and incidentally expose a few Nihilists. We shall fish in the Grand Canal at Venice and wear out our shoes prancing about Florence on a still hunt for old masters.

"Last, and by no means least, we shall sample everything to eat from English muffins to Hungarian goulash."

"I knew he'd end with something like that," sniffed Nora contemptuously.

"I am surprised that he ended at all," laughed David.

Those who have followed Grace Harlowe through her four years at High School, will hear from her again in college.

In "GRACE HARLOWE'S FIRST YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE" are set down the eventful happenings of her freshman year, and her many friends will find her to be the same generous, warm-hearted young woman who won their admiration and respect during her High School days.

THE END.

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